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Mary Thompson, MDiv
Is Sexual Violence a Public Concern or a Private Affair? An Exploration of Community Members' Perceptions in a Rural New England Village

ABSTRACT

This qualitative methods study explores how community members were impacted by isolated cases of sexual violence that involved their neighbors in a rural New England village and asks whether they perceive sexual violence as a public concern or a private affair. As a pastor in the town when these events occurred, I wondered about the ensuing communal silence and its impact on the community as a whole. Were individuals navigating questions about social norms and communal responsibilities, as they processed personal thoughts about sexual violence and their emotional experiences of their neighbors' pain? Fourteen community leaders representing three generations of villagers engaged in conversational interviews about gendered violence and considered reasons behind the apparent qualitative difference in social communications around sexual violence, compared to talk about other forms of violence.

Findings showed that respondents' personal relationships with survivors, perpetrators, and their families created complicated internal responses, mostly because of their shared communal history and a powerful sense of belonging in a community, where people know and trust their neighbors. Community members kept silence because they wanted to respect the privacy of the suffering individuals, yet they all agreed that gendered violence is a public concern, and a community has a responsibility to educate itself and do something about it. Understanding specific contexts where violence against women occurs also requires knowledge of the systemic and symbolic forces that perpetuate it. This research proposes that communal prevention efforts be conceptualized as empowering communities to resist and transform these harmful influences.

IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE A PUBLIC CONCERN OR A PRIVATE AFFAIR? AN EXPLORATION OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS IN A RURAL NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE

A project based on an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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At this point in my life the number of people that have helped me along the way is legion; I could not begin to name every person who has been a part of my journey into the work represented here. I can begin, however, by thanking the members of my community who made this study possible by sharing with me the stories of their memories and the wisdom of their hearts. I am most grateful for your trust, your insight and the magnitude of your combined compassion. Your words, your feelings and your deep understanding of the power inherent in communal life were inspiring and offered me a great deal of hope that communal efforts towards eradicating sexual violence against women are not only worthwhile, they are possible. Thank you; it was an honor to sit with you, and this thesis is dedicated to you.

I would also like to thank the small contingent of my "older" friends at Smith for keeping me sane and laughing these last two and a half years, which is no small accomplishment, given the challenges that we have faced in our respective adventures here as "mature" students. It is nice to know that you know too that maturity is a relative term, and we can socially construct it however we'd like.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In a small, rural New England community (pop. 1000), where I served as pastor for ten years, three instances of sexual assault against women occurred within a two-year span. Perhaps there had been other such events during that decade, however, no others rose to public awareness. News of sexual violence was both unusual and alarming in the life of our community, yet few, if any, wanted to talk about it. The cases were unrelated and quite different from one another, but in all cases, survivors, perpetrators and their families were known to almost everyone in the community. In the course of my pastoral duties, I observed that after the initial news of the events and their immediate aftermath had been absorbed, further mention of what had happened dropped out of communal discourse. It did not take long before the families involved were sheltered or, depending on one's perspective, abandoned, by a cover of silence that settled over what they had experienced and continued to endure. No malice added to the sadness and horror of the events, yet I could not help wondering if the community might have held the families better, had the silence not fallen around them so quickly and so completely. I also wondered what impact, if any, these events had on our community as a whole.

Without participating in a collective meaning-making process at the time, were some community members traumatized by what had happened? Did individuals have questions about social norms and communal responsibilities around intimate violence, or did most succumb to an uncomfortable avoidance of the issue, believing that sexual violence happens in other places, but

not in the very midst of one's own daily community life? The purpose of this study is to explore how isolated cases of sexual violence occurring in a rural village impacted community members, and to examine the meaning of community members' perceptions in light of local and global social opinion concerning violence against women. More specifically, this exploratory qualitative methods study seeks to determine the perceptions of community members regarding the presence and impact of sexual violence in their rural New England village, and the research question asks whether they perceive this type of violence as a cultural problem or a private affair.

As first one, then another, and finally a third instance of sexual violence occurred, what questions came up among friends, neighbors and family about the nature of intimate violence and the safety of women and children in their quaint, rural village? What was the content of people's internal emotional, psychological, moral and philosophical discourses? The present study is an exploration of individual perceptions that are associated with a small community's past experience. However, this query is anchored in the current global concern about violence against women that reaches indiscriminately across all categories of social, racial, ethnic, economic, political and religious existence.

Gendered Violence and Culture

Those who study and attempt to make sense of violence in general conceptualize it as a dynamic phenomenon that bears characteristics both specific and universal, and whose impact is felt on individual as well as collective levels (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2006). A frequent finding across disciplines and around the globe is that violence in general is linked to gender, and, more specifically, there is evidence that gender inequalities embedded in social and political systems correlate directly with all forms of violence against women (Lloyd, 2006; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004; Stanko, 2006; Thapar-Björkert, Morgan, & Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Worldwide studies of patterns of violence reveal direct associations between gender and power, primarily because most societies continue to function according to dualistic interpretations of male/female behaviors, physiological attributes and related attitudes (Galtung, 1990; O'Toole, Schiffman & Edwards, 2007). For example, traditional gender systems stereotypically view men as aggressive and entitled to power and dominance, while women are assumed to be passive and obedient. Though this example is a simplification of a far more complicated reality, it points to the fundamental conflict at the heart of gendered violence -- the unequal distribution of power frequently manifested as conflict in interpersonal relationships and reinforced in socio-political arenas (O'Toole et al., 2007). Violence rising out of contested gender relations is seen as an extreme means for the preservation of power or social control, and it is known to take on physical, emotional, and psychological forms (O'Toole et al., 2007).

Research identifies and confirms that "rape myths" embedded in society contribute to all these forms of maltreatment of women, especially those who are victims of sexual violence, and that there is a direct correlation between rape myth acceptance, the stereotyping of gender roles, and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Burt defines the last of these in the language of power and domination: "[a]cceptance of interpersonal violence refers to the notion that force and coercion are legitimate ways to gain compliance and specifically that they are legitimate in intimate and sexual relationships" (Burt, 1980, p.218). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) define rape myths as, "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (p. 704). Weighted toward maintaining the innocence of perpetrators, seven types of female rape myths are listed by Payne, Lonsway and Fitzgerald: 1) "she asked for it" 2)

"it wasn't really rape" 3) "he didn't mean to" 4) "she wanted it" 5) "she lied" 6) "rape is a trivial event" and 7) "rape is a deviant event" (cited in Chapleau, Oswald & Russell, 2008, p. 602).

Writing about men's violence against women as a form of domination, Michael Kaufman keenly portrays the depth at which these dynamics permeate society:

> The act of violence is many things at once. At the same instant it is the individual man acting out relations of sexual power; it is the violence of a society – a hierarchical, authoritarian, sexist, class-divided militarist, racist, impersonal, crazy society – being focused through an individual man onto an individual woman. In the psyche of the individual man it might be his denial of social powerlessness through an act of aggression. In total these acts of violence are like a ritualized acting out of our social relations of power: the dominant and the weaker, the powerful and the powerless, the active and the passive … the masculine and the feminine (Kaufman, 1987, cited in O'Toole et al, 2007, p. 33).

It must be said that in today's world, gender as a signifier of personal identity and social arrangement is no longer limited to binary constructs, and gender violence researchers are broadening their studies appropriately (O'Toole et al., 2007). However, it remains that male-on-female violence is a pervasive and insidious problem, and the significance of how this dualistic understanding of gender and associated expectations operates on both individual and collective levels cannot be underestimated when considering all types of violence against women.

That being said, dualisms are difficult constructs to use when assessing violence against women, because its persistence relies upon its multi-faceted complexity, which is developed at multiple intersections. Physical violence is often visible and identified as "public or private" and 'individual or collective," but violence is also delivered in various disguises that may be

understood as cultural, structural, psychological, emotional or symbolic, which are far less easy to detect and every bit as real (Thapar-Björkert, Morgan, & Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Definitions and Terms

Even while considering sexual violence in a small rural community, it is not unreasonable to begin with a global assessment of violence against women, because it is the unrelenting occurrence of individual, private incidents that finally have become recognized as a global concern. Today violence against women is recognized by the United Nations as a "major threat to social and economic development" (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005, p.3), not to mention other characterizations, such as a public health epidemic (Affonso, Frueh, & Shibuya, 2007; Frye, 2007).

Domestic violence and sexual violence are perpetrated most often on women and children by men. Statistics from 2005 found on the National Center for Victims of Crime website show that 92% of sexual assault or rape victims were female, and those who were between sixteen and nineteen years old registered the highest rate of this type of victimization (Catalano, 2006). Research on violence against women does not clearly or consistently separate these two terms for violence; therefore, in this paper, "domestic violence", "sexual violence", "gendered violence" and "violence against women" will be used interchangeably as applied to the study focus and as connected by the literature. The types of violence considered here include the full range of tactics commonly used by perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence such as: intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, coercion, threats, economic controls, blaming, belittling or using the children as leverage for control (Johnson, 2007).

In their daily work with victims and perpetrators, direct service workers have identified a cycle of violence that becomes established through systematic employment of these tactics. The

model developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) in Duluth, Minnesota, has been duplicated widely for general use in the field, translated into more than forty languages, and has also been interpreted and modified to accommodate cultural differences by workers within specific ethnic groups (see Diagram 1) (DAIP, 2012).

The National Center for Victims of Crime defines sexual assault as follows:

> Sexual assault takes many forms including attacks such as rape or attempted rape, as well as any unwanted sexual contact or threats. Usually a sexual assault occurs when someone touches any part of another person's body in a sexual way, even through clothes, without that person's consent. Some types of sexual acts which fall under the category of sexual assault include forced sexual intercourse (rape), sodomy (oral or anal sexual acts), child molestation, incest, fondling and attempted rape (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2008).

It is widely known that sexual violence is one of, if not the most underreported crime, due to many of the reasons covered in this paper. This, in turn, creates massive problems for governmental and non-governmental agencies on local, national and international levels in compiling accurate statistics about rates of occurrence, types of sexual assaults, the impact on its victims, and development of best practices in meeting the needs of victim/survivors and the communities in which these crimes occur, and more. It is also important to note that sexual assault definitions are not limited to rape, and it is equally critical to understand that definitions of these crimes continue to be altered. In December, 2011, the FBI updated its definition of rape for the first time since 1929 (Markon, 2012), notably expanding inclusion of sexual violence that is not limited to female victims and heterosexual couples. Nevertheless, this study remains

focused on the most prevalent dynamic of sexual violence, which at this point in time is male on female violence.

Silence

Sexual victimization of women is a particularly complex and sensitive issue, partly because of its association, in many cultures, with taboo practices, secrecy and shame, all of which operate simultaneously on individual and communal levels. As Marie Fortune (2005) observes, "[o]ne of the challenges in addressing sexual violence has been that it is often greeted by silence, and silence means denial, and denial enables injustice" (p. 2). In this way silence becomes an actor interacting with the violent event, the perpetrator, the victim/survivor and the collective membership of the community. How a community processes public knowledge of a case of sexual violence and chooses to act or not to act in response depends, in part, on its perceptions of what has occurred within the communal context. This study's exploration of perceptions of sexual violence is prompted by the community's lack of a timely and perceptible effort to engage in some form of public discourse, a response that may be construed as a collective silence.

Sexual violence and silence have a history as natural partners. "Breaking the Silence " is a slogan associated with the movement to end violence against women in the United States and across the world. It refers to how silence operates as one of the primary covers under which domestic violence and its close sibling, sexual abuse, continue to occur at alarming rates. Despite inroads made since the outbreak of feminist movements in the Sixties that called attention to violence perpetrated against women in society, statistics show that a nation-wide systemic intolerance for these acts of violence has not yet fully developed. The good news nationally is that sexual assault has decreased by 60% since 1993 (RAINN, n.d.a), and the bad

news is that someone is sexually assaulted every two minutes (RAINN, n.d.b). Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated in 1997 that one in three women worldwide experiences intimate relationship violence during her life (Nayak, Byrne, Martin & Abraham, 2003). Though most people would not condone such acts, many still do not engage publicly in either collective dialogue or action towards disallowing such violence to take place. Resistance to this particular discourse is ubiquitous. The denial, avoidance and silence that tend to characterize communal responses to intimate violence continue to be significant obstacles to finding out why violence occurs in a given time and place, and what impact it has upon both individuals and the collective.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction and Overview of Literature

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of community members about the presence and impact of sexual violence in their rural New England village, and whether they understand this type of violence to be a private affair or an issue of public concern. Essentially, this project is defined by an interest in what happens at two intersections: 1) where individual experience meets communal perception and 2) the point at which private violence becomes a public concern.

In spite of abundant projects, activism, reports and studies that attest to an urgent and global public preoccupation with violence against women, a review of the literature related to the parameters of my study proved to be a frustrating exercise, particularly in the two areas mentioned above. My inquiry into the relationship between individual victim/survivors and their communities was stymied by a lack of research on how isolated incidents of sexual violence impact members of the communities in which they occur, and what type of collective response, if any, these events might elicit. The general focus of research on perceptions appears to be primarily geared towards assessing the extent of the problem of violence against women and the success, or lack thereof, of victim/survivor services and community awareness education. Other research is necessarily devoted to understanding and addressing the psycho-emotional needs of survivors of violence and chronic abuse. A growing body of research on the nature of witnesses

to violence focusing on characteristics and actions of bystanders is promising, yet the sample communities are often limited to college campuses, not the more diverse populations of wider society.

A second significant obstacle to understanding how sexual violence affects rural communities is that research on community violence largely focuses on urban areas and their subgroups, or it looks at violence against women and collective trauma within the larger scale scenarios of war and genocide. Rural communities *outside* the theater of war *and* as entities distinct from suburban or urban areas *and* characterized by their own geography and regional influences are noted in the literature, but thinly researched as a body.

While the literature gathered for this review exposes gaps at the intersections of interest for my study, it also offers potentially enlightening clues about the importance of the contexts in which acts of violence against women occur. Context itself appears to be a commodious container that can hold the specificity of each violent event, while also accommodating common thematic connections between individual and communal experiences of sexual violence, and highlighting evidence of patterns on both local and global levels. Contextual implications will evolve, as the discussion of one rural New England community's perceptions of sexual violence is explored through various theoretical models and empirical observations that both honor the particularities of this community's experiences of violence and create a broader, multi-layered context for understanding them.

Theoretical Framework

I have focused on theories and constructs that can help explain the main components of an inquiry into perceptions of gender violence within a small community. Broadly, these include what it means to be a member of a rural community, community dynamics, interpersonal power

dynamics, attitudes about violence against women, and prevailing notions and practices regarding gender roles and socialization. Research on these issues draws on an overwhelming number of theories, which intersect with one another in various ways, but they are not employed systematically in the literature. I found perspectives offered by certain feminist theories and principles, theories of power, gender relations, and the culture of violence theory to be the most useful for identifying themes in the literature about gendered violence. Social change theory, social constructivism and a theory of community contribute to understanding the vital role that the wider community plays in perpetuating or preventing interpersonal violence. To create a structure for making meaningful comparisons out of wide ranging research, I employ an integrated ecological model.

Feminist theory and principles. Although violence against women is known to have been a factor of social existence since ancient times, it is only in the last forty-odd years, with thanks to American and other feminist movements, that it has become an issue of public debate and international concern. Much of the literature about violence against women relies heavily on feminist claims that can seem, as a whole, to imply that a feminist perspective has coalesced into a universally accepted social understanding with regard to this issue. However, there is no single feminist viewpoint; Patricia Yancey Martin (1990) cautions against the perception that feminism adheres to a single ideology, and proposes that it be seen instead as a broad political orientation. Along with this conceptualization of multiple feminist theories and positions, it is reasonable to consider it near impossible to discuss violence against women without a historical perspective on what problems, out of those first addressed by early activists, persist today. Likewise, it is pertinent to consider the impact of two divergent paths of the anti-rape movement on social constructions of this issue. Lastly, the importance of varied cultural and social contexts

in which women of diverse races, ethnicities, religions and nationalities experience sexual violence is a crucial factor in how feminist theory and concepts are currently applied and critiqued. Aspects of the feminist movement and elements of these three different stages influence the current discussion about violence against women.

Early activism – private becomes public. Compared to the present scope and level of concern with domestic and sexual violence, it may be difficult to imagine that Betty Friedan's 1963 book, seductively called *The Feminine Mystique,* launched a social revolution (Carey, 2004), because it presented the plight of an American white, upper middle class housewife as one of alienation, isolation and unhappiness. The bestseller attributed this "problem that has no name" (Friedan, 1963) to the restrictive and oppressive gender roles prescribed and enforced by a male dominated society. At the time, the most shocking aspect of Friedan's work may have been that she brought into the public eye that which had always been kept private. She effectively challenged a social taboo that turned out to have been little more than a tool to maintain *status quo* power dynamics, by which men held dominance over women.

Divergent paths. Soon after it gained momentum the women's movement splintered, both for philosophical reasons and because of differing priorities among activist groups. Nancy Matthews (1994) uses a dichotomous continuum between bureaucratic and collectivist feminism to describe some tensions among the factions that continue to surface today. While Friedan and her National Organization for Women (NOW), focused on women's liberation within mainstream political structures, more radical feminist groups focused on true gender equality, which they believed could only come about if male dominance was dismantled in every social, political, legal and economic establishment. These younger grass roots groups focused their work on violence against women (Matthews, 1994), first by bringing women together to share

the unthinkable – their stories of being raped and beaten. They built coalitions of solidarity and created slogans such as, “[t]he personal is political,” and “[t]here are no individual solutions” (Matthews, 1994, p. 9), which expressed their focus on a collectivist mindset and organizational structure.

As anti-rape activists grew to understand the dynamics of power and control in sexual violence, they began to develop a feminist theory about rape and its socio-political context (Matthews, 1994). Against conventional understanding, it became clear that rape had nothing to do with sexuality, and everything to do with violence. These feminists exposed and countered with new evidence numerous “rape myths” that functioned in society to silence and demean female victims of sexual violence, while allowing perpetrators to go unpunished by the legal system. Connections between isolated violence and the community context were made early on. Radical feminists centered their activism on shifting the consciousness of the medical and psychological professions, as well as those of the judiciary, legislature and law enforcement, whose members chronically devalued women and denied them voice to tell their truths about personal experiences of sexual violence. Though the multiple challenges waged by various feminist movements have been profoundly successful over time in raising consciousness and creating transformative social and legislative change, the literature shows that “rape myths” continue to function in American institutions, in the wider society, and all over the world.

Even as efforts to reframe the truth about rape, its perpetrators, and its victims gathered support, activists realized that a parallel effort was necessary to provide services for victims, who needed immediate support such as medical attention, financial assistance, legal advocacy, and, importantly, someone to listen to them. Empowering survivors became a priority, as rape crisis centers opened all over the country. The first centers were staffed by trained, but non-

professional, female volunteers, and though this was the collectivist ideal, over time, some centers survived only with funding from the state, which began to demand professional qualifications for their staffs. Consequently, crisis centers are sometimes maligned, because they are seen to be part of the "establishment," doing little more than "managing victims of violence" (Matthews, 1994, p. 166). Writing in 1994, Nancy Matthews lamented the irony of how the state's sought-after acknowledgment of the problem of violence against women ultimately resulted in softening and redirecting the political process away from what feminists started – to overturn the social, political, legal and economic institutions of the nation and eliminate gender inequities. In 2008, Lerner & Allen called for feminists to re-politicize the issue, for related reasons.

Intersectionality as context. Even in all its forms and factions, the feminism of the sixties and seventies was primarily a movement of white, middle class women, which addressed neither the varied needs and interests of women of color (Matthews, 1994), nor how closely race and rape were linked. In 1978 the Feminist Alliance Against Rape published a newsletter article entitled "Rape, Racism and Reality (Shechter, 1982, p. 40)," in which they called attention to the deficiencies of a single-issue movement. While feminist organizers sought to undo the unequal power dynamics between genders that lay underneath the issue of rape, they did not take on the larger problem of how these dynamics of oppression echoed throughout society. Susan Schecter (1982) writes of an important observation made in the same 1978 article, that stated, "…while anti-rape organizers exposed myths about interracial rapes, and developed outreach programs to black, hispanic, chicana [sic], Indian and Asian women, they developed no unified analytic position on racism and rape (Shechter, 1982, p. 40)." Women of color partially engaged the

movement, but also forged a parallel path that pertained to their own circumstances as a twice or thrice-marginalized group.

Feminist theories of power. As there is no single feminist viewpoint, neither is there a uniform socio-political discourse about violence against women, perhaps because there continues to be little consensus on the relationship between power and the role of women in society. As introduced above, an imbalance of power is at the heart of gendered violence; therefore, it is appropriate to consider the contributions of feminist theory to the topic at hand by means of feminist perspectives on power. Acknowledging the variety of feminist theories, Amy Allen (2011) suggests that, in spite of their differences, feminist theories are built on the following common themes: "critiquing women's subordination, analyzing the intersections between sexism and other forms of subordination such as racism, heterosexism, and class oppression, and envisioning the possibilities for both individual and collective resistance to such subordination" (para. 1). Although power is a pivotal dynamic within feminist critique, analysis and activism, Allen (2011) finds that it is not explicit in feminist endeavors. Even so, she lays out three ways in which feminists theorize power: "as a resource to be (re)distributed, as domination, and as empowerment" (Allen, 2011, para. 1). The latter two are most useful here.

Power as domination. Explaining that debates about the definition of power abound in social and political theory, Allen (2011) offers some general ways to conceptualize power. Considering power as dominance, or power-over, it can be understood in terms of relationship or in terms of action – the act of exercising power-over (Allen, 2011). A radical feminist view focuses on power as an unjust or illegitimate relational domination and points to a power/powerlessness dynamic between male/female genders, keeping the issue within the construct of the dyadic, patriarchal model of masculine power (master) and female subordination

(slave) (Allen, 2011). Nancy Fraser sees this construction of power as a limitation, because, in her mind, the master/slave model refers to the individual realm of interactions between men and women and does not account for the multiple, impersonal forces that contribute to women's oppression, such as socio-cultural norms and practices (Fraser, cited in Allen, 2011, para. 19).

This points to another way to think of dominant power, by contrasting the actions of individuals with a larger, systemic power that constitutes opportunities for particular actors to exercise power-over others (Allen, 2011). Allen states, "[t]he systemic conception thus highlights the ways in which broad historical, political, economic, cultural, and social forces enable some individuals to exercise power over others, or inculcate certain abilities and dispositions in some actors but not in others" (Allen, 2011, para. 5). The implied tenacity in the relationship between structural power and individuals shows how people are constituted by the social worlds they inhabit, and engage in power relations that may be outside consciousness, and effectively, not entirely of their own doing. Allen (2011) goes on to make a third point about power, quoting Steven Lukes: "how we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them" (Lukes, cited in Allen, 2011, para. 8).

Thinking about power in the context of gendered violence is both a literal and theoretical endeavor, when both of these perspectives on power as domination are held simultaneously. Few would disagree that an act of sexual violence is literally a demonstration of an individual's power over another, which is why the phenomenon of sexual violence has been conceptualized and well documented in terms of power and control, with emphasis placed on a victim's lack of agency in the situation. However, focusing on power as domination alone is clearly rejected in

the literature on power, especially by feminist and other social and political theorists who focus on the interrelationship between collective processes and individuals.

Power as empowerment. Feminist thinkers who turn away from the power as domination camp conceptualize power as a capacity for transformation of self or other, which replaces the more static masculinized connotation of power and energizes its potential for empowering change (Allen, 2011). Empowerment is contrary to the bitterness of oppression and diminishment and instead implies enhancement, growth, creation and change. Jean Baker Miller points out the symbolic import of this conceptualization, saying "there is enormous validity in women's not wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used" (Miller, 1992, 247-248 cited in Allen, 2011, para. 36). Citing Hannah Arendt's rejection of the master/slave model of power, Allen (2011) highlights Arendt's belief that empowerment is a collective endeavor, quoting her definition of power as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (Arendt, 1970, p. 44 cited in Allen, 2011, para 40). The concept of power-with others, as opposed to power-over others is at the heart of the feminist principle of empowerment and essential to the operations of social change at the heart of feminist activism.

Michael Foucault's writings on power have drawn both feminist interest and criticism (Allen, 2011), perhaps due, in part, to the dialectic nature of his work and its inherent contradictions (Sadan, 1997). Foucault rejected the idea that domination is the essence of power, essentially discounting the need to locate the source of power, in favor of discovering how power operates within societies. (Sadan, 1997). He saw power as a decentralized set of relations, an endless string of practices within a society that creates and produces reality in a given place and in real time (Allen, 2011; Sadan, 1997). Foucault acknowledged that power can function in repressive ways, but saw it as fundamentally productive (Allen, 2011). Ironically, because of his

theoretical construct that power does not rest, but is instead a continuously interactive sociopolitical player, Foucault himself did not believe that social change could be brought about by means of traditional methods of resistance or empowerment (Sadan, 1997).

Empowerment, social change and social constructivism. While Foucault denied the existence of human agency and saw power as a singular motivator of and designer of all social interactions, Anthony Giddens proposes a more optimistic model, which incorporates Foucault's freewheeling characterization of power, but recognizes an ongoing human contribution in shaping the way that power enters into and influences social relations (Sadan, 1997). About Giddens' concept, Elisheva Sadan (1997) writes, "[i]t is human agency that creates the social structure – it establishes it, consolidates it, and also changes it while it acts" (p. 68). Sadan (1997) conceptualizes Giddens' "duality of structure" model as foundational for understanding the mechanism of empowerment as a dynamic encounter between individuals and their social contexts that may be geared toward changing the way power is used. He conceptualizes "power as process" (Sadan, 1997, p. 69).

Giddens' "duality" accommodates the existence and operation of structural and cultural forces, along with the ways in which these impact and are exercised by individuals, either purposefully or unconsciously (Sadan, 1997). What makes this pertinent to a study about community members' perceptions of sexual violence occurring in their rural community is the notion that their perceptions matter within their realm of influence, the community. As every small community is also impacted by the more generalized forces of society, history and culture, these same community members can apply their perceptions of sexual violence in their own community to how "the outside world" does or does not exert its power in the community.

Theories of power that incorporate concepts of empowerment on both individual and communal levels dovetail nicely with a constructivist outlook on social change. In a constructivist analysis of power, Stefano Guzzini (2005) lists three characteristics of constructivism claiming that "meaning, and hence knowledge, is socially constructed" (p. 498), that our social world is constructed by shared beliefs, and that "…it focuses on reflexivity; that is, on how the social construction of knowledge can itself affect the construction of social reality and vice versa" (pp. 498-499). Guzzini (2005) elaborates on how reflexivity manifests on the micro and macro levels. On the micro level he points out how "identification and identity become crucial terms for constructivism" (Guzzini, 2005, p. 499), because through language and social exchange, we create identifiers, or labels, for people, which become part of their self-identity. Of reflexivity on the macro level, Guzzini (2005) observes that it can amount to the perpetuation of "self-fulfilling prophecies," if the collective accepts social constructs as unavoidable or as fact. Questions of empowerment, change, and how power is exercised in society not only offer challenges to the problem of the seemingly intractable patriarchal systems embedded in society and culture, they also invite further reflection on the interrelationship of individuals with each other and with their community contexts.

Ecological model. Any discourse about incidents of sexual violence should address the fact that, while gendered violence may happen to an individual person, it occurs in the context and under the influence of multiple layers of wider society. A number of authors have drawn upon Lori Heise's (1998) integrated ecological model, which she conceptualizes as a way to organize diverse approaches and theoretical formulations found in the literature on gender-based violence. She retools existing uses of the ecological model towards a deeper understanding of the etiology of gendered abuse and to structure and compare findings from cross-cultural, cross-

disciplinary and international research. Heise (1998) considers violence against women a multidimensional problem that can only be understood contextually and on various levels that acknowledge the interaction of personal, situational and sociocultural spheres.

Heise (1998; Ellsberg & Heise, 2005) proposes a visual schema of four concentric circles to inform the etiology and dynamics of gender violence and abuse. At the center is the individual, whose behavior is guided by biology and personal history. The second circle represents the immediate context of an individual's interpersonal interactions and includes intimate relationships, family and friends. The third realm, the exosystem, is the community, with its institutions and structures, such as neighborhoods, work places and social networks. Encircling all of these is society and its institutions, comprising the macrosystem that is the creator and carrier of cultural norms and attitudes.

In a multi-national collaborative effort spanning a decade and ultimately sponsored by The World Health Organization (WHO), Ellsberg and Heise (2005) compiled and specifically designed a research manual for use by researchers, activists and community-based workers to gain a deeper understanding of violence against women throughout the world. They note that although violence against women is not universal, it is widespread, and, using the ecological model, they cite frequent findings of systemic gender bias that leads to violence, including male dominance in decision-making, wealth management and marital relationships (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, patriarchal power is assumed and commonly wielded to treat women as property, restrict their mobility and social support, and cultures supportive of this dynamic often tolerate violence as a tool of discipline for women and children (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005).

Informed by a number of international studies, the co-authors emphasize that studying the issue on each tier of the ecological model illuminates how the relationships between a woman and the various entities pertinent to her context work to endanger or protect her. Risk factors noted include increased frequency of harm when abuse is kept "private" and away from public view, and events between married couples that often "trigger" a violent episode, for example, if a wife cooks poorly or challenges her husband's infidelity (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Protective factors are seen in some communities that uphold norms that foster respect and autonomy for women. However, the manual encourages attention to differences in how the concentric circles of context interact, as in some communities where women may feel free to engage in independent behavior, but they may experience more violence if they do so, because cultural norms are unsupportive of the practice (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005).

As gendered violence is currently garnering international attention in a world increasingly in need of cross-cultural and cross-national understanding, it seems reasonable to add one more outer circle to Heise's model, one that represents the multi-layered interactivity within the global sphere. The authors of a study that looked at attitudes about violence against women in four vastly different countries found that socio-cultural differences as reflected in political, historical, religious and economic sectors may carry more weight than gender, in shaping attitudes about sexual violence (Nayak et al., 2003). Their study highlights a need for more research into sociocultural differences among nations, to better understand gender attitudes that relate to violence against women (Nayak et al, 2003). Its scope and findings will be further discussed below.

Theory of community. Across cultures and borders, international researchers have demonstrated the existence of thematic commonalities in attitudes that foster and perpetuate

violence against women. However, these same researchers are calling for more exploration of differences that appear to be contextually specific on the local level. This research postulates that local perspectives on gender dynamics and sexual violence can be at least partly revealed by how individuals view themselves as part of a community and what that means to them.

Seeking to build a theory of community, McMillan and Chavis (1986) reviewed literature centered on perceptions of what creates a sense of community and found not only that a sense of community does exist, but also that it is considered to be a vital aspect of life. The authors define this as follows: "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan, 1976 cited in McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) develop their theory of community by elaborating on the five points of their definition, which they apply equally to geographic and relational uses of the term "community." *Membership:* Attributes of community membership include boundaries (who belongs and who does not) that help provide emotional safety and a sense of belonging and identification with the community. Membership is further solidified by investing oneself in meaningful ways and by participating in the symbolic life of the community such as its ceremonies, myths, rituals, and holiday celebrations. *Influence:* Community members and the community exert influence on each other based on mutual needs, a dynamic that validates both and builds cohesiveness. *Integration and fulfillment of needs:* This element is associated with reward and reinforcement, such as the bonding with other members over shared values that are played out in community life. *Shared emotional connection:* This is developed through frequent and positive interactions and participation in or identification with a shared history. It is

deepened by the community's ability to resolve issues and create closure when afflicted by a crisis. Finally, a community is strengthened by opportunities to honor each other and develop a common spiritual bond. *Dynamics within the elements:* Interactions among members and individual relationships with the community as a whole are dynamic, ever evolving and particular to each locale.

Community empowerment. Using a similar model to define community, authors Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman (1994) look at the effect that empowering a community can have on the health of individuals, particularly those who are disadvantaged or marginalized, due to the sequelae of economic disadvantage, minority status, and inadequate interpersonal relationships or social supports. Emphasizing the relational factors between the individual and their environment, they explore how the health of individuals is impacted by the collective in which they abide, on both organizational and community levels (Israel et al., 1994). In essence, their thesis is consistent with the ecological model as applied to the dynamics of sexual violence occurring among neighbors and draws attention to the role of the collective response. To lower the number of risk factors that constitute what these authors term the "stress process" impacting an individual, they implore health practitioners to encourage social change on the collective level (Israel et al., 1994). They define empowerment as referring to "the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations" (Israel et al., 1994, p. 152). Emphasizing the mutual support available with group membership, an empowered community improves its capacity for sharing a positive quality of life, something that can also spread, say, to the next town (Israel et al., 1994).

In the context of community planning, Elisheva Sadan (1997) writes about empowerment as a social change process in three dimensions that affects: “people’s feelings and capacities; the life of the collective that they belong to; and the professional practice that gets involved in the situation” (p. 13). He defines the process of empowerment as a “transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one’s life, fate, and environment” (p. 13) and points out that this is not an event or an individual achievement, but a dynamic *social* process that creates an empowerment ethos and benefits both individuals and the collective. Sadan (1997) notes that current social reality is heavily marked instead by negative, disempowering processes such as discrimination, prejudice and blame, which essentially label and separate individuals from each other and from the notion that communal energy and power can be applied to soften or solve shared problems (Sadan, 1997). He sees empowerment as a contemporary endeavor that "contributes to the discourse on social problems, since it exposes the extent of oppression, discrimination and stigma in the lives of vulnerable populations, …" (Sadan, 1997, p. 19). Basing his theory of empowerment on Giddens' construct of power dynamics, Sadan (1997) sees the individual, the community and the wider society engaged in a process of "contextual relations that influence and are influenced by changing and dynamic circles" (p. 24).

Bystanders as social support. Theories of community and empowerment understood through the ecological model are compatible with research on bystander education and involvement in prevention of sexual violence. A sense of community is conducive to the positive development of social supports that mitigate the perpetuation of sexual violence. The engagement of bystanders as partners in preventing sexual violence reaches beyond the concept of professional handling of individual problems, as in deferring to law enforcement or direct service agencies, and puts the responsibility into the midst of the community.

Victoria Banyard (2011) has focused much of her research on bystander interventions and observes that scant attention has been paid to the community context and how community members might be enlisted to get involved in sexual violence prevention efforts. Reviewing the literature, Banyard consolidates important factors for bystander involvement that have been gleaned from various studies and years of attempts to understand the relationship between victims, perpetrators, and the community context in which sexual violence occurs. Most pertinent to the study at hand are her calls for more research to focus on bystander attitudes and behaviors in a larger variety of situations that involve sexual violence (Banyard, 2011). Employing observations gleaned from Burn's (2009) situational model and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, Banyard (2011) suggests that more be done to discover the impact that broad socio-cultural norms have on bystander's inclinations to act or not act, calling for more systematic research to explore how perceptions of individuals who choose to intervene in cases of sexual violence relate to normative beliefs about individual and collective responsibility. These insights point directly to the purpose and the fundamental question of this study and to the reason behind presenting the material using an ecological perspective and in a much larger context than the rural village in which sexual assaults occurred.

Bystander intervention. Using the ecological model, Banyard's (2011) research has sorted out variables that are key to understanding bystander behavior on the individual and contextual levels. Looking at intrapersonal factors, she found that attitudes, emotional engagement and gender, along with knowledge about sexual assault are significant predictors of bystander helping behavior (Banyard, 2011). Personal beliefs and attitudes about sexual violence as an issue and its victims and perpetrators have been mostly studied in relation to rape myths that permeate society and its institutions (Banyard, 2011). Defining rape myths as

"generalized and false beliefs about sexual assault that trivialize a sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not occur" (Faniuk Seefelt, & Vandello, 2008, p. 790, cited in Banyard, 2011), Banyard (2011) finds evidence among studies that shows a correlation between knowledge about sexual violence and lower acceptance rates of the myths, which in turn increases the likelihood that these bystanders will intervene in cases of sexual assault.

A sense of personal responsibility is another positive correlate for taking action, and can be diminished in individuals who endorse rape myths, particularly those that negatively judge the worthiness of the victim and assign less import to the culpability of the perpetrator (Banyard, 2011; Burn, 2009). Individual responsibility may intensify when a witness experiences emotional arousal in cases of obvious danger, or when a witness feels an empathic connection to the victim because he/she knows the person or perceives the victim as similar to themselves (Banyard, 2011; Burn 2009). Because they are more likely to identify with the victim, research shows that women are more inclined to intervene when they perceive risk of sexual assault, and, while men are less likely to take action when situations are ambiguous, they are more likely to help in emergencies (Banyard, 2011; Burn, 2009). Women may tend to help victims, and men may focus more on stopping the perpetrators (Banyard, 2011). Gender differences in bystander behaviors are also affiliated with rape myth acceptance, which is found to be more prevalent in men (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Shechory & Idisis, 2006, both cited in Burn, 2009). Rape myth messages that blame the victim and justify rape, even against social prohibitions against harming others are found to be associated with sexual assault perpetration (Burn, 2009).

Taking into account pertinent characteristics of individuals who are faced with decisions about how to engage with sexual violence as both issue and occurrence within their communities, Banyard presents her work on bystander engagement as a model of community

change (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Components of the model include assessing a community's readiness to listen, to decrease resistance and discomfort with the issue by helping the community understand the power of negative social and environmental messaging, and, ultimately, to foster community responsibility for the prevention of sexual violence (Banyard et al., 2004). These activities take place in the context of relations among individuals and the encircling social systems outlined by the ecological model, and in which Banyard and others identify contextual variables that may support or serve as barriers to developing a community practice of bystander involvement in cases of sexual violence (cf. Banyard et al., 2004, Banyard, 2011; Burn, 2009). Of note, positive factors include a strong sense of community and the willingness of community leaders to speak openly about the issue (Banyard, 2011).

Empirical Literature

Overview. The empirical literature on sexual and domestic violence and perceptions and attitudes about violence against women is plentiful and varied. It spans decades and currently is cropping up in the form of domestic and international government reports, in legislation and policy documents, as meta-analyses of research on violence and attitudes toward women, as studies on behalf of victims, in studies on psychological sequelae of trauma, in research on sexual violence's impact on communities, as studies for prevention programs, and more. These works are appearing in journals and other sources across disciplines, which appear to share concerns about the level of violence against women throughout the world, but which do not appear to be joining together in a single conversation. Although the literature is disparate, I have attempted to show here something of the range of studies, thematic relationships among them, and how they inform the present study.

Bystander intervention and social supports. Several studies look at aspects of social supports, how they are extended to and perceived by survivors, victims and perpetrators, and how professional sectors and communities can be educated to employ them productively (Banyard, 2004, 2011; Burn, 2009; Dekesredy, Donnermeyer, & Schwartz, 2009; Frye, 2007; Neville & Heppner, 1999; Reck, 2007; Starzynski, Ullman, Filipas, & Townsend, 2005; Ullman, 2000). Some of these studies supply framework for others and will be reviewed here in more detail, as this is an evolving area and pertinent to this study, which emphasizes the relationship between individuals and their community contexts. The term "social support" itself eludes definition, as it is widely and variously used in the social sciences (Reck, 2007), however, when applied in specific contexts, the concept gains structure and purpose. The array of social supports can be generally seen as positive (supportive) and negative (unsupportive) and are also described as available (e.g. one's social network) or perceived (the belief that one's needs are met) (Reck, 2007).

In an exploratory cross-sectional study to determine the likelihood of bystander interventions occurring in three Brooklyn, New York, neighborhoods in response to either cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) or general violence, Virginia Frye (2007) found that attitudes may be instrumental in undermining the benefits of community cohesion. Frye (2007) measured informal social control (inclination to intervene), perceptions of neighborhood cohesion, attitudes about IPV against women, attitudes about general violence and crime, and self-efficacy for intervention in IPV (Frye, 2007). Using quantitative and qualitative methods, Frye (2007) and a team of interviewers collected information from residents in three predominantly Caribbean immigrant neighborhoods, by means of a "street corner" survey method, completing 126 structured interviews about "neighborhood issues and problems" (p. 1006) over the course of

three weeks. Inconsistent with her expectations, Frye (2007) found that while personal attitudes and a sense of self-efficacy were factors in reacting to IPV, perceptions of neighborhood cohesion and related neighborhood factors did not have an impact on a person's propensity to enact informal social control. She concluded that individual and group attitudes toward IPV along with a sense of self-efficacy are critical measures to assess in research on informal social controls (Frye, 2007).

A good amount of research has been directed toward identifying what forces shape social supports, how and why they manifest as they do around this issue, and how best to cultivate positive outcomes between individual victim/survivors and their community contexts (e.g. Banyard, 2004, 2011; Burn, 2009; Ullman, 2000). To that end, some studies focus on developing education and prevention strategies, in a continuous process of deepening knowledge of the social dynamics of this issue and refining practices for confronting it. Two studies looked at bystander behavior and reflect work on recent prevention programs that are concerned with enlisting bystanders as allies in supporting not only the victims of sexual assault, but also each other, as community members can work together to create new social norms and attitudes through sharing responsibility and building skills to address this problem (Banyard et al., 2004; Burn, 2009; Potter & Stapleton, 2011). The bystander approach differs from traditional prevention programs that can create defensiveness in audiences, who may feel it is being suggested that they may be prospective victims or perpetrators themselves (Burn, 2009).

In a report for practitioners, Potter and Stapleton (2011) describe a social marketing campaign that they ran for seven years on a New England college campus, which seems to have been essentially an evaluative study of a pilot project, in which they received continuous feedback from students, as they shaped a campaign that encouraged bystander awareness and

action in cases of sexual violence on campus. Using evidence-based social marketing strategies, the researchers worked to create an environment in which bystanders would develop proactive attitudes against accepting gendered violence in their community (Potter & Stapleton, 2011). Potter and Stapleton (2011) identified a target audience of students and a control group, who were exposed to different types of media images of model bystander behaviors at various times; at each point questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to evaluate the efficacy of the campaign to create awareness of sexual violence prevention and consciousness of the role of bystanders. Changes to the campaign were made according to suggestions from the student feedback, in order to keep the messages pertinent to the students and to examine the sustainability of the program (Potter & Stapleton, 2011).

To learn more about bystander intervention training, Shawn Burn (2009) conducted an exploratory correlational study with a sample of 588 (378 female and 210 male) mostly White undergraduate students in California. She administered an anonymous questionnaire designed to measure five components in a situational model of bystander behavior that she identified as barriers to bystander intervention. The barriers were individually related to five precursors to intervention that Latane and Darley established in their 1970 situational model: "bystanders must first notice the event, then identify it as one where intervention is needed, then take responsibility for intervention, then decide how to help and, finally, act to intervene" (cited in Burn, 2009, p. 779). Describing each barrier as a failure to achieve its counterpart action for intervention, Burn (2009) found that situational barriers at any stage of this process can interfere with bystander action for both men and women, with few differences. Most notably, men scored higher on felt ability/skills for intervention and significantly higher on four "worthiness" items associated with the barrier to feeling responsible for intervening, if a potential victim makes

choices deemed to increase her assault risk. Burn (2009) encourages awareness education on the barriers in bystander intervention as one way to increase the efficacy of bystander action.

A few studies consider aspects of how an individual victim/survivor of sexual violence is impacted by visible and invisible social dynamics. Sarah Ullman (2000) created the Social Reactions Questionnaire (SRQ) to measure negative and positive social reactions to disclosures of sexual assault, by means of a study that invited participation from 323 adult sexual assault victims in three sample groups: college students, community residents, and mental health agency clients. The average age was 30; a high percentage was college educated; the mean income was $20,000-30,000; 52.2% were Caucasian, 26.1% African-American, and the remaining women were Hispanic, Asian and of mixed races. Overall participant response to an anonymous survey was 86%; they were asked questions about their social networks and the frequency of their informal and formal social contacts, along with questions about the nature of their assault, their level of satisfaction with reactions to their disclosure of the attack, and what types of responses they received. In an effort to support the reliability and validity of her findings and to measure the multiple dimensions of her concept, Ullman (2000) also used a number of additional assessment scales in the survey, such as the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors, the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), the Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale (PDS) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Ullman (2000) found that her scale proved to be a reliable and informative measure for social reactions to sexual assault victims, and it illuminated the important contextual aspects of an individual's experience of sexual violence. Positive reactions included victims feeling validated and believed, and victims described negative responses as feeling blamed, being treated differently, being told to move on with their lives, feeling controlled and that the other person

was prioritizing their own needs over those of the victim (Ullman, 2000). Positive social reactions were associated with more social support, higher self-esteem, and better psychological function, but not necessarily less severe PTSD symptomatology. Negative social reactions resulted in more severe PTSD symptoms, less self-esteem and poorer psychological functioning; negative reactions were also found to be more frequent when the sexual violence was more serious and disclosures were made to professionals – police and medical providers – whom victims rated as less helpful/supportive (Ullman, 2000).

Social supports as negative power. Silence and either negative responses of lack of involvement from potential social supports is identified as a problem in a variety of studies, from Chicago to Israel to Vietnam (Starzynsky et al., 2005; Krantz, Van Phuong, Larsson, Thi Bich Thuan, & Ringberg, 2005; Boehm & Itzhaky, 2004). In a study of social reactions received when a woman disclosed a sexual assault to formal and informal supports, Starzynski, et al. (2005) hypothesized that a woman is more likely to report her experience of sexual violence to formal supports such as law enforcement and medical providers, when the assault conforms to stereotypical definitions of rape, meaning that she has a better chance of being believed. They also tracked whether a woman's assault history, her racial identity, and the quality of her psychological functioning are other factors influenced which type of social support a woman may choose when in need (Starzynski, et al., 2005). A large, diverse sample of adult female victims of sexual violence was recruited with flyers and newspaper ads in the Chicago area to participate in a mail survey. 1,084 completed surveys represented a 90% response rate. Starzinsky and colleagues (2005) found that most of their hypotheses were confirmed. The authors point out that when women are assaulted by someone they know, or when there have been no weapons involved, they are less likely to report the crime to formal services, with the

result that their experience of sexual violence goes unreported and remains "private" (Starzinksky et al., 2005). In this way, negative social reactions contribute to the continued misinformation about the variety and frequency of situations in which sexual violence occurs, and to the process by which women internalize the blame that society continues to place upon the victim (Starzinksy et al., 2005).

In a rural area of Vietnam, researchers conducted a qualitative study with twenty men and twenty women, who were chosen, because, occupationally, they were either healthcare workers or elected representatives of local and regional organizations who also served on local reconciliation boards when violence occurred in a community (Krantz, et al., 2005). In an informal, semi-structured process with five focus groups, researchers uncovered three main themes: how IPV manifests, its consequences, and people's readiness to act. They found that perceptions of violence included physical, psychological and emotional forms of abuse, and, although sexual abuse was considered unacceptable, it was seen as a private family matter and reported less frequently, with women feeling compelled to keep silent about it, and seeking health care only in the most serious cases (Krantz et al., 2005). In spite of significant negative consequences on women's health caused by lack of social supports, the researchers found that the medical professionals were uninformed about the issue and less likely to intervene, even when asked. Even with the presence of local reconciliation groups who were prepared to act, and recognition of the problem at the national government level, Krantz and colleagues (2005) believe training programs for local officials, counselors and healthcare workers are necessary to increase an understanding that violence against women is a serious public health problem.

In a single case study design based on events in an ultra-orthodox Jewish urban community of 800 families in Israel, researchers addressed the community silence that

surrounded multiple cases of sexual assault of children (Boehm & Itzhaky, 2004). Community-wide fear and shame associated with these events created a tenacious informal social contract to silence the disclosure of the abuse and refuse treatment access to the victims and their families. For a year, Boehm and Itzhaky (2004) and a multi-disciplinary team of professionals interviewed the residents and gathered data about the social process behind the destructive silence and located it in the messaging and activities of the religious leadership, who insisted that disclosure of the abuse was inconsistent with their religious practice. With this information, the researchers launched a social marketing campaign to reinforce the positive socio-religious traditions that upheld community life and enlisted the community's aid to introduce new values that supported changes in the norms and behaviors that had silenced the child abuse (Boehm & Itzhaky, 2004) and would now find open communication, reporting and treatment to be consistent with their religious and community values.

Community systems and culture. Research into how service sectors or communities do or do not support victims and survivors of sexual violence, generally attempts to deepen both global and local understandings of its origins and meanings. Local and/or cultural context and perceptions delimit violence and its impact on a community or group and constitute a critical body of information. Growing numbers of studies are illuminating the dynamics of individual suffering inflicted by community responses and cultural norms about violence against women. One quantitative methods study used qualitative data to ascertain the perceptions of mothers in Brazil, whose daughters were sexually abused (Carvalho et al., 2009) and had no support or recourse for justice. Through semi-structured interviews of ten mothers ranging in age from 34 to 49, the research team found that the mothers' silence and pain were directly related to unrealistic cultural expectations of motherhood (Carvalho et al., 2009) combined with society's

disregard for “[violence’s] magnitude and the whole chain affected by it …” (Carvalho et al., 2009, p. 506).

Three exploratory qualitative methods studies used surveys and focus groups to enrich understandings of how violence is processed through cultural lenses of minority groups living in a contrasting American culture (Ahrens, Rios-Mandel, Isas, & del Carmen Lopez, 2010; Affonso et al., 2007; Moracco, Hilton, Hodges & Frasier, 2005). In one, 65 Spanish-speaking United States resident Latinas of various educational and socio-economic backgrounds and between the ages of 18 and 60-plus engaged in ten unstructured focus groups to determine the impact of cultural norms on Latinas’ identification and disclosure of intimate partner violence (Ahrens et al., 2010). They found that Latinas' access to information about sexual abuse was compromised by traditional values that made the subject taboo, and that structured a woman's duties around protecting her husband, family and those in authority from any stigma associated with disclosure of sexual violence. (Ahrens et al., 2010). Ahrens and fellow researchers (2010) noted that assumptions about Latinas' acceptance of traditional norms specific to their heritage may be less accurate than the actual beliefs held by Latinas, which the researchers interpreted as an indication that further study should consider the ways in which cultural beliefs about sexual violence are impacted by acculturation. The study also pointed to the need for increased outreach and culture specific community services for Latino communities (Ahrens et al., 2010), as did a second study about knowledge and attitudes about IPV in a rural North Carolina community (Moracco et al., 2005).

In the latter, a convenience sample of 100 Latino immigrants with an equal male/female gender distribution and between ages 19 and 60 was recruited and interviewed in various locales around town, including private homes, community centers, churches and *tiendas* (small stores)

(Moracco et al., 2005). The interviews were conducted in Spanish and followed a survey of open and closed-ended questions designed to gather data on the participants' perceptions of community problems, including IPV, and their awareness of community resources that could support them (Moracco et al., 2005). To preclude, as much as possible, any social desirability bias that may have been associated with asking questions only about IPV, the research purposely asked the men and women to list the top three serious social problems in their town; neither gender group listed IPV as one of the three, but women put it fourth and men mentioned it in sixth place. The researchers' recommendation for outreach and awareness of existing services included a call for gender-specific content and education about the seriousness of IPV and legal ramifications and resources (Moracco et al., 2005).

The third study focused on community violence in rural Hawaii, where the focus groups, consisting of 84 children (ages 5-10) and 66 adults recruited from a large elementary school, emphasized communal participation and the culturally pertinent method “talk story” to draw out experiences and perceptions of youth violence in their rural, multi-ethnic school (Affonso et al., 2007). Findings pertinent to this discussion indicate that before preventative interventions can attempt to ameliorate forms of community violence, a community needs first to identify and agree upon what the violence is, and then to engage community members in culturally meaningful practices that aim to reduce or eliminate it (Affonso et al., 2007; Carvalho et al., 2009; DeKeseredy et al., 2009).

Community identity as strength. Two studies focus on identity derived from a sense of place, history and tradition and find that members of communities assign meaning to their specific contexts that can create, uncover or enrich benefits gained from social cohesion and collective efficacy when issues arise (Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, & Foster-Fishman, 2006;

Yoon, 2009). In a mixed methods study Intae Yoon (2009) sought to determine, among other things, why a poor, undereducated, 97% African-American populated North Carolina town was the only one in the region to rebuild after a devastating flood. Warned that, as an outsider, he may find the community members unlikely to respond to a mailed questionnaire, Yoon (2009) used six culturally sensitive contact methods to gather 127 completed responses, including multiple mailings, signage in public places, and requests to pastors to encourage participation from their congregations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with "key informants" to gather information about the pre-disaster town and perceptions of elected town leaders' management of the disaster. From the contributions of the townspeople to his study, Yoon (2009) gained much useful information for the role that invisible community assets play in post-disaster recovery, but most pertinent here is the discovery of a unanimous pride in the symbolic meaning of the town's place in American history as the first town chartered by African-Americans, which had been forgotten or unknown until the flood's aftermath. The symbolic meaning of place, culture and history was the most precious rallying asset in the town's survival, in spite of various negative factors such as poverty and conflict and mistrust over the elected officials' distribution of resources (Yoon, 2009).

Believing that people are affected by their neighborhood contexts, and wanting to know more about what meanings individuals assign to the physical characteristics of their surroundings, a research team employed a methodology called *Photovoice*, with 29 adults and adolescents representative of seven economically disadvantaged urban Michigan neighborhoods (Nowell et al., 2006). The demographic distribution of the sample was 52% African American, 31% Caucasian, 17% Hispanic; 69% were female, and ages ranged from 13 to 65. Building on research about social dynamics that create a sense of community and collective efficacy that

support social change, these researchers were interested in how residents' thoughts, feelings and behaviors were impacted by the physically distressed conditions of their neighborhoods. They explain *Photovoice* as "a qualitative participatory methodology that puts cameras in the hands of participants to document the realities of their daily lives;" a second step involves using the photographs for reflection and group dialogue to express which aspects of their community life are important to them, why, and what they want to change (Nowell et al., 2006, p. 31). The findings showed that residents derived multi-layered meanings from the conditions and the characteristics of their physical communities that gave them "cues … about who they are, how they are viewed by others, what behaviors are socially accepted, and who they might become" (Nowell et al., 2006, p. 35).

Rural communities as unique cultures. In an analysis of domestic violence among Native Americans, Sherry Hamby (2000) emphasizes the importance of community among this population, stating at the outset that sharper attention should be given to the identity of American Indians that is derived from inter-tribal differences and from their community structures. With numerical statistics, Hamby underlines the uniqueness, diversity and heterogeneity of native tribes residing in the United States alone: "512 recognized native groups and 365 state-recognized Indian tribes who speak 200 different languages" (Chester, Robin, Koss, Lopez & Goldman, 1994, cited in Hamby, 2000). Hamby (2000) reports that little attention has been directed toward understanding the causes, the prevalence and the contexts of domestic violence in Native communities that likely differ from group to group and acknowledges the challenge to researchers to engage in individualized, culturally accurate assessments and interventions.

This example is presented as a correlate to researching sexual violence in American rural communities and in their counterparts in other nations. The need to understand culture and

community as a prerequisite to gaining a true portrait of how sexual and other forms of violence are enacted among people in a given context seems a daunting task. In an overview of challenges that rural settings present to researchers, Janet St. Lawrence and Serigne Ndiaye (1997) observe that standard research methods are often not applicable because of contextual differences endemic to each rural place.

> Rural researchers invariably are faced with the need to understand the social, life-style, organizational, and institutional factors that prevail in rural areas and to adapt their research methods into rural ecologies. Familiarity with rural social organizations and the ways rural people think and act is essential to gain insight into the social and organizational factors that affect the research (St. Lawrence & Ndiaye, 1997).

The "community" part of rural community is not easily defined, although some articles and studies agree that certain general characteristics appear in rural places. Within their conceptualization of community as a link between people's personal problems and broader global forces, Donnermeyer, Jobes, & Barclay (2006) list some common characteristics of rural areas; the first is a smaller population with a lower population density, and the second is a limited variety of daily activities that ensures more regular and familiar interpersonal contact among residents. Functionally, Donnermeyer et al. (2009) see the community as the geographic and interactive system that socializes its residents into certain social values, norms and beliefs, and, through its subgroups such as families, schools, peers and the more formal legal structures it controls the attitudes and behaviors of its members. Others observe that rural social networks are more interconnected, less stratified and more dense that urban areas, and that rural residents may have both a strong preference for independence, yet operate with a collective feeling of solidarity (DeKeseredy, et al., 2009; St. Lawrence & Ndiaye, 1997).

Donnermeyer et al. (2006) describe the sense of community as a development of interactions among the residents, who create a specific, contextual "weness" (Warren, 1978, cited in Donnermeyer, 2006), which then influences their mindset and actions. In a proposal for a community-based crime prevention plan designed to address violence against women in rural places, DeKeseredy et al. (2009) challenge the common tendency to idealize rural areas as "crime free," and they question the assumption that rural places naturally possess more collective efficacy to reduce violence than do urban areas. They acknowledge that

> communities are contested places where differing strands of values, norms, beliefs and tolerance for crime influence the security of rural women. Hence, some forms of social organization or collective efficacy … may promote and condone woman abuse, and other forms serve to prevent and deter it (DeKeseredy et al., 2009)

Citing studies that testify to the frequency of IPV in rural communities, DeKeseredy et al. (2009) find that, contrary to widespread opinion, women in rural communities often feel less safe in their own homes than outside of them, and that they may not disclose the violence, due to lack of trust in local informal or formal supports to help them find safe alternatives for their lives.

Perhaps because there is little research on sexual violence specific to rural places, a number of state sponsored investigations have been launched to investigate rural communities' perceptions of sexual violence and to learn what sorts of supports victims of violence need to overcome barriers to access supportive services (Berliner, Fine, & Moore, 2001; Lewis, 2003; California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2010). To determine outreach needs, the Washington State Office of Crime Victims Advocacy conducted a telephone survey to gather data on the occurrence rate of sexual assault in the state, along with information about the nature of the assaults, how often they were reported, and the quality of victims' access to services

(Berliner, et al., 2001). A representative sample of 1325 Washington female residents aged 18-96 completed the survey; the racial demographic reflected that of the state – mostly White, which makes it noteworthy that findings included a higher incidence of rape in Native American and Hispanic groups. Overall the study showed that about a third of the women in Washington State have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives, often multiple times, with more frequency occurring among younger women (Berliner, et al., 2001). Few women reported their assaults to police, sought medical help, and many had never told anyone; those who did report the crimes showed benefits in general health and psychological function (Berliner, et al., 2001). Most of the women reported positive perceptions of their own communities' response to violence against women and children and felt there was a high level of awareness, particularly in rural areas of availability of services for victim/survivors (Berliner, et al., 2001).

The California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA) (2010) continues to update materials assembled for rape crisis centers in rural areas that contain strategies for partnering with groups and individuals in their respective communities in order to meet the needs of survivors of sexual violence and to work toward ending the problem. The comprehensive informational packet is designed to help service providers overcome the challenges endemic to rural places, including isolation, rape myth supportive attitudes, limited resources, lack of anonymity, and public denial of the problem. Service providers are encouraged to build relationships and collaborate with schools, faith communities, businesses, and engage in community outreach and education about sexual violence and the community dynamics that perpetuate it, towards changing public attitudes (CALCASA, 2010).

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) researched how geographic and cultural differences in rural areas in four states, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Oklahoma and

Alaska, impacted service delivery to victim/survivors and identified specific ways in which service advocates in each area could better understand and provide for their communities' needs (Lewis, 2003). The research identified barriers to reporting and to seeking services associated with rural community dynamics and cultural codes generally similar to those described above (Lewis, 2003). Data from Pennsylvania indicated that there are higher rates of sexual violence in rural areas compared to urban places; in Oklahoma, there was evidence that reported rapes do not reflect the actual number in rural areas; rural areas in Alaska were shown to contribute disproportionately to the state's high rate of sexual assault and rape; data from Mississippi showed that rural rates for sexual assault were higher than those of urban areas (Lewis, 2003). The summary of findings suggests that sexual violence is a "hidden epidemic" in American rural communities and calls for place-sensitive efforts to understand the unique ways in which a common violence manifests in even the most out of the way villages (Lewis, 2003).

Two exploratory studies investigated barriers to services in rural areas; one used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the perspective of service providers, and the other used focus groups with service users from both rural and urban areas (Eastman, Bunch, Williams, & Carawan, 2007; Logan, Evans, Stevenson, & Jordan, 2005). Eastman and colleagues (2007) assembled a nonprobability purposive sample of rural domestic violence agency administrators in North Carolina and Virginia who were 22 to 55 years old and 79% Caucasian and 21% African American, who filled out a survey and participated in focus groups. They identified barriers to accessing services for rural survivors that included geographic isolation, insufficient employment and housing, no public transportation, a high social tolerance for domestic violence, and a lack of anonymity or confidentiality in the community, which produced shame, embarrassment, and sometimes put the survivor in danger from their attacker.

Overall, the service providers felt that they were supported in their work and had low burnout rates, in spite of a lack of professional training opportunities, their clients' needs outpacing agency resources, a general sense that women they serve are socialized to believe violence is acceptable, a high level of victim blaming in social dynamics, and a lack of public awareness of domestic violence as a social problem (Eastman et al., 2007).

A sample of thirty female service users with an average age of 37 and from unidentified urban and rural areas participated in six focus groups to compare similarities and differences in how they perceived barriers to legal, health and mental health services in their contexts (Logan et al., 2005). The rural sample was 89% White and 11% Biracial, and the urban set was 33% African American and 67% White. The research team found that some concerns about seeking medical or mental health services were shared, and others were specific to either urban or rural settings; rural service users found the biggest barriers to be lack of resources (limited housing, phones and transportation), community or family silencing codes and fears associated with lack of anonymity in small communities, including shaming gossip and safety concerns, if the perpetrator should retaliate (Logan et al., 2005). With regard to the criminal justice system, there were only shared concerns and others specific to rural women; these included misconceptions about the justice system, lack of trust about law enforcement (fear of police; not enough police) and fear of retaliation by their perpetrator (Logan et al., 2005).

Violence and constructing change. The studies discussed above represent a small piece of an enormous collective effort to alleviate the pain and suffering caused by interpersonal violence, and, specifically in this paper, sexual violence against women in rural places. Part of the work necessarily addresses individual and communal attitudes and dynamics that contribute to and even create the problem of sexual violence, which begs the question of "uncreating" the

problem through community education, awareness, prevention and cultural change. One study considered individual agency in relation to the image of a culture of violence assumed to be permanently entrenched in the rural South.

Seeking to understand cultural foundations of non-specific interpersonal violence in the rural South, Lee and Ousey (2011) conducted a study to examine how individuals use the "scripts and tools" (p. 901) that they derive from their cultural context to inform their perceptions, decisions and actions concerning interpersonal violence. Out of the mix of culture of violence theories, the authors bridge the chasm created by the debate between structuralists and cultural theorists by claiming that violence in the South is rooted both in structural problems, such as poverty, and in culturally shaped values. However, Lee and Ousey (2011) interpret these classic theoretical models in relational terms by applying to them a "culture in action" model, which emphasizes the agency of individuals and views culture "as intersubjective, performative, affective-cognitive, relational, and worldmaking" (p. 903). Thus culture does not impose formulaic values on individuals, but an individual may choose a strategy for action from a number of culturally scripted messages, when it comes to situational violence (Lee & Ousey, 2011).

In their study, Lee and Ousey (2011) completed thirty-nine face-to face semi-structured interviews, in which they provided for participants various narratives involving interpersonal violence and then asked open-ended questions to discover how the person would respond, how they imagined others in the community would respond, and why. Using snowball sampling in two Louisiana parishes chosen for their violent crime rates and population characteristics determined by religious diversity and ethnocultural history, the researchers achieved a sample that was fairly evenly racially mixed (African American and White), male/female gender

balanced, socioeconomically diverse, and with an age range of 18 – 88. They found that cultural scripts for violence exist across the diversity of their sample, that scripts leading to violence are most commonly noted when the police are perceived as ineffective or slow, or when people feel they or their family are in danger. The findings suggested that social messaging does not seem to reflect normative expectations or values, since participants reported that they might differ from other community members in their response. The authors interpret this evidence to support the culture in action model that conceptualizes "culture as intersubjective, relational, and performative" (Lee & Ousey, p. 912-913) with regard to individuals' perceptions of and engagement with interpersonal violence.

Often informed and encouraged by international organizations such as the World Health Organization, research outside the United States appears more often to focus on the issue of sexual violence as a public health issue that is related to human rights and the economic sustainability of nations (e.g. Krantz et al., 2005; Laisser, Nyström, Lugina, Emmelin, 2011; Nayak et al., 2003). In a qualitative study using focus groups with a purposive sample of 75 men and women, ages 15-59, from an urban district in Tanzania, Laisser et al. (2011) examined participant's perceptions of and responses to IPV. Their research included a thematic guide based on the ecological model, which enabled them to gather a full contextual picture of their participants' understanding of and attitudes about sexual violence against women (Laisser et al., 2011). With the help of local leaders, the research team drew information from a sample representative of the district's socio-cultural diversity that gave them insight not only about the influence of national social norms and pressures, but also those placed upon sub-groups by religious beliefs, for example (Laisser et al., 2011). By looking at each level of the social ecology with respect to IPV, they found that this Tanzanian community was in transition, and

that change processes were occurring at different rates in these sectors; they found increasing openness to report and to intervene on the individual and community levels, in spite of stubborn gender norms that subordinate women and the need for more attention to women's rights from the medical, legal and social welfare on the societal level (Laisser et al., 2011).

Other work that is geared toward social change on the global level is represented by a cross-nation study of attitudes toward violence against women that centered on undergraduate students in four countries, Japan, Kuwait, United States, and India (Nayak et al., 2003). In this comparative qualitative study of 1,182 male and female 17 to 24 year olds, the researchers sought to understand differences in attitudes about violence against women as impacted by varying socio-cultural, political, historical and economic contexts. They found significant gender variations in beliefs about violence in all countries, and that social codes related to traditional gender roles and collectivist ideologies are more tolerant of violence against women. Nayak et al. (2003) call for more research into contextual structures and the development of more empirical data about attitudes and gendered practices across nations, in order to achieve social change regarding violence against women.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Literature

The strengths and weaknesses of the literature gathered and reviewed for this paper, ironically, are inseparable, in that most of the weaknesses can also be viewed as strengths, when considered from alternate perspectives. It is a strength that the literature is so varied in focus and context, that the topic is researched domestically and internationally, and that it is studied from many diverse angles of community, culture, ethnicity, and national identity. Related weaknesses include little standardization or uniformity in study designs and purpose across contexts, and there are large gaps in certain dimensions of the topic, for example, how it is experienced in rural

places. Although currently there do not seem to be consistent theoretical frameworks or templates, they are developing, especially as seen in expanding use of the ecological model in this research, which points out the generalizable aspects of the problem, while maintaining focus on contextual specifics. These points are related to the strength and weaknesses of small sample sizes common to qualitative methods and the resulting lack of complete generalizability across contexts. While these are weaknesses, the specificity of this type of research also lends to the field, a richer, more multi-layered understanding of the topic.

While comprehensive reports and analyses are increasing in number, it does not appear that disciplines are yet joining forces in ways that could support more collaborative research into this problem; interdisciplinary co-operation could be productive.   Particularly, American research seems less integrated into the international conversation about violence against women than that of other nations. Additionally, American research does not appear to have tapped widely into the insights into the problem of sexual violence that the rich diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural and regional groups in this country could offer.   The force of emotion and activism around gendered violence is a strength evident in the literature, yet it seems that the tendency is to work on gendered violence as a whole, rather than to develop research avenues that look at nuanced differences in causes and effects of domestic violence v. sexual violence v. violence cause by societal or cultural hostility toward women.

Summary

As noted above, the research that touches the topic of community members' perceptions of sexual violence and whether it is to be considered a private or a public matter is vast and varied.   With a dearth of research on sexual violence in rural places, it seemed reasonable for this research to determine the location of rural experiences of sexual violence within the context

of the issue itself. Flexible research methods are invaluable in relation to the issue of sexual violence against women, as indicated by the variety of study designs and purposes across nations and disciplines. The research as a body points to the import of viewing sexual violence through a contextual lens, which may be why so many disciplines appear to have both theoretical and practical stakes in this issue.

The following summary shows how this study is conceptualized in this paper. The issue of sexual violence has been viewed by many as "belonging" to the feminist school of thought, and solutions have been pursued through decades of feminist activism. The literature on feminist principles and theories of power helps illuminate the scope of social discovery around gendered violence and serves to track the journey of social change, even as it continues. The weaknesses of omissions by some feminist work in the area of intersectionality become more evidently pertinent as research into contextual differences builds through discussions of social power dynamics, theories of community and social supports, and cultural variations in attitudes about gender roles and women. Increasingly, the ecological model of individuals' relationships with socio-political systems is being applied to explorations of the pervasiveness of the problem of sexual violence. This model is gaining wide acceptance as a tool for understanding, and it appears to have contributed to increased attention by national and international governmental spheres, which are emphasizing the depth of social, political and economic damage created by systemic sexual and other types of violence perpetrated against women. The exploration of rural communities and the diversity of their dynamics and personalities serves to explore a tiny part of the global social system that is universally harmed by all forms of violence against women, and is meant to shine a light on community members' perceptions of sexual violence occurring in their hometown in one corner of New England. The study's interview process aims to

reciprocate by revealing insight not only into how rural communities are impacted by larger sociopolitical forces, but also to show how communal values and actions in rural places can make contributions to global efforts to alter the damaging effects of overt and latent misogyny and find solutions for violence against women.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how isolated cases of sexual violence occurring in a rural village impacted community members and to examine the meaning of community members' perceptions in light of local and global social opinion concerning violence against women. Specifically, this exploratory qualitative methods study seeks to determine the perceptions of community members regarding the presence and impact of sexual violence in their rural New England village, and the research question asks whether they perceive this type of violence as a cultural problem or a private affair.

As a pastor in the community when these events occurred, I found that this type of violence was very difficult for people to talk about. This made it almost impossible for me at the time to discern how news of sexual violence impacted individual members of the community and how, if at all, this knowledge may have affected the community's overall sense of itself. As a researcher, I am interested in learning how the thoughts and feelings of individual members of a community contribute to a collective perspective on the issue.

Research Method and Design

Aiming toward a better understanding of gendered violence, this study's design is based on the notion that narratives of real people in real places potentially hold vast amounts of information about human experiences of violence and the perceptions, assumptions, fears and hopes that shape them. I used an exploratory qualitative research design to obtain a multi-

dimensional sense of what meanings individuals assigned to their experience of the sexual assaults that occurred in their hometown some years ago. Qualitative research offers ways for more personal connections and communications between interviewers and their informants, particularly about complex and sensitive or painful topics that have the potential to stimulate deep emotional responses (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002). A flexible methods, semi-structured interview approach was most appropriate to gather participants' subjective experiences that, together, can tell a rich, layered story of a community's response to crisis. A less formal interview method was also more suitable to the relationship between the study participants and myself as researcher, given that we are not strangers to one another. In my role as participant-observer, I was sensitive to potential relational biases that could arise from my previous position in the community and employed measures to clarify differences between my purpose as researcher from my role as local minister by means of the letters of invitation and consent and the use of an interview guide. Rubin and Babbie (2010) use the term, "qualitative observation," to describe the role of a participant researcher using qualitative methods. Out of their list of four types of qualitative observation, my role in this research most closely resembles "participant-as-observer," which Rubin and Babbie (2010) define as a researcher's participation with the group being studied, along with full disclosure that the participant-observer is doing research.

Details of my interest in the participant's opinions and an explanation of my past community role and current project were clarified in my letters of invitation and consent. Because of established prior relationships with members of my sample, I used an interview guide (Appendix E) consisting of open and closed questions to create a level of formality that would discourage random conversation, but at the same time, to allow for a personal exchange based on familiarity and trust. The guide was also purposefully employed to insure against a respondent's

potential desire to stray into discussing details of the referenced past events or people involved in them, rather than focusing on their own thoughts and feelings about the fact that sexual violence occurred in their hometown. Demographic and descriptive information was obtained through closed questions asked at the end of the interview (Appendix F).

Researcher bias. For obvious reasons, bias is of particular concern in this study. The difficulties insinuated by my dual role in this research are reflective of the ongoing debate in social science research that centers on the question of how a researcher's objectivity or subjectivity influences the legitimacy of a study's outcomes (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009). Biases are bi-directional – some originate in the respondents' behaviors, which may include "social desirability," or wanting to give socially acceptable or desirable answers to the interview questions, and other biases can come from the researcher's own beliefs, particularly if they conflict with those presented by the study participant(s) (Iacono et al., 2009; Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

As much as possible, I attempted to be watchful of these pitfalls through the study design, as mentioned above, and by careful consideration of my position, past and present, in the community, my relationships with the individual participants, and the sensitivity of my topic. I drew upon my past role and my relationships with the respondents that, over time, have fostered a certain level of trust. This, along with my belief that the people I selected for my sample are relatively fearless about expressing their opinions allowed me to attend to the interviews in a relaxed manner, which helped me to listen and be mindful of, but not preoccupied by, my own reactions. Nevertheless, my own response serves as a framework throughout the study.

My curiosity about my neighbors' perceptions of the sexual violence that happened in our community served as an overriding control that helped me keep my own bias in check during the

interview process. I very much wanted to hear what others felt and thought about the events, and about what I perceived as the absence of a community process in their aftermath. I did not know if a collective response was an important consideration for others, or if it was limited to my own experience of the events and my impulse as a pastor. As such, this subjective interest is the source of this research study, and informs its conception, design, sample choice, data collection and analysis. In contrast to theories of detachment in research, Rosaldo believed a researcher to be " 'a positioned subject', whose 'life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight'" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 19, cited in Iacono et al., 2009). The ideas behind this use of self in research entail using one's own emotional responses to situations as avenues to understanding those of others (Iacono et al., 2009). Essentially, my own feelings about sexual violence occurring in my hometown when I was a pastor to the community constitute critical, foundational knowledge in my exploration of this topic in a rural setting.

Ethical considerations. Central to the negotiation of the tension between subjectivity and objectivity are the ethical codes that guide professionals in the ordained ministry, in social work, and in research. As a pastor in a small community for ten years, I was privileged with many confidences; it was a priority to protect these in my study design and in my comportment during the interview process. The fact that I have been away from active involvement in village life and currently have some distance from my neighbors helps redefine my former role as minister to my current role as researcher. This has been circumstantial, in the sense that I have been away pursuing a MSW degree, but it is also due to purposeful steps that I undertook when I decided to "retire" from the church, in order to return to school and also to retain my residential status in town. Ministerial ethics are very clear on boundaries between departing ministers and former congregations; while still active as pastor, I spent months teaching the church leadership

and members of the congregation about limitations imposed on me (and them) by ministerial ethics and what and what not to expect from me when I stepped down. I also put a good deal of effort into preparing the town for my new role as "simply" neighbor (e.g. letter in town newspaper, conversations to spread the word). I believe that the forced estrangement has proven itself to be effective; I feel quite the outsider now, with a degree of insider status, which seems as good a position as possible from which to be a participant-observer, as I conduct this research.

My training as a minister in the social justice tradition facilitates connection with the core values and ethical demands of the social work profession that are associated, both in practice and in research, with personal and sociopolitical support of individuals in the context of their environments. Social work research calls for continuous construction of a body of knowledge that serves the profession's goals to alleviate suffering and honor the dignity and worth of all people (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002). My study is intended to contribute to the dearth of research about community attitudes toward sexual violence that occurs in rural places, and potentially, if indirectly, to inspire community leaders to find ways to ameliorate this issue in their own context.

Sample

The feasibility of this study and identification of appropriate study participants were both influenced by my unique position in the community. Relying on a non-probability sampling procedure and my knowledge of the community's dynamics and membership, I selected a purposive sample of adults for this project. I was able to make informed choices about which of my neighbors may offer me thoughtful responses to my questions, because I have lived in the village for thirteen years and was the sole resident pastor there for ten of them. A lapse of about seven years since the events occurred, my former pastoral role, my years as an active community

member and my recent separation have all served to support my research about a sensitive topic among people that I know.

The rationale behind my choice of a purposive sample is supported by the principles behind ethnographic research (Rubin & Babbie, 2010) that directly apply to recommendations for researchers in rural communities. These include being familiar with the community's organizations and leadership, and immersing oneself, as much as possible, in the social rhythms and nuances that are unique to the location (St. Lawrence & Ndiaye, 1997). As a former pastor to and current resident of the community, I am acquainted with most of the people, sensitive to family inter-connections, and aware of the work of organizations and leaders in the town. If participation in this research were to empower the community to address the issue of sexual violence, the impetus most probably would come from cooperation among established leaders and groups. Because it is often centered on personal interviews and other first-hand encounters, qualitative research has the potential to make connections between the local work and the larger social context (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Relational methods such as interviewing and joining with the community conspire to give voice to social pain and to pockets of silence. In this way, interactive qualitative methods can be conceived as instrumental in the construction of social change (Stein & Mankowski, 2004), perhaps especially when focused on discussion of sexual violence in a small community.

I shaped this research study to explore a handful of community leaders' perceptions of sexual violence as a social issue in their own rural context and in relation to how they believe sexual violence is perceived in the wider society. I chose this sample, because I understand them to function in the community as formal or informal leaders. As a group, I believed these people most likely would have been familiar with the sexual violence that occurred in town some years

ago. Also, because of the wide range of leadership activities performed by this sample, they are in regular contact with numerous other community members who may represent a wider demographic, conceptually increasing the diversity of the sample. The study sample was conceived to include equal numbers of men and women, to be representative of town demographics, and to involve a range of ages, inclusive of three generations. I am interested in the responses of community members who, by their actions, evidence that they value and benefit from participatory engagement with the community, in which they hold a personal stake, such as belonging.

Excluded from my study population are the survivors and the perpetrators of the violence and their immediate and extended family members. Important subjective characteristics of study participants included their willingness to talk to me, to talk about the topic, and to have lived in town at the time of the incidents. Although the interviews did not include conversation about the past events, this latter requirement for participation was meant to ensure that the respondent *potentially* experienced thoughts and feelings in response to an incident of sexual violence in his or her hometown. I purposely did not exclude respondents if they told me they did not know about the incidents, as this too was important information about the community's communication processes. The interview guide was designed as a flexible instrument, sensitive to variables among the participant's roles, activity and longevity in town. The guide was also organized in three parts to accommodate different levels of knowledge about the past events. For example, if an individual was not aware of any of the incidents, I could skip the questions that focused on emotional and cognitive responses to the news that sexual violence had happened and move onto the person's perceptions of sexual violence as a community and social issue. This would still

afford me a good deal of data about the community member's perceptions of sexual violence involving their neighbors.

This study's weaknesses reflect limitations of qualitative methodology and the context of the study itself. That non-structured interviews cannot consistently track the same issues in every interview is a methodological weakness of qualitative data collection and limits a study's generalizability. The time I have available to complete this research is another limitation, because it is difficult to gather data that reaches the deepest level of people's thoughts and feelings about gendered violence in only one interview. Because of its contextual frame, the study does not aspire to generalizability, as it focuses only on one small, New England village, which is neither racially nor ethnically diverse. The village's population echoes the demographics of a predominantly white, English-speaking state. Diversity is limited and primarily based in moderate socio-economic variance, as well as in the composition of the town, which is generally understood to be comprised of three categories of people: indigenous townspeople, those who were born and raised in other parts of the state, and the part of the population that has moved to town from places outside of the state. Inasmuch as it can be known, the study population aims to represent, more or less, the percentages of people in these implicit categories.

Given obvious shortcomings, the value of the study is in the gathering of data that is specific to a local context that happens to be a rural community where sexual violence has occurred. Sexual violence and its impact in rural communities is not well covered in the literature, and data collection from rural places is complicated by regional differences, subjective definitions of "rural", and an overall lack of information about the prevalence of the problem in these small, and often isolated, communities (Lewis, 2003).

Participants

Fourteen English-speaking Caucasian men and women, who ranged in age from 21 to 88, were interviewed during March and April 2012. Except for the 30's, all decades were represented as follows: 20's – 1, 40's – 3, 50's – 4, 60's – 3, 70's – 1, 80's – 2. Of the nine women, all but two came to town from other states and none is indigenous to the town, but six have resided in the town between 52% and 80% of their lives; for three of these, this time includes significant childhood years. Percentages for the other three range from 23% to 44%, and the actual years of residency of all the women range from 12 to 54 years. Of the five men, two are indigenous to the town and three came as adults from out of state. Their actual years of residency range from 12 to 67, and their lifetime percentages from 15% to 100%.

Other demographic information for the sample shows that all but two grew up with siblings, all but three were raised in a two parent household, and all but one are parents, with children ranging in age from 11 to 65. Most participants are married; one is widowed, and two are single. Socio-economically, there is not a discernibly broad variance, and educationally, three finished high school, one had three years of college, nine hold college degrees, and three have graduate degrees.

Various familial relationships were represented by individuals in the sample: three belong to three generations of one family; two generations are represented in another family; two married heterosexual couples were interviewed. One participant's family has been in town for nine generations, two individuals' families have resided in town for five generations, and another's family for four. Four participants belong to the second of two resident generations, and five are the first of their families to live in the community.

All participants are or have been leaders in some sector of community life, and many have been involved in more than one sector at a time, often simultaneously. Participants were chosen because of their community engagement as either informal or formal leaders, or both. Formal leadership roles include: elected town official, volunteer fire department chief, school board member, teacher in local K-8 school, lay leader in each of three community churches, leader in the local Lions' Club and Masonic Lodge. Informal leadership roles are derived from community interactions due to vocational and other positions such as: store owner, postmaster, and special interest volunteer (library, historical society, energy commission, school, theater group, youth sports coaching. Omitted leaders were those who currently hold the positions of school principal and minister, because they did not meet the study criteria and are not residents of the community.

Data Collection Methods

The design for this study was approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (Appendix A). Because previous relationships and the sensitivity of the subject matter indicated a need for a personal form of written communication and not all prospective subjects use e-mail, participants were invited into the study by means of a personal letter (Appendix B). The letter of invitation described the purpose of the study, clarified my different role as researcher, and each was personalized to explain why I was specifically interested in that individual's responses. Primarily, the differences were expressed in varying endings to the following sentence: "I am writing to you specifically, because I believe you value your membership in this community, you lived here at the time of the violence, and … *you are a leader who serves this community in particular and important ways,"* or, *"you have been a leader in the community in many ways, and you have lived here for much of your life,"*

and other such remarks that pertain to an individual's role, status and engagement in community life. Because I felt this letter would have the best chance of being read through, I also included in it a brief overview of the study's purpose, the nature of participation in the study, the formal consent process, and confidentiality safeguards. These were detailed further, along with associated risks and benefits, in an enclosed copy of the consent letter (Appendix C). The informed consent letter also detailed federal regulations requiring that all data gathered is to be kept confidential and in a secure location for three years, at which time, if no longer needed, it will be destroyed. This data includes notes, transcripts and audiotaped interviews, all of which will be kept together and preserved in a safe place in my home office, as mandated by federal regulations and guided by social work ethics.

I wanted to recruit between 12-15 participants to talk with me about a subject that is often difficult for people to discuss. Expecting that a number of people would decline my invitation, I created two lists of fifteen names of people in town who met the selection criteria. These two lists paralleled each other, in their arrangement and general category of informal and formal town leaders. A third list contained the names of other potential "qualified" participants, but did not fully correspond in the parallel manner described above. The fifteen people on the first list contained the names of those who I deemed to be the most likely to agree to be in the study, and I was prepared to draw upon candidates from the second or third lists that corresponded to those who declined and send out as many more letters as necessary to gather my desired sample.

One week after the first batch of letters was mailed, I followed up with a phone call to each individual in order to answer any questions he or she might have, to find out whether or not he or she accepted my invitation, and if so, to schedule a meeting for a face to face interview. Fourteen out of sixteen people, five men and nine women, responded in the affirmative; one man

never replied, in spite of repeated attempts on my part to reach him, and one man declined my invitation. Since I had enough people to schedule for interviews and little time, I chose not to use any names from my secondary lists. Because I was well acquainted with the people in my sample, I offered to meet them where they would feel most comfortable, which, for many, was at their home. If they did not feel that we could finish the interview without interruption or if we might be overheard, I offered an alternative meeting place at a neutral location in town. One participant took advantage of this offer, and I agreed to meet four at my home, because they specifically requested that alternative; the other nine were interviewed in their own homes after confidentiality was assured.

Participants were encouraged to read the informed consent letter carefully before the interview, and at the beginning of each interview I offered to answer any questions they might have about the content of the informed consent letter. I then asked them to sign two copies, one for my records, and one for their own. I gave them a list of national, state and local resources for sexual assault service agencies and mental health referrals, in case the interview stimulated uncomfortable emotions or a need for further support. There was one exception to the face-to-face encounter, because one participant was away from home at college; we agreed to do the interview via Skype, and the letter of consent and resource list were exchanged by mail. At the last moment, this turned out to be a Skype interview without visuals, due to rural internet transmission problems.

Participants agreed to a semi-structured, audiotaped conversational interview about their perceptions of the sexual violence that took place locally a number of years ago. The interviews lasted between 43 and 100 minutes. Each recording was subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber of my choosing, who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix G)

to ensure the informants' privacy. The transcriber does not live locally and was not given the names associated with the taped interviews she transcribed; any reference between us to the participants was by the alphabetical letter I had assigned to each. In choosing the transcriber, I felt confident in her professionalism and her ability to maintain confidentiality. She has not retained any recordings or copies of the transcripts; the interview tapes and transcripts are in my possession, and they will be kept in a secure location as described above.

During the interview, subjects were asked questions designed to stimulate thoughtfulness about the issue of sexual violence on a level that is not normally part of everyday parlance, and the voluntary nature of the participants' responses was emphasized. At the outset, I explained that the interview questions were subdivided into three general categories: the first section was meant to elicit their thoughts and feelings, as an individual, about the fact that sexual violence happened in town; the second section asked them to consider the same from the perspective of their role as a member of the community; the third section centered on their impressions about sexual violence, interpreted as violence against women, as a wider social issue (Appendix E). Although I had many interesting opportunities to deviate from my interview guide, due to time constraints and the large amount of data already anticipated in response to my questions, I decided early in the interview process to remain faithful to my original plan. Nevertheless, the semi-structured interview format allowed for enough flexibility for limited explorations of some unique and unanticipated insights. At the end of the substantive portion of the interview, I gathered basic demographic data (Appendix F) and inquired if the respondent would like to receive a summary of my findings; each replied in the affirmative.

Data Analysis

Face to face interviews provided the data for this study in which fourteen individuals described, in their own words, their perceptions about a complex subject. By nature, qualitative methodologies invite a contextual and detailed interpretative analysis. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, so that the interviews could be read and analyzed, first individually, and then as a body, using content analysis to identify and code themes that appeared in the narrative texts. My interview guide provided a framework of headings by which I could sort the data and examine points where differences or similarities among participant responses showed up. For comparison, under each heading, I listed illustrative quotes from the interviews. This coding system noted themes that were repeated either in the manifest or latent content of the interviews and made it possible to determine related patterns, overlaps, and potential theoretical connections among them.

Because my interview guide was divided essentially into three categories that loosely mimic the concentric circles of the ecological model, this offered me a glimpse at how thematic threads appeared on the individual, communal and societal levels. The process of conceptualizing what the themes and patterns mean, how they relate to each other, and how they inform my study question incorporated quotations or data from impressions shared by my sample group. These serve as thematic and conceptual supports for my conclusions; drawing conclusions directly from the data contributes to the validity of the study, as does a careful review of variations, omissions, and alternative perceptions of the data. Toward this end, after I examined the data as a whole in these categories, I charted uncommon perspectives separately, to see if any patterns emerged outside of what I identified as more normative for the sample.

Demographic variables were considered in relation to the qualitative data gathered in the interviews, to identify whether patterns of respondents' perceptions line up in significant ways with the demographic data. I created a table containing all the demographic data to determine whether I could see any relationships between thematic content and specific demographic identifiers. In the course of analyzing the demographics, I determined that a change was indicated, and I converted the data point of "number of years lived in town" to a percentage of lifetime years lived in town, because this offered me more information about an individual's sense of community and his or her place in it. I also made note of themes and questions that arose in the interviews or the data analysis, which point to the need for further research in this area or suggest new directions for research in associated areas.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This chapter holds the findings from interviews with fourteen members of a rural New England community who shared their perspectives on sexual violence happening in their own community. During the interviews, participants were asked to keep in mind their experience of three events that took place within a specific time frame and involved individuals and families who were known to most members of the community. This research was designed to explore whether community leaders perceive sexual violence as a societal problem or a private matter, and how their individual thoughts and feelings may or may not shape a collective response to incidents of sexual violence in a small, rural village.

Overall, the data analysis generated evidence that the discourse about sexual violence is influenced by themes presented above in both the theoretical and empirical literature, such as power and control associated with the devaluation of women and gender inequities in society, the continued conscious and unconscious presence of rape myths, the thread of silence that is so tightly woven into the phenomenological fabric of sexual violence, and the complexity of the boundaries between respect for individual privacy and leaning toward public awareness and involvement. The contextual sense of community derived from what I will label here as "ruralness" was palpable, and some of the drawbacks of rural attitudes also became apparent. These themes will be presented below as they developed in the interviews, wherein the questions were organized into three major sections meant to illuminate individual perspectives of a

globally occurring social problem that has been experienced in a rural community context. As described above in Chapter III and in Appendix E, the interview questions engaged the participant first on the individual level, moved into the community context, and finally into an exchange about the issue of sexual violence as a societal and global phenomenon. I will present the findings for each section accordingly, and note pertinent thematic correlations or significant demographic factors in the summaries of each.

Individual Perspectives

Knowledge of the events. The initial questions pertained to an individual's knowledge and experience of at least one of three incidents of sexual violence that occurred in town between six to eight years ago and inquired about how they received the news. Five people reported awareness of two events of sexual violence; six were aware of only one event, and three were unaware that any of these events took place. The remaining questions exploring individual responses were not asked of the three, but they were asked to respond to the question at the end of this section about their knowledge of area resources. Consequently, the rest of the findings reported in the *Individual Perspectives* segment are those from eleven, not fourteen participants.

There was some variation in how the participants first heard the news. Three people reported that they heard of both of two events from other community members – at public gathering places or from family members and friends. One person heard of one incident by word of mouth and of another through the newspaper. Three reported knowledge of just one event, which they learned about through the grapevine, and another knew of only one event from the newspaper. Two people were aware of just one event, but heard about it twice, by word of mouth in the village and, later, at their different work places outside the town. One person heard the news of one incident directly from a member of one of the families affected by the abuse.

The circumstances of the three who did not know about the events differed from each other. One participant was fairly young at the time and does not know if her parents chose not to tell her, or if she did not know because most of her focus and activity at the time was at high school in the next town. One older participant who is involved in the town, but isolated from town gossip chains, stated "[i]t just seems a foreign concept to me. I don't encounter it. Never had to endure it. Don't know much about it." The third person may have been unaware, due to having moved to town at about the same time the events took place but evidenced connection with town communication processes by sharing awareness of more recent local violence, which was not sexual in nature.

Out of the fourteen participants, six recalled other episodes of sexual violence associated with people in the town. One of these respondents briefly mentioned knowledge of other events but, during the interview, referred only to one event highlighted by the study's timeframe. The other five used their memories or responses to older local events as comparisons to their experience of the more current incidents, and/or otherwise to inform their answers to the interview questions, which will be further explained below.

This research was focused on how past occurrences of sexual violence impacted community members and purposely excluded discussion of the events themselves. This created some confusion at times, especially when participants switched back and forth between references to cases they had in mind that may or may not have been one of the three events that occurred in the study's specified time frame. Though it could be termed a methodological weakness, it was important for both researcher and participant to tolerate a certain level of uncertainty in this regard, so as not to cross privacy and ethical lines established by the study design. For the most part, this was not problematic, as individuals were able to respond fully to

the questions, regardless of which experience served as their source of reference. Nevertheless, there was enough evidenced in the interview dialogues for me to be certain that one case (Case I) was the most recalled event, primarily because of its high profile and the fact that minors were involved. The second case (Case 2) that I had in mind clearly was known by at least one person, and possibly by four others, although they did not provide definitive indicators. As no one could remember three incidents from that time frame, it is probable that the third incident (Case 3) was not widely known because, while public, it came to a much quieter resolution than did the other two. Because none of the incidents were random attacks, fears for general public safety did not arise with regard to individual responses to the news, however, the incidents did prompt discussion about preemptive community awareness and will be discussed in the next section.

Responses to the news. Once a participant's level of knowledge of the events was established, the questions focused on cognitive and emotional responses to the news, and how these might have changed as more information or news of other incidents became known. Another question asked the interviewees to assess the conversations in which they participated at the time, noting similarities or differences between their perspectives and others' opinions of the violence. The responses that were shared included internal and external processes of reaction, discernment and impact on community members.

It was quickly evident that participants struggled to separate their thoughts and feelings about the incidents they recalled, especially if they were personally attached to the victims, perpetrators or any number of their extended family members. When asked about their first thoughts, most respondents had Case 1 in mind, and they responded with some version of what one man exclaimed, "[o]h, no. Why this family? It could not happen to this family; they've been though a lot already." Disbelief, shock and denial were common descriptors, in combination

with compassionate concerns for the young survivors and uninvolved family members. People remembered feeling a range of emotions from betrayal to surprise, associated with the belief that they thought they knew the perpetrator and, as one said, "I would never have guessed in a hundred years that this person could have done anything wrong." Most people felt sadness and some expressed deep hurt, "… it really broke my heart." Four people expressed little surprise at discovering the identity of the perpetrator, having regarded him for years as "a bit rough" and perhaps somewhat unlikeable, but no one foresaw this type of outcome. Angry at what he did, they expressed sadness and regret that he came from a well-respected family and that this would be so hurtful to them.

Referring to Case 1, seven people specifically mentioned that their personal connection with the victims/survivors, the perpetrator and/or members of other generations of the perpetrator's family made a difference in their ability to absorb the news, as compared to how they were affected by news of other, similar events. This manifested in a few different ways. One man who knew about two cases said that he felt badly for both families, but the occurrence of sexual violence in a family that he knew well made it "more difficult to accept or understand why and how it happened." Five people worked through their disbelief by rejecting the "rumor mill" and held back their judgment until the story could be verified. Independently of each other, two men went to the county courthouse to obtain copies of evidentiary documents to help filter fact from gossip. Three women said that it took some time before the facts of the case accumulated and compelled them to change their minds. Until that time, one woman found herself in disagreement with her daughters and others, as she was more inclined to believe that external factors, and not the man himself, caused the perpetrator to sexually violate his victims. Another of these women resisted the anger, questions, frustrations and judgments of people that

she frequently heard at one of the town's central gathering places and reported, "I knew the person, and it was hard for me to accept what others were saying, but he ended up being guilty. It was really sad to think that it really happened." The third of these women described a slightly different evolution of her denial:

> Well, it went from it couldn't have happened to well, I guess it did happen. And, I guess he wasn't – the person that you thought he was. You start getting, instead of open – hoping that it is not true – then you start getting more callous – that it is true, and you distance yourself, or totally remove yourself from any situation with them.

For the most part, people found that they did not differ much from those with whom they spoke, and found some comfort in being able to express, rather than be alone with, devastating and disturbing feelings that included helplessness at not knowing what to do, how to help. Two people mentioned that they did not agree with ideas they'd heard from others that suggested revenge as an option or "taking care of" the perpetrator themselves, if the State did not.

Individuals had memories of reactions to the perpetrators in each case and to perpetrators of sexual violence in general. Along with expressions of anger, moral judgments about the perpetrator(s) in all referenced cases were voiced as disapproval, disgust and "just wrong." Five people brought up a popularized disease model, mostly in the context of trying to understand or account for what puzzled them about predatory behaviors: "they say it is a sickness," or "he has a screw loose," or "he has his demons; it probably happened to him as a child - there's something missing or wrong with his psyche." Mentioning two of these, one woman said that she could not accept either, because she did not feel they explained the behavior. Another woman raised the point in the context of having heard that one of the perpetrators may be returning soon to the community, after his jail term is up. Her comment was not overtly directed at the person, but

generalized in terms of a perpetrator being reintegrated into a community, when she said, "it's scary; I don't know enough about the disease, if it is a disease, but could it come back?" Not speaking in direct reference to perpetrators of these local events, two people, one male and one female, suggested that sexual offenders, in general, be subjected to capital punishment.

Three women commented that they had either wondered themselves or heard people discussing a perceived bystander's presence in the house while the abuse was occurring, and found it hard to believe that the bystander would not have known. Others considered how difficult it must have been for the family to endure the community's knowledge of what had happened, and expressed admiration for the courage shown by the bystander and family, that they did not flee, but remained in town and moved on with their lives. All respondents conveyed sadness towards the multiple generations and branches of the family in town, concern for how they would cope, and a desire to offer support and love, in spite of some frustration with not knowing exactly how to do that, for fear of impinging on their privacy.

There was unanimous compassion for the survivors of Case 1, and although Case 2 was described as "tragic in its totality," the survivor was not specifically mentioned in that case. Thoughts or feelings about survivors in other, older cases, however, were offered and will be discussed in another context below. Two distinct views of the impact of the abuse on the survivors in Case 1 were shared. One person was concerned that, by virtue of being assaulted, the survivors became "damaged goods," while others who spoke of the survivors felt at the time that it was essential to communicate to them love and support, to help them be strong, and to continue to include them in community life, just as they had always been. Describing how her initial responses changed over time, one woman said,

> So I guess I have felt like, … this is probably a really good place to have to recover. I have felt like people have been willing to see the kids, the victims, as just kids and not ruined, damaged goods and I know that that does happen often. But it hasn't been as much the case here. I think that's a benefit of a small community, … but in a community where the culture is even a little different, the kid could really be more victimized and seen as strange and ruined.

Four people shared thoughts that countered the sense of separation that many people feel from people who commit sexual crimes, and sometimes also from those who have been victims of these assaults. One man observed,

> The moment we start hearing about things happening to families, we start immediately thinking, sort of self-protectively, 'that is their family, not ours,' so immediately we are casting away from the community, whether it be your family or the larger community, people begin trying to distance themselves from it. … But the reality, you know, it may be them, but they *are* us.

Reflecting on her thoughts about the grandmother of the perpetrator, one woman recalls saying to herself, "[i]t could've been me. It could've been my grandson." One man suggested that others not "make monsters out of the individuals – they are just like you and me." Describing how her thoughts changed over time, another woman says that she was challenged, through frequent subsequent contact with the perpetrator's mother, to consider a new point of view,

> I thought, 'this could be *any*body's son, this could be *my* son, going down a path you didn't plan on, and that you never imagined.' And thinking about your son causing harm to someone and thinking, how must that feel? … to work closely with other family members and to see them hurting with shame and fear of what other people would think

of them and their family and how they raised a son. It is just heartbreak all over again, from a different angle.

Besides the very personal responses described above, other responses were questions about acts of sexual violence and the mindset of one who commits them. "Why?" and "how could somebody do this?" were the most frequent ways people shared their frustration and struggle to understand. Another asked, "What triggers it? Why is this person over here fine and this person over there gets messed up?" Other responses to the fact that something bad had happened included feeling the need to protect one's own family, which, notably, was verbalized by parents of daughters.

Impact of the events. Two questions specifically focused on how individuals processed the fact that sexual violence had occurred among their neighbors and asked them to identify both what they found most helpful at the time and the length of time it took for them to regain a sense of freedom from preoccupation with thoughts and feelings about any aspect of the incidents. People mentioned six different processes that were helpful to them, including talking with others; internalizing; avoiding or "playing ostrich;" having previous professional or past personal experience with support services for victims of interpersonal violence; taking part in a conscious process involving leadership, education and concrete action; and seeing the events resolved, which had two components. The first component was that the perpetrator had been removed from the community, and the second was observing that the families were moving on with their lives, and the survivors appeared to be doing well. Six people found that two or three of these factored into their recovery processes at different stages.

Seven people, two men and five women, said that talking with others was very helpful to them. The "others" involved in these conversations varied among individuals. One specified

talking with his spouse as most helpful; others talked with small groups described as being contained within the family, with other parents with school-aged children, with school professionals, or with close personal or professional (vocationally associated with trauma/crisis work) friends, both inside and outside of town. Talking was cited as beneficial for several reasons; it helped some in the quest to understand or to figure things out; for others it was comforting to know that they were not the only ones who felt as they did; others found that it helped define their internal experience and determine what sort of external action would or would not be appropriate. A few people mentioned that, while it helped them, it also felt disrespectful to the families involved, to discuss the situation too often.

Two men and a woman reported that they were focused inward during this time, even though they continued to engage in community activities where the subject was being discussed. One man avoided talking with others just as he avoids the daily news, due to a low tolerance for the "horrible stuff" that is reported. One woman found that it suited her best to stay away from community gathering places as much as possible, until she saw that the crisis had come to its resolution.

While two people whose professional lives intersect with interpersonal violence said they found it impossible to function with professional objectivity in response to the personal impact of what happened in town, they agreed that previous experience with the issue and the ability to view the dialogue about sexual violence as a normal process were both helpful to them. A third professional also said that her past exposure to sexual violence and her function as a survivor supporter in a variety of contexts helped her cope with her own feelings and her responsibilities in working closely with one of the local survivors. She was further helped by being part of an organized collaborative effort at the school, which worked to support one of the survivors along

with other community children and adolescents. Three women recalled being helped by another conscious process and collaborative effort that had occurred several years before, when their church was alerted to a potential danger in their midst. One woman said that the deliberate process that unfolded at that time helped her to understand the necessity of awareness about this issue and made her an advocate of safe communal practices. She found it most helpful to have had strong leadership in the minister, opportunities for education about the issue, and being given tools to take concrete action in making the church community as safe as possible from sexual predators.

Asked if they were preoccupied with the news of any of the events, and to estimate the amount of time it took before they stopped dwelling on it, most respondents said that they did not dwell on it, necessarily, but it did not go away. One man said, "[y]ou don't ever really accept it, I don't think – you try to figure out why it happened, but you don't come up with an answer." Three people remembered that they felt better after about two years, once Case 1 was settled in court – the perpetrator was sent to jail and the family was able to continue their recovery process more freely. One person thought it took her the better part of a year to overcome her own denial and accept that he did it. Every person cited continued experiences of being reminded of all referenced events when they drive by a house, run into a family member, or hear rumors that the one perpetrator is nearing the end of his jail time. Three mentioned that receiving my letter of invitation to the study was a reminder, while one participant said that my letter was the first she had heard of the incidents. Almost eight years later, three people were moved to tears at different points in the interview process, as they recalled their memories and struggled to articulate the meaning that they have assigned to them.

Awareness of resources. The last question in the section seeking individual responses inquired about each person's awareness of area resources that deal with the issue of sexual violence and whether any would call upon these resources to help themselves or someone else whom they suspected may need help. Five people who have either direct or indirect professional reasons to be aware of such services had substantial knowledge of what resources are available and how to use them. Out of four people who confessed to being unaware or having very little knowledge of these services, two thought they would call a priest or minister for guidance, and three felt they could so some research, if the need arose. Five others had vague knowledge of available resources, but reported that they had not paid close attention to them, because they have never had occasion to request their assistance. With regard to whether they would ever call upon the agencies for their own support when encountering issues of domestic or sexual violence, two people said "no," because they are accustomed to managing their problems on their own, one man said "maybe," three said they had other spheres from which to draw their support, and six people would call upon the services for themselves or for others if necessary.

Summary of individual perspectives. These findings reflect the first segment of the interview, which focused on individuals' cognitive and emotional recollections and also offered insight into community communication processes. Two themes, silence and the line separating the private and public spheres emerged, as did a few observations pertaining to demographic factors.

That three out of fourteen people were unaware that any episodes of sexual violence had occurred in town six to eight years ago evidenced that a perception that "everyone" in town knows about a situation is not always an accurate assessment. The findings also show that even news that *is* publicly known is not always *widely* known, as demonstrated by the fact that no one

recalled three events, and although five people had two events in mind, only one of these people made clear reference to knowledge of the second. Most people focused on their responses to one event, which appeared to be universally known and powerfully experienced, evidently because the case involved minors and was associated with a well-respected family with a long history in the community, where four generations continue to reside.

Although it was clear that none of the participants felt that these incidents have deterred them in any major way from being able to move on with their lives, the clarity with which every person was able to recall his or her experience of this period of their communal history was a striking aspect of these interviews. These findings show that, in spite of a lack of visible communal response, individuals did talk about these events with family, friends, and other community members, and they found solace in doing so. The theme of silence was linked with difficulties that community members had in negotiating the line between protecting the privacy of the afflicted families, while the circumstances of their suffering was quite public. Not wanting to talk about it was also tied to feelings that it would be disrespectful to the families involved to do so.

Individual responses varied in emotional intensity, according to the level of personal relationships that community members had with the individuals directly involved with the sexual violence or with their extended families, also resident in the town. Awareness and responses also varied somewhat, depending on a participant's role in the community, which had to do either with vocational or a-vocational functions or literal position in the community chain of communications, such as job locations in gathering places.

Demographic factors that tangibly affected individuals' experiences of sexual violence happening in their hometown were few and subtle. Parents of daughters and school-aged

children related quickly to fears about the issue of sexual violence. No remarkable differences in thoughts and feelings were noted along gender lines or among age groups. There was some difference in responses that can be attributed not to an individual's education level, but to one's level of education regarding the issue of sexual violence itself. It was notable that individuals' responses to the news were inseparable from their home community context, which will be explored in the following section.

On Community

The nature of community. The second part of the interview began by asking all fourteen participants what ingredients are needed to make a town into a community and to share their impression of their own town as a community. The following words from a woman who grew up in town are presented as a comprehensive "recipe" for community, which encompasses most of the points made by all the others.

> I think what makes a town a community is the ability to pull together in stress and duress; the ability to ignore any hard feelings or disagreements of the past and to help people in need, and the ability to rise to an occasion, when necessary, as a group – strength in numbers – like the flood for instance – the ability to help your neighbor. It is also a time commitment. It means you have to care about things beyond what just affects you. So, if you live in a civilized society and in a community within that, you have to care about how well your school performs even if you don't have kids in school; you have to care about how well your church is attended even if you don't go to church; you have to care about how well your businesses survive even if you don't necessarily shop or do business at them everyday; and so that means you have to show up at town meeting, you have to

> volunteer in your town school, you have to do the things that need doing even if they don't necessarily benefit you every day. It is a real 'we are in this togetherness' mind.

The "togetherness mind" was described also as a sense of belonging, which, as one woman put it, couples the realization of "oh, this isn't a place that does everything for me" with knowing that as a part of something, one has a responsibility to it. If a respondent did not specifically endorse that a community is where people give of themselves for the common good, participate and work together, especially for those in need, he or she essentially communicated the same by speaking of community as a place where you genuinely care for your neighbors, you take the time to get to know them, and you connect with them in meaningful ways, whether by helping out or just listening. Volunteerism was high on everyone's list.

Making an effort to connect, communicate and compromise were named as dynamics necessary to build and maintain community, and these were seen as happening in community institutions and gathering places, which were deemed vital to town life and included the following: a general store, a post office, a seniors' center, a school, churches and "approachable town government." An array of interest groups and services dependent on volunteers, such as a library, a historical society, a volunteer fire department, an active PTA, etc. were cited as additional conduits not only for community activity, but also as venues for relationships and friendships among diverse people that may be unlikely in larger, less cohesive places.

Portrait of a community. Although the first question asked for general characteristics of a community, it was clear that most drew on their experience within their own community as the basis of their descriptions. Directly after mentioning the importance of caring for your neighbors, one man added,

> …being able to associate with other people in the community without 'oh dear,' feeling less than that person. To me that has always been important, because there's always people I consider well-to-do and with more education and everything. If you are truly a community, that doesn't come into play, and I don't think it does a lot in our community here.

Along the same lines, another man stated, "There are friendships and relationships formed here that would never happen elsewhere," attributing this dynamic to the "remoteness and intense culture" in the town. A third man echoed this and highlighted the influence of size.

> In a larger place you are bound by just the people you know, who might be spread out all throughout the community in different ways. In a small town, you are up against people that in a larger place you would never encounter - so there is the totality of it and the shared experiences and what you know about people and what they know about you. So it is a very different thing than in a large community.

"Unique," "pretty fantastic," "great," "unusual," "outstanding" were adjectives used to describe the quality of community where the participants reside, and although everybody spoke positively of the community, two were a bit less effusive. "…[T]here are wonderful things about the community. There are some that probably aren't. There is pettiness and ignorance and all those sorts of things. On the other hand, there is generosity and there is enthusiasm… ," said one man, and a woman deemed it a "[h]arder question [than the first]. It's a good community – I have some issues with it."

In sharing thoughts about their own community, respondents were also asked to comment on what has changed during their years in town and what they value about the community. There was some variance on these questions, depending on the respondent's longevity in town

and also the period of their lives spent in town, for example, whether they grew up here or arrived later as an adult, even though the number of years of residence may be similar. One lifelong resident observed,

> Everybody thinks back to when they were younger – 'the good old days.' I think if you grow up in a small town and you live in that town, it is part of your life, the way you think and everything, and then as the town grows, some things change – you really can't be that specific, but things seem to change and you lose that.

Several people who are either indigenous to the town, or almost so, referred to this subtle change as the outside world metaphorically arriving in the village; one man spoke of the town being more easily accessed, hence exposed, since the interstate highway was put in, although he feels that "the community we *have*" (i.e. not any community) exercises a protective function that has helped keep out such things as drugs and related dangers. He and others believe nevertheless, that growth has to do with feeling less carefree or safe in town, primarily because it is now much harder to truly know everyone in town. Two people spoke pointedly of the irony of new people moving into town because they like it just the way it is, but within a few years are calling for changes to be made. "It is hard to accept sometimes, when you were born and brought up in the little town. You realize change happens, but sometimes you ask why did that happen?" Though he is not considered a native resident, one man who has lived in the village for 31 years sees his community as unique among other nearby towns, in that there is less divisiveness and strain "between the people who move here and those who already lived here," which he feels is due to "a certain amount of mutual respect. This community in particular had a sort of tradition of tolerating each other. People who came here were protective of it; now, some of that is being lost." One woman has seen the town grow more open over time, and, assessing the impact of

that, concluded with a smile, "we have a few new ideas." In spite of many changes, one woman still values the community, "because the new people want to be part of it and 99% of them are welcomed."

Other types of changes were also noted. One woman offered a historical perspective, tracing the sense of community from the 1960s and 70s, when, she said, the core of the town was tighter; as time passed, "the edges of the community became less community-minded" and fewer people were taking part in community activities and efforts. She observed that in those days it was a poor community, and that was "part of what drove people together." She was among six men and women who commented that the town has grown wealthier. Another woman elaborated, saying that there is more of a difference now, more separation, between the lower and middle classes, which she thought was related to both income and cultural shifts. Both these women felt that families from lower socioeconomic groups are the ones who are less involved in communal activity and interchange than in the past. One man spoke of the inevitable changes in the people that make up any community, but that have particular significance in a small, rural community:

> I have been to more funerals in the last few years than in my entire life prior to that. That is one of the consequences of living in a community, because you know people. The impact of their death, the absence, is more obvious than it would be in other places.

Asked what they value about their community, the interviewees spoke of the generous community behavior, the volunteerism that keeps the town going and cares for neighbors, the idyllic setting, the friendly atmosphere, and the flow of rural community life. One man values the friendships he has had here since he was a young boy, as well as the friendships developed with "new people." He expressed love for his work at one of the hubs of the community,

because, associating with people each day, he continually witnesses the amazing things that happen at the heart of the community. "You know, to me, my life is perfect [there]." A non-native town resident, who arrived more than three decades ago and has been a community member for 57% of her life, commented, "… surprising things happen here – thoughtful things. I would move here again." A young woman who grew up here valued the many venues in which she had opportunities to interact with multiple generations, especially with elders not of her own family.

With distinct differences, three people related their personal growth or development to changes in the community. The young woman just mentioned described a subtle evolution in her awareness of the characteristics and opportunities in town that ran parallel to her development from childhood to adulthood, mentioning that her perceptions of the community changed as her family's role in the town became more defined. She also shared an example of a shocking realization that accompanied adulthood, which was learning that the small size of the elementary school is a problem for a town's tax base. She marveled at how her youthful perspective as an elementary student was that the "smallness" was a "good thing," and precisely what made the school such a "wonderful environment for the kids." One father saw his relationship with the community, its people and activities, as directly related to his children's passage through the town's school and out into high school in a neighboring town. As his kids grew out of activities tied to certain ages, he also moved on, which he mentions as contributing to a shifting perspective on the community that forces him to continue to redefine his own role and relationships in the community. One woman spoke of being adopted into the community as a young bride, describing her experience as being taken in by a family with history there, who

helped her "to get to know people and to get involved. … And then I just started growing, and then I had children, and we got into the school, and then everything started flowering."

Impact on the community. The next interview questions asked respondents to consider their thoughts and feelings about sexual violence happening in their community from the perspective of their status as a member of the community. The participants were also asked to reflect on whether they thought these events and their aftermath changed their own view of the community, and if they had a sense of the impact of the violence on the community as a whole. The three interviewees who were unaware of the occurrence of the specified events were asked to respond to these questions, based on the fact that sexual violence was known to have happened more than once among their neighbors, within a certain time frame. While many of these responses were more generalized than those in the "individual section" above, again, it was evident that many responses focused on the dynamic elements of Case 1.

The following quotations reflect a range of immediate responses to the first question from different individuals. "This is not the place for this to happen." "It shocks the community when you get apparently normal people that you interact with every day and something happens, and you're like, nah, that's just the rumor mill. And then you read it in the paper, and … wow!" "You don't expect it, and it is always harder to accept." "The fact that I belong to a community doesn't change my view of sexual violence." "People don't like it much; it angers people." "It's appalling." "Tragic, but we can't pretend it's not there." "Frightening, disappointing and sad. A little surprised, but it'd be shortsighted to think it isn't prevalent, even in what you might consider the safest and most community-minded town."

Initial reactions deepened in thoughtful directions. Nine people acknowledged in so many words that sexual violence occurs everywhere, and, as one woman put it, "there is no

reason to think our town could avoid it." A few people thought that the problem could be less prevalent in town, due to the small population. Much of what the participants shared revealed characteristics that are associated with rural places. One man infers the complexity that a sense of community and familiarity add to already distressing news. "The difference in your own community is that there is a chance you will know the people; the personal thing gets you feeling sympathy for the person [perpetrator] and the victim." Another man suggests that part of his response to the news was to consider the influences of isolation, emotional and otherwise, that can be common in a small town, along with alcohol abuse. Both of these, in his mind, contribute to ways in which people are removed from social constraints that could lead to abusive behaviors. He felt that it would be very hard to know if someone was in need of help, because of a general cultural unwillingness to share what happens in families, which he attributed to a New England culture of independence and reticence. Two women spoke about not knowing that anything happened until afterwards, in the context of comments about protecting the children in the community. One admitted, "it scares me to death, because it can happen right under our noses, and kids may feel so threatened that they might not tell or feel empowered or have someone that they can talk to." She added, "it makes me feel more vulnerable that it can happen here."

One woman, who was raised in town, said that hearing the news for the first time so many years later felt like a breach of trust to her, because although she could not say that she trusted all the individuals in the community (she doesn't know them all), she had trusted the community itself. She noted a felt sense of guilt, which she attributed to not knowing what had happened in her own community, thereby feeling implicated in the conspiracy of secrecy and silence that she has learned so often surrounds sexual violence. Another woman who also grew

up in the village commented on how the lack of anonymity in a small town can work out well, in the sense that there is help for survivors, and it can also work out badly, because there are so many layers of potential interactions among community members that can go in unexpected directions.

Twelve people reported that knowledge of the events did not change their view of the community. One was not sure, and one said it made her feel that the community may be less safe than she thought. Seven respondents said that they did not have a measurable sense of any impact of the incidents on the community as a whole. One thought it probably had an impact, but did not elaborate, three said that they thought it was "a big deal," but that it quickly went underground, as townspeople went back to business as usual. Three others speculated that the incidents raised the population's level of fear and made them more cautious, because it likely destabilized their sense of security and safety. This was articulated in more detail by one woman, who offered some concrete reasons for these thoughts:

> … it must've made people more aware that sexual assaults have a big impact and they happen to people who aren't asking for it, and aren't obviously in situations where they're likely to be victimized. That realization must make many people feel less secure that they know exactly what to expect from people.

Nevertheless, she suspected that it did not significantly change how comfortable people are with their neighbors – "maybe too comfortable sometimes."

Community response and awareness. Respondents were asked next to reflect on ideas they might consider for an appropriate communal response to sexual violence happening among their neighbors. "That is a hard one" was a frequent first reaction to the question. Most struggled with conceiving a response to things that already had come to pass, a challenge that

was traceable to the question of the boundaries that rest invisibly between the public and private spheres of life.

> Well, it’s always happened," said one woman, "[a]nd, I think, the times when more people knew about it, and knew more about it, have been a healthier way for victims to recover and families to kind of take in the knowledge and understand what to do with it. When nobody talks about it, children overhear pieces without explanation from parents, and individuals feel targeted, more embarrassed, feeling talked about. People in the community will have different levels of knowledge about sexual violence and what it means for the kids, and what it can be in a community. It would be helpful for everyone to hear that it's a bad thing that happens, but we can move on from it. It's tricky to get that message to the community and be respectful of the individuals involved.

One woman recalled the church's process (described above) as testimony to the fact that when sexual violence occurs or is alleged, it impacts more than the perpetrator, the victim/survivor and their family members; as such, it calls for engaging others in a process that includes education, action and support that can address the additional, less obvious and wider impact on the community.

Three people, two women and a man representing three generations of the same family, suggested community meetings for education about the issue. In each case they were asked if they believed anyone would come, and their responses were positive, based on their perceptions of community members' response to other issues and community actions. Two felt that somehow making it known that "the community cares" was important, although they did not have concrete suggestions. After proposing that a community-wide meeting should have been

called at the time of the events, one woman was almost instantly beset by her own questions about the purpose and wisdom of such a meeting.

> Maybe we would have benefited from it, and I would have learned more if we had had a community gathering. … What I don't know, because I don't know psychology, would it have helped the family of the abused, would they have felt they were getting a scarlet letter A? Would it have made them feel worse - so that is the part where I have no idea.

Ten people specifically talked about offering care and support in various forms such as friendship, a listening ear, and being aware of opportunities to get involved to protect someone under threat or, after an event, being careful not to shun a family or survivor. It was suggested that this be done by normalizing interactions and, generally, being kind to them; two women included extending compassion to the perpetrator. Five people explicitly stated that they thought the community responded well to Case 1. "Most people dealt with the incident … in a kind and generous manner. It doesn't transfer everywhere, but it said nice things about our community, I think."

While there was a unanimous feeling of wanting to find a way to communicate and deliver communal support to victims and families, there were many questions about how best to do this. One man expressed a chronic concern he has about community responses, saying,

> … one of the things I find difficult about community response to sexual violence is that, from my point of view, we make the events horrific and again, I think that trying to separate the "them" from the "us" and I think that by virtue of making the events horrific and so different from the norm, we actually make it harder for victims to become survivors.

Along these lines, a woman shared,

> I think that the more that incidents of sexual violence are looked at as the most horrendous thing, the harder it is to deal with them. … I think separating sexual violence out in terms of community reaction isn't helpful, in that it makes it weirder and more horrifying. … I feel like making it less of a separate thing is helpful.

One man points out that in spite of wanting to help, "you don't always know what happened, so it is hard to know how to respond," and then adds that in his community it is even "… more complicated … because of the levels of generations and layers of familial relationships within the community." Not knowing was also a complicating factor for another participant, as she considered what it would mean to take an active role in supporting someone in need. "It's a fine line between intruding upon their privacy – they're trying to hide it, and hide from it, and any community support can be embarrassing and maybe even unwanted." This conflict was present again, as another woman pondered the question:

> …you want to make sure it is right for the victim and not the wrong response. That would depend on the victim. … A community response can be overwhelming – gauging both timing and the need for privacy … people want to help, but they need to know what to do.

Three people imagined the community response as a potential tool for healing and helping survivors recover. A man stated his belief that

> … it is our response to the survivors that makes a difference in terms of their possibility of success and welcoming them, to make them realize that, though this may have happened, a) this is not their fault and, b) it does not make them marred, used, whatever, it is something that happened. … And, so the community response can make a difference in the success of the individuals …

Similarly, a woman shared that a very public community response was positive and effective:

> … the community members might have learned that these kids might have had something bad happen, but they're not different kids. … I think that this was so publicly discussed that it made it easier for these kids. Or made it easier for people to support these kids.

Reflecting on the relationship between the community and hardship, another woman said, "I think the greatness in a community is how you handle things that are horrible, not necessarily how you handle horrible things, but how to heal and recover from horrible things, because horrible things happen."

The last request of participants in this section of the interview was to estimate the community's level of awareness about sexual violence, particularly as it manifests against women. Although many focused their responses to the local violence on the fact that Case 1 involved minors, the respondents did not find it challenging to shift into considering the more global issue of sexual violence as primarily violence against women.

Nine respondents characterized the community's awareness about sexual violence as "low," "very low," "way too low," "fractured," or "not very good." People variously attributed these assessments to the possibility that their opinion was reflective of their own limitations; that they were not part of the gossip streams in town and did not really know; that many people preferred to believe that sexual violence only happens elsewhere; that community members feel so safe that they are unwilling to talk about precautions, or that sexual violence never came up in the community discourse. One person did not venture an opinion; one wanted to think the community is aware but had no evidence for that hope, and one thought the level of awareness would be mixed, because the town residents are a blend of people with varied exposure and education levels. She was also "willing to bet" that there is a big gap in people's understanding

of what constitutes sexual violence – "what's ok, what's not ok." One woman thought the level of awareness is high, perhaps basing her opinion on the vast difference between her memories of how sexual crimes were handled in the past, compared to current practices. Finally, one woman commented on the community's political will, "I'm sure we are aware that there is a problem existing, but whether we care to do anything about it, if it doesn't impinge on people we know, I have no idea."

Summary of community perspectives. The findings that portray the community context of individuals responding to sexual violence in their hometown overwhelmingly demonstrate that the sense of community in this rural place is extremely strong and well integrated into individuals' lives and identities. No one was able to separate his or her thoughts, feelings or opinions from the influence of community dynamics or a sense of belonging *to* and *in* it. There was a good measure of uniformity in the definitions of what a community is and the meaning that individuals attributed to the fact that they perceive their hometown as a "good community," by their own definition.

Characteristics of "ruralness" were demonstrated primarily as an emphasis on knowing your neighbors and members of your community and affiliated tangible and intangible benefits, including feeling or being safer. The small size and isolation of the town were noted as both positive and negative factors, in that they provide a layer of protection *against* the outside world, which is represented as a negative influence, insofar as news of bad things happening, temptations, or opportunities to do likewise are carried into the village by the media, technology and even better roads. On the other hand, it was also observed that these same protective factors can be seen as lulling people into a false sense of security or fostering an unwillingness to discuss the issue of sexual violence as important and pertinent to the community. Tension was

clearly demonstrated by respondents in how they held both resistance to a communal self-understanding as being connected to the rest of the world and the fairly universal realization that sexual violence not only *can* happen in their hometown, it *does* happen, and individuals and the community are *impacted* by the fact that it happens and by the personal nature of relationships they have with perpetrators, victims and their families.

Themes of silence and the boundary between the public and private realms with regard to sexual violence were expressed mostly as either attributes associated with the issue, such as its secretive and hidden nature and the resulting frustration at not being able to know what or whether it is happening, or as formidable barriers to sexual violence prevention or support of survivors in its aftermath. Without question the participants expressed commitment to the idea that a community has a collective responsibility to support its members in need, and to become educated and to practice vigilance, when it comes to sexual violence. Most were conflicted about how to enact a communal response, or to communicate to victims or potential victims that a community is ready and willing to offer support and other resources to anyone in need of them. Many observed the additional barrier faced by victims who are afraid that more harm will come to them, if they reveal their plight to anyone as a motivator to institute supportive messages. Many also expressed frustration that they are uncomfortable or do not know what to do when sexual violence happens; most, however, were willing to consider possible ways to overcome inertia about the subject. Five people expressed the opinion that a process of normalizing the conversation about sexual violence as being on a par with other forms of violence and problems that communities encounter would be sound first steps toward alleviating public discomfort in addressing the issue. Four of these five viewed the quality and particularity of the community's response as critical to the future well-being of survivors of sexual violence.

Noticeable demographics showed in ways in which people described changes that the community has endured over time, but the essence of what people value in their hometown was not distinguishable in any demographic category. While changes that were documented in the interviews contained a range of historical perspectives both from native-born residents and those who have lived in the village for a significant percentage of their lives, those mentioned were more than reminiscences. Primarily, they had to do with shifts in interpersonal and community dynamics related to the town's established culture, socio-economic shifts, changes in land use and increased occupational diversity, the ratio of newcomers to native residents, and associated attitudes. In the course of her interview, one woman offered a historical picture of changing societal attitudes towards sexual violence, as seen through her memories of sexual predation and violence in the town up to forty-five years ago. She described several men, who, over time, appeared in town and were suspected or known pedophiles, and, although community members often did not want to believe that they were sexual predators, townspeople nevertheless watched their children and did not associate much with these men. When something happened, and it did, the man was sent out of town; it was never considered a police matter, because sexual violence was not recognized as a crime. Counseling for survivors was neither available at that point in time, nor was it understood in the social consciousness that survivors of sexual violence would benefit from therapy. As this woman stated, "it's different now."

This testimony to the presence of sexual violence in an isolated rural community would indicate that it is as old a story in rural places as it is in other parts of the world; furthermore, it is not immune to the tides of societal change, whether for better or for worse. Wanting to know more about how the respondents perceive the socio-political status of sexual violence against women in the context of American society and the wider world and how they believe events in

their village may relate to others, I asked them a series of questions about gendered violence as an issue salient to us all. The findings from this line of inquiry are reported in the following section.

Sexual Violence Against Women as a Social Issue

Beyond community. In the third segment of the interview, the focus of the conversation shifted away from specific events in a rural community and moved into consideration of sexual violence as gendered violence that a) occurs throughout the world and that b) statistically, it is mostly perpetrated by men against women and children. The questions were intended to gather respondents' perceptions of the magnitude and causes of the problem and to determine their thoughts on whether societal processes, such as gender socialization and the transmission of assumptions about perpetrators and victims of sexual violence, have an impact on how individuals and communities talk about and deal with sexual violence. The first group of questions asked if the participants believe violence against women to be widespread in American society; if they believe that it happens more in other places, and, if so, what characteristics of these "other places" might offer some explanation for it. Additionally, the interviewees were asked if they felt there were any connections between sexual violence in their own community and sexual violence in other parts of the country or world.

All fourteen respondents affirmed beliefs that gendered violence is widespread in The United States, which they based on the frequency of media reports about sexual violence. For six people, the issue is more personal and not merely "out there" in the news, as they are personally acquainted with women who have survived sexual violence, either through their professional or volunteer work, or because the survivors are family members or friends. One woman noted that she sees sexual violence appearing more and more as a theme in fiction, not

just in news reports, which she feels is testimony to the reality and the pervasiveness of the problem in our social lives.

In spite of the prevalence of gendered violence in this country, nine people felt it happens more in other places, two did not, and three said they did not know, although one of these surmised that sexual violence may happen more often in larger, heavily populated areas or in war-torn regions. The two who said "no" to this question both contended that Americans might *perceive* that sexual violence happens more frequently and openly in other societies or cultures, but, because it is not culturally sanctioned here, American society is "good at hiding it." "I think it is universally around," said one of the two, denying that gendered violence happens more in other places than in this country. He clarified his use of "universally" by stating his belief, "[i]f we delved deep enough, we would find common denominators that apply there, here, everywhere. That is one of the problems we have not identified. We have not found the common denominator.

The nine participants who affirmed that violence against women occurs more elsewhere clustered potential causative characteristics of these places under the umbrella of a cultural devaluation of women. One woman poignantly conceptualized such a place as "where women aren't cherished." The respondents saw this dynamic demonstrated in societies that are male dominated, treat women as property and where laws and/or religious or cultural traditions prevent women from having the same rights as men to work, become educated, drive, or otherwise have the ability to act independently. These were described as societies where violence against women is not actively condemned and may be accepted as normative. Other factors considered as characteristics that could foster gendered violence were poverty and environmental violence, such as exists in areas engaged in civil war.

When the respondents were asked if they thought the sexual violence that occurred in their community was connected in any way to gendered violence that happens globally, their answers were more varied. Three did not see any connections, and one did not address that question directly. Two people interpreted the question comparatively, noting the protection provided by a small community where people know each other, as opposed to larger, more populated places where they believe gendered violence happens more, because more opportunities and temptations are available and influential. In a place where there is not a familiar and connected social structure, they thought it more likely that people may be inclined to either perpetrate sexual violence, or get into a situation where they could become victimized, with nowhere to turn for help.

Three people viewed the media as a conduit for connection with violence elsewhere, but in different ways. One man, ruing its damaging effect on the protective nature of small community life, explained that in the

> …[l]ast 30 to 40 years, … [the town is] not as isolated as it used to be, … I think if [our town] was isolated from the rest of the country, I don't think it would happen as much. I just think that a lot of things happen because people hear about it happening somewhere else and they just get it in their mind that they can too.

One woman pointed to the media and easily accessible pornography as influences on some men that make them angry and potentially violent. A younger woman described how the dynamics of socio-political power are demonstrated through images in the media, where, especially in this country, male attributes of physical strength are promoted. She proposed that the physical differential emphasized between men and women implies the potential for violence against

women. She also commented on how this image of masculinity is embedded in our society in symbolic ways that are ultimately performative:

> We have really achieved great things for feminism in the country, but it is still amazing when you look at things like magazine ads. You just encounter so many examples of how even America is *so* patriarchal. It is just built into our language – at this point it is built into everything we do, and we have kind of forgotten the way it is. …[S]o we kind of go along seeing these images and accepting them and judging them for whatever they are without thinking what this mass culture or media is doing to our culture.

One woman conveyed a sense that one of the things happening to our culture is that the power balance between men and women is changing and creating an undercurrent of feminine anger in society, as women seek to gain ground and men fear losing their power in an age-old rivalry. For her, connections between the village and the world have to do with the overarching belief that women are "less than." Also concerned about social trends, a man and a woman spoke about connections among incidents of sexual violence in terms of a perceived weakness or lack of social structures that once served as behavioral constraints in interpersonal relationships. They both spoke of the emergence in the last 40 to 50 years of permissiveness in society that altered the way people think about sexual behavior in a moral sense. Speaking of the seeming ubiquity of alcohol misuse and the "date rape drug," the woman shared that it is worrisome and scary to her that "young men think it is alright to plan a rape with a date rape drug – that it's alright to have sex that way." The man reflected on "how society holds," when people impose upon themselves fewer inner restraints and feel they have social permission not to be constrained by a variety of moral forms of behavior – "[y]ou are more on your own for how to define your behavior."

Avowing that there is "a lot of connection between what goes on in the world and what goes on in a small community," another woman spoke of the dangers of compromised restraint and noted the broader commonalities of secrecy and power dynamics associated with sexual violence. She offered,

> Although way back when, 40 to 50 years ago, it probably wasn't as obvious – it wasn't well-known, nobody talked about it. Well, look at the Catholic Church – nobody really knew what to do about it, what was really going on – nobody wanted to talk or about it or open the door to it, and so they just sort of shoved it under the rug.

She concluded, "The Catholic Church is no different than any other group of people, but … of course a priest or a minister or anybody who has prestige or power doesn't expect to have anyone else find out about it, so they do as they please." As this woman pointed out, power is key in the perpetration of sexual violence and is employed toward this end by an assortment of people, groups and societies. According to one man, the dynamic of power-as-control is both the causal reason and the hallmark characteristic of domestic and sexual violence; no matter where in the world it occurs, in this respect, there is no difference.

> The cycle of control and power is generally accepted and I think it is something that makes sense. It is the same here as NYC, as in Japan, as in Botswana. So there is nothing different about the dynamics of the cycle. They may be expressed differently, there may be some cultural intricacies in different places; it's mostly male need to control their partners that is taking us through the cycle.

As the interviews continued, respondents were asked about their perception of whether there is more or less violence against women now than there was earlier in their lifetimes. Three people did not know, four felt that it was about the same, and seven sensed that the problem has

grown. Whatever their answers, most found it difficult to be sure about their answers to this question, because multiple social and legal variables are in constant flux around both sexuality and sexual violence against women, particularly during the last 40 years. Older community members recall that this topic was simply not discussed when they were growing up, and the youngest participant does not have a sense of any statistical change during her life, because her awareness of and interest in the issue are relatively recent developments. Others cannot be sure if gendered violence did not happen as often when they were younger, or if it was still a socially unacceptable topic to broach and they did not hear about it. Though 50% of the participants felt it is a bigger problem now, they also acknowledged that increased media communications make the problem more visible and that social consciousness has progressed, now condemning violence against women, actively prosecuting sex crimes, openly talking about sexual violence, and providing trauma recovery services for survivors.

A few offered some possible reasons for having a sense that the problem is larger now than in the past, including: fewer constraints and more liberal sexual mores; the influence of the internet where people connect with others virtually unknown to them; feeling there are more predators than before or maybe just becoming more aware that they exist. Two people, a man and a woman of different generations, thought that the seismic shift in gender roles could have contributed overall to the increase in violence against women. The woman thought that when she was growing up, men had more appreciation for women and the roles they fulfilled; the big difference today, she thought, is the undercurrent of anger as many women "try to be men" and compete more directly with men in the marketplace. In a similar reference to male frustration at feeling powerless in the face of change, the man said, "[y]eah, I think some of it could have to do with the times, … [t]his probably doesn't make sense, but I think that the independence for

women that has come on in the last 30-40 yrs or whatever has… I think it has made it harder … made it difficult for… some men to accept … "

Knowledge and obligation. The next group of inquiries in the interview sought to explore how the participants relate the general issue of violence against women to their own sense of obligation to engage with it either individual or collectively. The first question asked for opinions as to whether a small community has a collective responsibility to be informed about sexual violence and about what to do when it happens in its midst. Another question focused on whether the respondents ever encountered the issue on any level (suspected or actual) in their workplace, and if they felt equipped or inclined to act. The third simply asked if it is difficult to talk about or deal with sexual violence.

All fourteen respondents strongly endorsed the idea of a collective responsibility to be informed and prepared, when it comes to the reality that gendered violence happens locally. One woman, however, qualified her affirmation by saying that an aware community could be a resource and act as a support group, but it should not be an action group. Concerned that a communal response to an incident could become overly aggressive or persecutory, she was inclined to differentiate between an individual's responsibility to act in support of anyone needing assistance and a community's feeling obligated to become involved and act as a whole. Most expressed similar concerns as the difficulty of negotiating the public/private boundary and emphasized the importance of communicating a sensitive communal readiness to help – one that respects the privacy of victimized individuals and the constraints of shame and embarrassment that interfere with seeking and receiving help, but that also encourages people to come forward.

One woman described the conundrum this way:

> I think everyone would benefit from knowing when there is an incident and knowing the specifics, but I also think a victim's right to privacy trumps that. But anytime a victim is aware of the benefit, I would encourage it, because I think people knowing it makes them have to think about how to address it – how to stop it, how to protect themselves. Too easy to think it isn't going to happen to me or anyone like me, or it's not my business. It is really hard to draw the argument, whose privacy is being protected and the benefit of everybody knowing.

In spite of immediate positive reactions to the question, for the most part, few offered concrete ideas for how a community would carry out this responsibility. After "[y]es, I do," one woman said, "I can't say more, because I don't know where to start," which seemed to be a common sentiment, even if not spoken. What was expressed tended to be a general sense, that if the community was able to foster an atmosphere of support, care and watchfulness, it could work both to deter potential perpetrators and to help victims know that they would receive help if they asked.

Some did offer ideas for specific actions, even though many questions were articulated or implied alongside of them. The idea was clearly demonstrated that sexual violence must be brought out into the open and normalized as an important conversation in our social lives.

> It is a societal problem- we don't prevent it enough, and it happens right under our noses – I'll never understand what it is in our society that allows males to go down that path. I don't know how we nurture boys differently and make girls stronger in resisting it. But we should look at it more openly and talk about it more openly, so it doesn't happen.

Toward the same purpose, another woman made a strong point for normalizing responses to sexual violence as one problem among all other serious issues, saying,

> Yes, absolutely. Because I think if there was an issue of any other kind of violence in our town, we would we would want to respond to it. If someone was attacked with a gun or a knife, we would deal with that and come to the aid and we do it – we do it for illnesses, disasters. We are that kind of community and sexual violence shouldn't be any different.

One woman thought that "making it known, less hidden, makes it seem solvable;" her thought was to have town-wide educational forums. Running through an array of ideas, another woman said, "[i]f you had information nights, boy, I bet you wouldn't get the people who need to be there. Their husbands wouldn't let them come." Declaring that "we can do a better job," she wondered if making information about the issues and resources widely available, by means of brochures on town bulletin boards and notices on the town website, would be one step in that process.

This woman took her thoughts one step further than anyone else did, when she began to ponder how "a better job" could be enacted.

> I don't know whose responsibility is that? I don't know. To make sure the community is well informed. Is that the responsibility of the churches, the [town government], the schools? That is a good question. I mean, we certainly try to do it as a school with 7th and 8th graders. The mission community at church has just supported openly [a local legal advocacy group]. We supported [another agency that serves survivors of sexual and domestic violence] and published that. So we are showing … .

Implying progress in the community's collective awareness of appropriate action regarding sexual violence, another woman mentioned,

> I remember when [agency that serves survivors of sexual and domestic violence] started, there was quite a bit of opposition to have the Town fund it. I don't think that happened this year – the money came through and nobody fought against it.

Nine participants said that they had encountered the issue of sexual violence in some form in their workplace; five said that they felt equipped to manage some, but not all, situations, four felt comfortable that they knew what to do, and one felt ill-equipped and said, "I think most people are [ill-equipped]." It is notable that the four who knew how to handle situations that arise have training in this regard because of their professional fields. Even so, they felt that it is qualitatively different when a co-worker comes to you for help; one man said that he hoped he dealt with one such situation as he would professionally – " I had a prescription for it; I advised, was empathetic and not condemning." Generally, the respondents felt that it would be easier to address a situation with someone known to them, where there was a certain level of trust already established between them.

For eight people sexual violence is not a difficult issue to discuss. Four people did not say how they, themselves, felt about it, because they focused on how hard it would be for a victim to discuss it. Three said it is difficult to talk about and deal with because of social taboos about mentioning sex or invading the privacy of people's homes and relationships. One woman said that not enough willingness to talk publicly about sexual violence is a big problem with specific characteristics:

> I think one of the reasons is a lot of times, because there is some fuzziness involved with it – particularly in terms of domestic and sexual violence – there is some lack of clarity,

> … lack of definition, if it is considered sexual violence in a domestic situation. There is definitely, also the stigmas related to it in terms of, we don't talk about sex in our daily community. So talk about sexual *violence* [emphasis added] is making the conversation even [more] difficult.

While it is true that the respondents were replying to the question as it applied to conversation about gendered violence *outside* the interview construct, it was notable that every person not only readily agreed to be in the study, each had a good deal to say about this issue.

Several described the dynamics of shame, embarrassment and self-judgment and how these are barriers that hamper a victim's pursuit of help or ability to talk to others about what is happening to them. It was also mentioned that the furtive nature of sexual violence made it difficult to know how to identify it, to gauge the dangers involved (rural homes often contain guns), and to know what to do, so that one's action will not endanger the abused further. Questions linger at the intersection of knowledge and obligation, as this woman's summation shows:

> …this private event does really or should really … affect the community, but it can be a case that is still intensely private in terms of the individual pain that is caused by these events, so kind of bridging that line between with – the community should help and needs to help, but how can they, with this event that is so private, and how should they?

Myth and gender. The interviewees were asked if they had a mental image of a "typical" perpetrator or victim of sexual violence. Everyone denied that there was a "typical" perpetrator, generally confirming that it could be anyone. Many referred to having had the equivalent of a conversion experience when a personal experience defied their idea of the type of person who was a sexual offender. As they spoke about this, the respondents used phrases and

statements such as, "I would never have thought;" "people who you thought were pillars of the community;" "you've got to be kidding me;" "it could be Mr. Cleancut;" "the guy next door, your cousin, your neighbor." One man said, "I have seen them and they look just like me." A woman answered, "I used to think I did [have a picture], but I don't, because of the cases I know about. One you look at and you say, 'he'd do that.' And the other one, you look at and I'd say, 'never in a hundred years'." Referring to the futility of this type of mistaken assumptions later in the interview, this same woman also remarked on the unfairness implied in making them.

Though they did not have a standard picture of a perpetrator in mind, six people offered descriptive situational or character factors that might indicate a possible offender or increase the probability of abusive behavior. Situations included family isolation and the use of alcohol or drugs either by the perpetrator or being given to a victim. Characterological factors included a need to hurt someone else because of anger, internal pain, powerlessness or insecurity; odd behaviors such as a preoccupation with children; a person with power, either physical or authoritative; a person "not well in the head and needing help." A few confessed to harboring stereotypical images of perpetrators, even though they knew they were not valid.

Overall, the participants had more impressions of a "typical" victim than they did of a perpetrator and simultaneously found it a more difficult question to answer. Seven said that they had no particular image of a victim, although all but one who said, "anybody, either gender" specified females. One woman responded, "No, my boat has been rocked on that one. The girls I know who are survivors are all confident, smart and strong. Before I knew any rape victims, I would have said, weak, vulnerable and passive. Nope." Several people did surmise that vulnerability would be one characteristic of a victim, either environmental (unstable family situation, poor, few friends or resources) or psychological (low self-esteem, submissive, scared,

unempowered). One man had a clear picture of a victim, who would be "a beautiful woman, very easy-going and just truly a victim. Almost like the perfect woman, and the man has periods of violence, from drinking or temper." A woman suggested that, "…any woman, any child, any youth anywhere is a potential victim – they don't fit into a category except they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The next set of questions asked the participants about how we learn about gender roles in our society and whether they perceive that we live in a culture where there is gender equity. Considering how society teaches us about gender roles, at least ten people conveyed that society "teaches us badly," which many people blamed on the powerful and conflicting messages that are delivered to us through the media. One man spoke of how he saw these messages as negative:

> So, women are weak and ought to be skinny and underfed, to be beautiful. Powerful women are to be avoided. Men should be powerful and listened to and obeyed. Yeah, broadly, I think that is what society teaches. I think there has been a little bit of a culture shift – a little bit – in the last 20 yrs. But. Overall, we idolize our physical men, not our physical women. We idolize our Barbies.

Aside from the media, participants listed other influential teachers that we encounter as we develop, which encompassed the family, schools, faith practices, workplaces, and life experience. Learning in these venues happened from role models and exposure to ideas and discussion of experiences, for example, as one woman put it, "kids are exposed to a lot and families help sort things out," perhaps at the family dinner table or by passing on family stories and traditions. Although many people made implicit references to changes created by the feminist movements of the '60s and '70s, one woman counted this social change movement as a

singular, critical piece in her development as a woman. She credited those who went before her as the ones who broke down many barriers to clear a path for her to follow.

> I think that empowering women to realize their full potential can only help keep domestic violence at bay. I am grateful for the feminist movement inspiring me during my college years – role models/peers in education helped me get an education in [a traditionally male field] – lots of women have to be bitches to prove 'we can do this' – I didn't have to be a bitch.

She felt that her confidence and success in a male-dominated profession not only was a product of feminist activism, it also allowed her to comprehend the value of the privilege she exercised later in her life, when she was able to make the choice to stay at home for some years with her young children. While she clearly acknowledged that her ability to make this choice was also due to personal economic stability, this woman was expressing pointed appreciation for the contrast between having her identity restricted to a standardized gender role and the flexibility she has been afforded by a societal change that transpired in the real time of her life. Her personal consciousness of the difference as expressed in her words above perhaps unknowingly, but powerfully, pits two forms of power against one another; power-*over,* as expressed in interpersonal violence, and em*power*ment, which holds its ground and does not succumb.

The next questions asked about how gender roles were transmitted in the informants' families of origin and how they received them and passed them on to their own children, where applicable. Regardless of generation, everyone's family of origin functioned relatively traditionally, in terms of parental gender roles, with a few variations. Most grew up with two parents in the home; one man was raised by his grandmother and his elderly aunt; one man grew up in a multi-generational household; one woman was raised by a single mother, and though

another woman's parents were divorced, she had a relationship with both parents. Most of the differences in how participants raised their own families reflected obvious changes in social trends; more mothers are in the workplace, and more fathers help at home. Replications of traditional gender patterns were understood as individual choices, rather than social imperatives, and those who were parents raised their children primarily by role modeling many of the same things they learned from their own parents, with individual adjustments. Over time, deeper relationships and more open conversations between parents and children about important topics appear, by these reports, to have increased.

Three women and one man spoke specifically of their mothers' independence and how it influenced them. Recalling his mother as a homemaker who decided to work part-time outside the house in an era when this was not typical, the man said that he and his siblings knew their father did not like it. But their mother enjoyed having her own money and some independence, which he remembered when he got married. That his wife worked never bothered him. One woman described her mother's influence on her in a few words: "I was a teacher. You'd better be a teacher." And she was. "My mother was a strong person and I knew it," said another woman, who then describes her own daughters as achievers and categorically stronger than her sons, who are "kind and gentle" and in fairly traditional marriages. The third woman's story reflected social changes, as she recalled that both her parents taught her self-reliance, and she was not taught to rely upon a man as her much older sister's generation was. As a role model, her mother conveyed strength and competence, but not the softer sides of femininity, which this participant has learned with life experience to cultivate as its own form of strength. A younger woman spoke of similar negotiations, as she works out how internalized feminist messages relate to what it means to be female, and makes choices about adopting aspects of stereotypical

femininity. Similarly, a man talked about the increased complexity of developmental decisions for both genders that has been brought on by less rigidity regarding gender roles. Fathers who were mentioned were regarded kindly or appreciatively, but it is notable that no one elaborated on specific influences transmitted from their fathers.

The next question was, "do you feel that there is gender equity in our society?" "No, no, no," is representative of the emphatic and unanimous response. Not a single study participant confirmed a belief that gender equity exists in American society, although about half said that there is more of it inside the home these days, than there is in the workplace or in government. Thoughtful responses considered the impact of changes in gender roles, how they manifest in daily life, and how these shifts may contribute to the causes of sexual violence, which is addressed in the next question.

One man referred to the movement toward gender equity as a "revolution" to stop the suppression of more than half the American population and give women free rein to do what they wanted to do or what they were capable of doing. He commented with amazement that after having made so much progress, some politicians are now working to unsettle issues that seemed to have been settled long ago. This suggestion that the current status of the so-called revolution may be somewhat precarious on a political level is accompanied by commentary on the uneven playing field currently open to women in their personal and professional lives, where women work for less pay; are not as likely as men to achieve CEO status; are still restrained by traditional social values that dictate what women can do and should not do, and continue to be objectified and depicted in the media as "being done to, rather than with." One woman described the equity offset between genders in this way: "I think that men feel it is really a man's world and the women don't feel that way anymore. The women feel equal to the men, but I don't think

they are really treated that way." Another woman observed that many women still hold traditionally female jobs, and that society has not come yet to value female traits, evidenced by the fact that many women who succeed in business, for example, "have to be men to do it." She suggested that women pay a high cost emotionally and psychologically, saying "we can't give ourselves a break," referring to the practice among women who try to "do it all." She goes on to say that, in her industry, mothers don't get promotions; for that to change, "someone has to make that valuable – your partner, or your employer, or your community has to say, 'we value your ability to mother your children. It is a huge help to society to have children well cared for." Her inference is that society has a good deal of catching up and readjusting to do, before gender equity can be said to be truly "online."

The ongoing struggle for balance between the genders is cited explicitly by all fourteen participants as an underlying cause of sexual violence against women. Eight people mention historically gendered patterns of dominance and submissiveness as a primary dynamic in sexual violence. In an understated manner, one man observed, "it seems to be pretty hard for some people to let go of that." A woman said,

> Men that just cannot accept women for anything other than traditional women's work or women's careers, I think that it may cause, in certain situations, a man who feels intimidated may react violently. … I think men have to be very secure in who they are in order to accept [that] and not have it affect them.

Another man suggested that education may be inadequate. "[Y]ou can't change the lack of empowerment to women if you do not teach women that there is an alternative," but, he continued, if you only work on the problem from one side, "it will create an 'us' v. 'them' fight." Instead, he encouraged an educational system whereby "both sexes are educated and made to

understand the value of the other sex and the dignity and worth of the other sex," an idea seemingly endorsed by a woman who listed insecurity, lack of acceptance of the other and the devaluing of human life as causes of gendered violence. Other factors in sexual violence that were mentioned included alcohol and drugs, and the confusion caused by the negative influence of the media. One woman pointed out, "… if the media were far less sexist … there would be less sexual violence. Media affects culture, but culture also defines the media."

Impact. The impact that sexual violence against women has on individuals, communities and society as a whole was determined by all participants to be detrimental on all levels, but this was not perceived as an easy question to answer, and not everyone articulated details. Three women expressed some hopelessness about the issue's receiving the attention it requires. "I wonder if once it leaves the community level, if it just ends up being a statistic," said one. Another ventured,

> [u]nfortunately, my gut reaction is that it is just a blip in society. If handled properly, it should be more of a bump. … No one sees it happening, so no one does anything about it. … I have been worried about this all my adult life. We have got to stop this from happening. … [I]t hasn't hit enough people hard enough to take collective action.

Another woman spoke of the unfair burden of fear that the pernicious threat of sexual victimization has on women, who "have to be conscious and cautious, more so than men." One man thought that sexual violence perpetuates itself, because people hear about it, get it in their heads that it is ok, and follow suit. Another called it "an awful thing. It can overcrowd prisons; it can destroy families." A third man said that sexual violence "shreds the basic fabric of a living organism." One man proposed, "When it is widespread, it has to have a stultifying effect on a

society and on women in particular." On the individual level, he spoke of the psychological damage of being sexually violated as a cause for impaired relationships thereafter.

Considering both collective and intimate relationships, a younger woman felt that one consequence of persistent gendered violence is that it decreases the likelihood of communities being able to develop a spirit of trust and to normalize discussion about how to protect community members from sexual violence. Also, when sexual violence continues to occur, the focus of conversations about sex and sexuality is on the violence and takes away from talk about how to have healthy sexual relationships, which is essential for young people to hear. Also focused on the impact on relationships, another man acknowledged the dehumanizing experience of intimate violence that often leads to internalization of self-doubt, low self-worth, and a lack of confidence in one's own judgment, among other things, all of which affect a person's ability to have good relationships. Alternatively conceptualizing the way in which an individual experience ripples outward, this man looked at the transmission of compromised relational skills to offspring.

> So the effect of the one intimate violence event in society is the mushrooming of the normalization of that behavior across generations. It's not that it happens across the community. It happens across generations, so the community is not necessarily condoning it, but by virtue of not interceding, by virtue of the separation, they are allowing for it to continue across generations.

"Until," he said, "somebody can break that cycle." One woman's response to the question incorporated a similar idea, that breaking a cycle is a key component in addressing this problem:

> Let's talk about the U.S., because we are sort of one big culture. How we see sexual violence is so conflicted. It's condoned in some ways, on some levels, but repugnant in

others and disgraceful. So we look at the community and might think we want to take care of everybody in our community, but we have this thing that we have always been taught - that it is disgusting and awful. There is no recovering and people are damaged forever and they will never function well and there is the individual getting this message, saying, 'right, I am damaged and I am never going to be normal.' But, if the individual who experienced this would say, 'that sucks and I am moving on,' they would be OK. And that is what we hope – it's what we saw in [our community]. But it would be pretty unusual. If that continues, the kids who are victimized continue to be strong, functioning healthily and succeeding at things. That would be really unusual. That might be because they were told, 'you are really still the same person; we are sorry we let this happen.'

She reiterates her hope that society can begin to craft clear and positive messages and that communities can begin to understand and enact the healing power of a caring response, "… the experience of the event is going to be very individual. But the recovery and bounding back from it is largely about the messages [the survivors] have heard from their community."

Action for change. The final question that respondents were asked to consider was whether they believed that sexual violence could be eradicated from a community such as theirs, and what would have to happen to achieve that. Eleven people said that they did not believe it could be eradicated, but each felt the problem could be ameliorated. One woman stated that the only way it could be eliminated would be to eliminate the population of sexual offenders. "Sexual violence? You're dead. That's it." She qualified this by saying that this would be a standard sentence when offenders are convicted in court, and added that although she believed this would take care of the problem, she was not saying that she truly believed it to be the best way. Two women were hopeful that sexual violence could be eradicated from a small

community by taking one step at a time, and through education, trust building and outreach, develop a collective desire to "buy-into" eliminating conditions that lead to sexual violence. One of these women specifically suggested education programs for kids, programs for empowering women, and making useful resources widely available, to include resources and education for perpetrators, who could be deterred by understanding both the consequences of criminal action and how to resist urges to violate someone. She encouraged families to talk about it and to unequivocally teach their children that sexual violence, in all its forms, is wrong.

The majority of the participants did not believe that gendered violence could be completely stopped for a number of reasons, primarily because there are always people that cannot be reached with education or pleas, and there will always be people who act on bad impulses. They also mentioned other barriers to elimination that are dynamically associated with the problem, as it exists in the social context. These included such things as the fact that sexual violence occurs behind closed doors and is often quite hidden; many people do not want to dwell on sexual violence or think about it happening in their town; people are more isolated, and community resources that served to support families in the past are no longer in common use, namely churches. Another barrier cited was that communities tend to react, rather than act proactively. One woman stated that there is a host of other social problems that are implicated in cases of gendered violence that need simultaneous attention, which she identified as alcoholism, violent tempers and anger, poverty, health issues, and the impact of war on returning veterans and their families.

In addition to barriers, several people offered hopeful ideas. Many felt that developing community awareness about the insidiousness of sexual violence and offering education about the issue, how to identify a potential need and what to do about it were important basic steps

towards ameliorating the problem. Also deemed central and useful were teaching good parenting, fostering a community where sexual violence can be openly discussed, and collaborating on ways to be both proactively prepared and to become a community that offers the best possible response to survivors, families and perpetrators when sexual violence occurs.

Summary of Issue. This section is the summation of the third part of the interview pertaining to the study participants' perceptions of the pervasiveness of gendered violence, how it impacts society, how social processes exacerbate or alleviate the problem, and what obligation is incurred by individuals and communities to address and potentially eradicate the problem of sexual violence against women. All the study participants described sexual violence against women as a widespread phenomenon in American society. However, it was difficult for them to gauge whether the problem has grown worse or better during their lifetimes, because multiple variables have been shaped by societal changes over time and obscure a clear picture. Variables named by the respondents included increased exposure of the issue through various media venues, shifts in social mores having to do with loosening the taboo around public discussion of things sexual, and more aggressive social, political and legal condemnation of violence against women. Sixty-five percent of the informants believed that gendered violence occurs more frequently outside this country, particularly in male-dominated societies, where it is culturally acceptable to treat women as property, and where religious and cultural traditions uphold laws that restrict women's rights or access to work or education that might afford women more independence. Such gender inequities were also seen to be more likely to lead to violence against women in places where poverty or generalized violence are significant factors.

Most participants believed that American social attitudes about gender and power dynamics between men and women have changed dramatically in the past 30 to 40 years and

resulted in more independence for women. Yet by all reports, the changes are uneven, as they appear to be more evident in the home than they are in the marketplace or in government, where women continue to be hampered by perceived limitations associated with being female. Violence against women was conceptualized as related to women taking a larger share of the available power in a patriarchal society. Both male and female respondents described men as potentially confused, angry and fearful, not only of losing social, economic and political ground to women, but also of losing their identity as men, who continue to be told by society that they are stronger, more deserving and omnipotent. Women were seen as positioned on a continuum of being overwhelmed by having to "do it all" and angry about not being rewarded, to feeling equal to men, aware of not being treated that way, and living with some level of annoyance. Developing an understanding of oneself in terms of gender roles was reported to have become a complex process, complicated by the fact that individuals depend less and less on established social institutions for support, moral development and behavioral guidance. In the aggregate, the gender role instability or confusion caused by these power shifts was believed to be causally associated with sexual violence, as was the perceived erosion of an embodied sense of right and wrong, especially in regard to sexual behavior.

The media in its many forms was seen as a culprit that perpetuates a social mindset that encourages and tolerates violence against women. Participants also conceptualized the media as a link between sexual violence that occurs locally and that which happens in other places, inside and outside the country. The influence wielded by the media was understood in various ways; several people mentioned the accessibility of pornography and even television and newspaper stories about sexual violence, which were seen as putting ideas into perpetrator's heads to follow through on bad impulses. Overly sexualized visual images objectifying women and

promulgating scenarios in which they are submissive to men, who are in turn portrayed as powerful in some way, are other media characteristics that were cited by many as causal factors of violence and equally accessible and ubiquitous, locally and globally. The findings revealed a general unease about the power held by the media, the impact it has on the culture at large, and its relationship to gendered violence.

In addition to power as an inherent force in gendered society and in the media, power was also noted as an internal dynamic of sexual violence itself. Two important findings bear mention here, even though each was articulated by only one participant, in the context of something that is common to both local incidents of sexual violence and gendered violence that occurs in other places, including other countries. One man raised the issue that the cycle of power and control is a central dynamic in sexual or domestic violence, no matter where it occurs. He recognized this as an essential commonality across cultures, in spite of possible varied expressions and contexts in which sexual violence occurs. One woman identified another wide-ranging similarity, when she described the shroud of secrecy that protects men in powerful positions, while they commit acts of sexual abuse, often without sanction.

Power also manifested as a systemic presence between the private and public spheres. All participants endorsed some form of collective obligation to act against the perpetuation of sexual violence. However, most people struggled with an internal debate between a desire to reach out to a victim or potential victim and the powerful resistance they felt against "invading" the privacy of a person's home, relationship or pain. Representative of the power behind historically ingrained social and legal norms, this was a real and present challenge to most people, as they considered their own relationships to the issue of sexual violence. It was also the heart of the dilemma in discerning the nature of a community's obligation to become

knowledgeable about the issue of sexual violence and to determine what to do about it, when it happens. The discomfort with negotiating the difficult line between public support for what is perceived to be a problem that occurs within the parameters of the private domain, was shown to affect individuals' confidence about either reaching out to potential victims or perpetrators before the violence occurs or to know how to respond in its aftermath. In spite of listing a number of barriers to eradicating the problem of sexual violence, community members were willing to engage in reflection and imagination, offering questions and suggestions. Many called for educational presentations, programs and resources; after offering several concrete ideas, one woman asked, "[w]hose responsibility is it to make sure the community is well informed?" Whether the school, the churches, the Town or a group of individuals initiate any community action, several people firmly stated that sexual violence *must* be discussed in the public square before it can be properly addressed, ameliorated or eradicated.

General Summary of Findings. The findings reported in this chapter are the compiled results of fourteen respondents' answers to 27 primary questions that contained 14 secondary or related questions about how individuals were impacted by local incidents of sexual violence, and whether they perceived them to be private matters or public concerns. Guided by the ecological model construct, the chapter is organized into three sections mirroring the research intent to gather data that might reveal how individual experiences and community processes intersect, when confronting the global issue of sexual violence on a personal, local level.

The study design presupposed that the fourteen community leaders who were interviewed were likely to have been aware of three unrelated incidents of sexual violence that occurred in their town in a relatively short span of time, approximately seven to eight years ago. In fact, no one recalled three episodes. Three people were unaware of any; only one person clearly

evidenced knowledge of two, even though others said they knew of two, and eleven focused almost exclusively on one case (Case 1), which involved minors and a well-respected family in town. The reason for this apparent gap in community communication processes regarding these events was unclear; it is not impossible that this can be attributed to a decision about confidentiality and methodology, which discouraged participants and prevented me from specifying identifying details of the incidents we had in mind.

As individuals, the participants struggled with feelings of anger, sadness, compassion, helplessness and the cognitive dissonance that resulted from having known the perpetrator as a lifelong member of the community and discovering that he was also a sexual offender. The respondents' personal relationships with the victim/survivors, the perpetrator and other family members ranging across four generations were foundational to their reactions to the news of sexual violence. Although there was no perceptible communal response at the time, the interviews revealed that a rich emotional, moral and philosophical discourse occurred within families and small groups of friends, as people tried to make sense of what they could not understand. The overwhelming desire was to help, but feelings of helplessness interfered, as most felt defeated by the inner debate between acting and affording the survivors and families their privacy.

The perceived silence at the community level can be understood as a reflection of individuals' lack of knowledge and confidence about how to make an appropriate public response, combined with an instinctive pull to protect those involved, because they, too, were part of the community. The sense of community conveyed by the respondents was powerful and unequivocally valuable. Associated with community membership, a sense of belonging was directly tied to an atmosphere of safety and attributed to fostering caring relationships with

neighbors and being engaged in community activities. While it was acknowledged that the community is able to be protective because of its small size, its community dynamics and its isolation, it was nevertheless reluctantly accepted that what happens in the "outside" world also can be expected to occur in a small town. Without exception the participants believed that it is a community's responsibility to be informed about the problem of sexual violence and what to do when it happens. Considering a communal response, interviewees were less tied to personal fears of overstepping into private space, but insecurity about the location of the boundary between private and public action remained. This was slightly different, however, because at the community level, respondents began to engage with the idea as a communal *obligation* to one another, recognizing that mutual responsibility is consistent with their respective definitions of what constitutes "community."

In the third part of the interview, the concept of local community obligation was developed against a global view of the problem of sexual violence against women and yielded thoughtful associations between gendered violence and the imbalance of power between men and women, as it exists in society. Devaluation of women in all its forms was seen as a cause for sexual violence regardless of where it occurs. Participants reflected on societal changes in this country that have occurred in the last 30 to 40 years and drastically altered social expressions of gender roles. They expressed beliefs that this change process has spawned confusion, anger and fear and pitted men and women against each other in a metaphorical contest for power, which manifests in very real inequities, including gendered violence. The media was noted as relentless in its delivery of conflicted messages about gender and sexuality, while social institutions simultaneously let go of past functions that served to shape community life and moral behavior. Without any trace of naiveté, participants characterized the wider world "out there" as chaotic

and rife with dangerous attributes, as a threat and in sharp contrast to the cohesive, healthier community in which they live. It became clear that this was an aspect of their community that the respondents were motivated to defend. The question that one person articulated, "whose responsibility it is to educate *this* community," symbolically describes the participants' painful realization that no community is immune to the problem of gendered violence, and explains their willingness to consider that their community is not necessarily powerless to address it on a local level.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study took place in a small, rural New England community where three episodes of sexual violence involving community members occurred seven to eight years ago. The research project engaged fourteen community leaders in conversation about how these events impacted them at the time, and sought to determine whether they perceive sexual violence against women as a private matter or as a public, communal concern.

The setting is a picturesque and relatively isolated village with a population of approximately 1000 residents that is quite distant from any urban center. Several larger towns located nearby provide services and employment that are not available in the village. Demographically, the town echoes the region, which is predominantly white; diversity is mostly socioeconomic. Formerly a self-sustaining farm community, the population has become less indigenous over time and the townspeople now are engaged in a variety of occupations, including many small local or internet businesses that offer goods and services such as carpentry and contracting, property management and maintenance and a variety of artistic creations. Most who work in the village also live in town. The town continues to be relatively self-supporting with working farms, a general store, a small café, schools covering pre-school to eighth grade, a bank, post office and a large number of active volunteer interest groups. The latter include social institutions such as a Lion's Club, library and historical societies, three denominationally

different churches, a neighbor support group and a busy PTA. Townspeople have many opportunities to get to know one another, in both casual and structured encounters.

As researcher, my position as a community member, along with my former role as a pastor in the community at the time of the events, automatically defined a participant-observer relationship with the study participants. Methodological and ethical details regarding this relationship are described in Chapter III. For the purposes of discussion with respect to interpretive authority of qualitative data, I concur with Stein and Mankowski (2004) when they write, "[r]egardless of what approach to analysis we take, interpreting qualitative material is deeply personal. In seeking understanding, the qualitative researcher must ultimately ask, "what do the voices say to me, the singular listener" (p. 25)? Witnessing to the thoughts and feelings of fellow community members about episodes of sexual violence among our neighbors, which I also experienced, was, for me, a dialogical process of continuous movement between the realms of personal and communal (i.e. public and/or political) experience. My interpretations are shaped by my past role in town and familiarity with its inner workings, by established relationships with the study participants, and by the fact that this research enterprise is about a public issue of personal concern to me as a woman, a pastor, a community member and a social worker.

Findings and Categories for Interpretation

Out of community members' thoughts and feelings about how the news of sexual violence among their neighbors impacted them, the research question aimed to discern whether they perceived sexual violence to be a matter of private or of public concern. In a nutshell, the answer to the research question is "yes," which is to say that the respondents perceived it to be both, but the line between what is public and what is private manifested in our combined

discourse in a variety of ways. Other themes presupposed in the research design were caught in the tension between the private nature of sexual violence and the public concern about it, which lent depth to understanding the conflict, as perceived by fourteen members of one rural New England community. Vestiges of functioning rape myths, silence and secrecy, aspects of rural culture and community life, attributes of social supports, and various observations and expressions about power and powerlessness were intertwined in the public-private dynamic. These themes will be discussed below, first as they materialized in the interviews, and then as I interpret their relationship to relevant literature. They are organized under the following headings: *Public-Private Line, Sense of Community and Ruralness,* and *Community Empowerment.*

Public-private line. The most commonly expressed difficulty in being able to allocate the issue fully to the public realm was tied to the personal relationships between community members and the victims/survivors, the perpetrators and multiple members of their respective families, who also reside in town. It was assumed that embarrassment and shame were unavoidable aspects of the experience of the individuals most directly impacted by the violence. This evoked in the respondents, their fellow community members, a generalized compassion and respect for their private pain, which resulted in social paralysis regarding the pursuit of any overt communal response. It did not, however, silence community members, as they did talk privately with trusted others, in an effort to make sense of what they were feeling and about what had transpired in their neighbors' lives. Talking was deemed beneficial to processing the surprising revelation, in one case, that someone so well known turned out not to be the person they thought he was; worse, he was guilty of perpetrating sexual violence. Verbal reflection was also

reported to have helped verify and negotiate complicated internalized emotions regarding the victims/survivors, the families and the perpetrators themselves.

Notably, the quality of the personal relationship with any party involved was a significant factor in how a community member responded to the news, both privately and publicly. Citing a qualitatively different past experience, a few individuals shared memories of a much older case that involved less valued relationships with a local family. These participants recalled that they felt more inclined to call upon the authorities to help the family of a man who was violent and unpredictable, because they feared not only for his family, but also for themselves and other townspeople. Issues involved in responding to public threat are beyond the scope of this study and presented here only as a useful explication of the significance of relationships in small communities as reported by some respondents. Experiences of this previous case were distinguished from interviewees' personal experiences of Case 1 in two other ways. One was the fact that the abuse was not hidden and its resolution was not a surprise to anyone; the outcome produced relief for community members, rather than shock and emotional confusion. A woman observed that in a local gathering place, people were reluctant to talk about Case 1 out of respect for the people concerned, but most people had not minded talking about their fears and opinions of the family involved in the case that occurred many years ago.

Clearly, personal relationships impact the nature of individual and communal responses to sexual violence occurring among their neighbors, and it is evidenced in the level and type of public discourse that ensues. The interviewees generally did not feel that sexual violence was a difficult topic to discuss openly. The critical silencing factor appears to be whether a community chooses to take things as they come or to prepare, as though they expect sexual violence to exist or potentially happen in town. Reacting to news of sexual violence among their neighbors

created a scenario for community members, wherein they were faced suddenly with complex relational and emotional concerns. This was uncomfortable territory for most respondents, which encouraged private, silent behaviors and intensified their internal pain, as well as that of the survivors and families who were caught up in the violence. Proactively planning educational programs, prevention strategies and how to proceed with reparative action after the fact were all presented by the participants as attractive alternative measures to their experience seven to eight years ago.

The struggle at the intersection of personal relationship and public concern is noted in the scant literature on sexual violence in rural places. Communities are seen as interactive systems that socialize their residents into certain social values, norms and beliefs (Donnermeyer et al., 2009) and that often operate with a collective feeling of solidarity (DeKeseredy et al., 2009). One can imagine variance in community members' views on perpetrators, survivors and their families as personal relationships are shaped by collective values, both of which come into play when sexual violence is added to the mix.

The familiarity bred in small town life can be adaptive or maladaptive when sexual violence happens in rural communities, as anonymity is often impossible. This can produce, in a victim, feelings of shame and embarrassment and reluctance to report chronic abuse, while in community members, similar embarrassment and feelings of helplessness can arise. These and other aspects of rural community life such as isolation, variable levels of tolerance for domestic and sexual violence, and lack of information about services are listed in the literature as barriers to seeking and receiving help, whether the seeker is a victim or an ally (Berliner et al., 2001; CACASA, 2010; Lewis, 2003). Victims of chronic sexual assault consider the additional danger of reaching out for help, for fear of discovery and retaliation, should their abuser hear about it

from someone in town. If a community has not communicated its values about sexual violence and clarified how victims/survivors can receive assistance, victims/survivors and others have little to assure them of dependable local support. This effectively redraws the line between public awareness and willingness to act and perpetuates the secret privacy of pain and violence.

At the outset of the study, I wondered about whether individuals and/or the community at large had felt traumatized by the multiple occurrences of sexual violence in the town. While the concept of collective trauma may be too strong in this situation, it was striking to me how fresh the participants' memories were of incidents that took place seven to eight years ago. Additionally, many said that although they do not dwell on it, they are constantly reminded of what happened and still experience emotional reactions when they meet up with members of the families or drive by certain houses in town, while going about daily business. For some, my letter of invitation was an instant reminder; that fourteen out of sixteen people took the opportunity to participate in the study may have been due, in part, to a shared desire to continue to process thoughts and feelings about sexual violence that was very close to home. Theorizing about collective trauma, Jeffrey Alexander (2004) claims that a tragic event is not considered automatically to be traumatic, unless a community says it is, based on the degree of harm the community feels the event inflicted upon the symbolic practices and ideals that constitute the very core of its collective identity. If the unusual series of violent events did deliver such a blow to the villagers in this case, Alexander’s (2004) model suggests that the community can essentially start over and use their perceptions of what happened with the violence, and later in the silence, and socially construct a new identity. While an altogether new start does not seem necessary, something new and relative to the issue of sexual violence was voiced by the respondents. I do not believe that community members themselves would say that they had been

traumatized by the events that took place within the relationships they held. However, some echoes of traumatic experience reverberated between memory and the narratives they shared – the level of emotional detail, stories of instant recall from visual stimuli, the depth of personal distress that they carry with them. In the context of a community prone to act on behalf of each other, compassion and pain could be foundational in a communal discourse about sexual violence.

On the other end of the public-private spectrum, participants believed that public discourse and education about sexual violence as an issue must become a normative process, if it is to be addressed. This was based on consideration of the secretive nature of the crime, especially in its chronic forms, and the social stigma that surrounds public talk about sex, sexuality and, by extension, sexual violence. Against hopeless frustration, one woman thought that if and when this issue is brought out of hiding, it makes it seem more solvable. One man shared his feelings about a particularly damaging effect that stigmatizing responses to sex crimes has on the victim/survivor, "I think that by virtue of making the events horrific and so different from the norm, we actually make it harder for victims to become survivors." He was not the only one who felt that way; a woman stated, "I think separating sexual violence out in terms of community reaction isn't helpful. I feel like making it less of a separate thing is helpful."

The twin problems of fear and silence associated with gendered violence were understood to be present and operational in the wider society, buried under layers of taboo and warning that have become maladaptive with age in an ever-changing society that now requires stronger, more direct challenges to violent, misogynistic behaviors. In spite of expressed concern for the protection of the privacy of victim/survivors and their families, participants did feel that the public should be educated about the problem and be more proactive. They located the forum for

breaking the undercurrent of silence in the local community and conceptualized it as a community's obligation to the well-being of its members.

Sense of community and "ruralness." This sense of communal obligation appeared to derive from the participants' powerful appreciation for and identification with their community. According to the narratives, positive aspects of rural culture contributed to the strong bonds between individuals and their community, which by their own definitions, revolved around knowing one's neighbors *and* truly caring about them, regardless of whether they become friends or remain acquaintances. Participation in community life and being willing to respond to a(ny) neighbor's need were hallmark elements of the definitions of community that were provided by respondents during the interviews. The relationships and familiarity developed through shared community life were recognized as characteristics of rural life that not only carry value; they also serve to create a sense of safety. Some parents implied a profound level of trust when they expressed the idea that, as they raised their children, they felt that the community collectively parented their children, giving the young ones added security through a felt sense of belonging.

These relational, behavioral and identity patterns are consistent with literature about theories of community. McMillen and Chavis (1986) affirm that "a sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging," and that they "matter to one another and to the group" (McMillen, 1976, cited on p. 9). Furthermore, they "have a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillen, 1976, cited in McMillen & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). In the literature about bystander intervention and social supports, a sense of community is seen as a powerful supporter in mitigating perpetuation of sexual violence, provided that a community coalesces around the issue in ways that indicate a readiness to listen

and to speak openly about sexual violence in order to promote a community culture where violence against women can be alleviated, or even eradicated (Banyard, 2011).

Comfort and security have a flipside, according to some participants, which they described as the danger of being so complacent that one operates without awareness that perhaps not all neighbors are equally deserving of trust. An example might be when a person develops a suspicion that another community member may be untrustworthy, or even a perpetrator of sexual violence. If that person chooses to speak out about his or her concern, there is a risk of social judgment landing squarely on him/her, especially if no one else shares the expressed suspicion about the fellow community member. The literature on social supports frames this type of social judgment directed at the outlier in the group as a "cost" of deviating from the group in the service of intervening when real or potential danger is observed. Individual and collective behaviors of college students were studied in the context of whether or not an individual would defy group norms to intervene on behalf of a victim of sexual assault (Banyard, 2011). It was determined that those who saw greater costs than benefits associated with a decision to act were less likely to intervene, had less self-confidence that they had the skills to help, and were less inclined to change their own behavior and develop them (Banyard, 2011).

Social judgment may also be directed at survivors and their families or at perpetrators and their family members, creating any number of negative dynamics, from internal shame to public shunning, depending on how a community responds to what has happened. This type of social behavior is attributed in the literature both to lack of knowledge about the issue and to rape myth acceptance, which has been shown to correlate directly with negative support for victims/survivors. In a small community it is reasonable to consider that negativity could also be directed at their family members or the family of a perpetrator. Formulating a measure of social

reactions to sexual assault victims, Ullman (2000) found that victim-blaming was not an uncommon social reaction when survivors disclosed sexual assault; other responses included treating the victim differently than beforehand and controlling her decisions. These were seen as stigmatizing and reflecting a lack of empathy and care for the victim/survivor.

Both a sense of community and the costs involved in creating a change process where community cohesion is strong have implications for individuals and communities, should they choose to create atmospheres of prevention and watchfulness that combat the dangers of sexual predation and violence in their midst. As mentioned above, a community's culture and the way it chooses to respond to incidents of sexual violence can have a big impact on the recovery process of a survivor whose misfortune is discovered, or who braves the lack of anonymity by reporting the sexual assault and choosing to remain in a small community. Ullman (2000) also lists positive types of social supports when victims come forward, including validation of her experience, emotional support, tangible assistance with information, and encouragement. According to Ullman's (2000) findings, positive encounters support a survivor's recovery process and are associated with higher self-esteem and better psychological functioning. One female respondent of the current study poignantly described how the fate of young survivors could be tied to a communal attitude or response:

> …I have felt like, … this is probably a really good place to have to recover. I have felt like people are willing to see the … victims as just kids and not ruined, damaged goods … I think that's a benefit of a small community, … but in a community where the culture is even a little different, the kids could really be more victimized and seen as strange and ruined.

The emphasis on an individual's recovery in a community context corroborates the literature on community and the ways in which social supports develop and function. Israel, et al. (1994) explored how individuals' health is impacted by the collectives in which they live and found that the mutual support available from belonging to a group is beneficial, especially for those who are disadvantaged or marginalized in some way. They write,

> … in those communities where members provide one another with emotional support (empathy, love, caring), instrumental support (tangible aid, services), informational support (advice, suggestions, information), and appraisal support (feedback, affirmation, social comparison), members would be expected to be at less risk of the negative effects of stress than in communities where such mutual support does not exist (Israel et al., 1994, p. 158).

It does not seem coincidental that these community functions are almost identical to the positive reactions Ullman (2000) identified as essential to an individual victim's recovery from sexual violence. This highlights the critical nature of the interaction between individuals and their communities and the potential that they have within their relationship to impact, even to create, one another and their shared environments.

The protective benefits of ruralness were associated also with the community's geographic isolation, which has helped preserve many of the small town values that are perceived as contributors to both the community's identity and also to that of many of its members. This also carries the potential downside that community members could foster an internal naiveté that sexual violence only occurs in other places, and thereby become unable to see any need to learn or to talk about the issue. While many interviewees expressed surprise that sexual violence had occurred, this was less connected to a lack of awareness, than it was to the

personal nature of relationships with the individuals involved. Although all participants acknowledged that sexual violence happens everywhere, even in their town, most verbalized some form of resistance to accepting its inevitability. Over the course of multiple interviews, I began to develop an image of residents in a small, isolated village feeling that they were under siege from the evils of the wider world. I was hearing expressions of frustration and hopelessness about the powerful, intrusive negativity of the media and the effects of unsettled inequities and angry dynamics between men and women in a changing society. Certainly I noted fears specific to the unspecified threat of sexual violence and the secretive nature of perpetrators and predators, especially by parents of daughters and school-aged children. Even so, I began to realize that what I was *not* hearing was resignation.

Cultures of resignation are recognized in the literature as existing in milieus where power inequities are a perpetual dynamic. A culture of resignation arises from tacit arrangements in which, for example, less powerful members suffer domestic or sexual violence in order to be obedient to certain traditional social roles (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2006). If a form of violence is condoned by a family or a society, a culture of resignation develops within a culture of violence, and both proceed across generations, unstoppable, until someone or some thing breaks the cycle. Cultures of violence legitimize gendered violence by fostering everyday practices that signal that women are "less than" or undeserving of respect. Oftentimes these messages are so deeply embedded in a culture's visual, verbal, social and political discourse, that they are not noticed as unusual or damaging, or if they are, it may be difficult to put into words whatever seems "off" (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2006). Many of the study participants lamented the way in which all forms of media often portray women as sex objects or in roles where they command little power or respect. Along with the gender inequities that they have observed in other areas of their lives,

the respondents named the media as potently responsible for the prevalence of violence against women. This claim is supported by an article in which Karen Morgan examines how the media portrayal of women "contributes to a 'culture of resignation' which permits much violence to be seen as inevitable, mundane, and as a consequence to remain an intrinsic feature of society" (Morgan, 2005, cited in Thapar-Björkert et al., 2006).

The power of negative and controlling social messaging is undisputed and explored in a variety of ways in the literature. While there is a focus on cultures of violence and resignation in the literature, there is also some recognition that cultures of resistance exist in defiance of the others. Seeking to understand how individuals in the rural South use cultural "scripts and tools" (Lee & Ousey, 2011, p. 901) to shape their perceptions, decisions and actions with regard to interpersonal violence, researchers found that individuals made strategic, not automatic, choices from the "scripts and tools" available to them. That individuals did not always succumb to the communal norms and expectations led Lee and Ousey (2011) to formulate a model they termed "culture in action," in which they conceptualized individual agency as a significant force with regard to maintaining or changing cultural norms of interpersonal violence. Their "culture of action" model defines "culture as intersubjective, relational, and performative" (Lee & Ousey, 2011, pp. 912-913). As applied to gendered violence, the idea of an intersubjective and performative relationship between individuals and their culture is empowering, provided that the intention involves resistance to violence and resignation.

Community empowerment. In a sense, the study interviews yielded a construct of the "world out there" as a culture of violence, yet there was evidence that the participants maintained a vision of non-compliance to the wider culture, when it came to describing their own community and their personal thoughts and feelings. Evidence of resistance to the very

frustrations that were named by the respondents was scattered throughout the interviews. Referring to her belief that if the media were to stop creating sexist messages, the frequency of sexual violence would decrease, one woman points out that "[m]edia affects culture, but culture also defines the media." If it is a culture of resistance that defines the media, then transformation of the current culture of resignation may be possible, small community by small community. Others also shared thoughts of resistance that appeared to be grounded in the dynamic of empowerment. One woman offered, "I think that empowering women to realize their full potential can only help keep domestic violence at bay." Another woman, speaking of the proverbial glass ceiling for women in business, imagines a society that places value on women's decisions to be mothers, by allowing them to have flexibility and legitimate opportunities in the workplace, unencumbered by penalties for taking time to care for their children. She speaks of that social value as potentially developing out of individual agency in a "culture of action" when she says, "someone has to make that valuable – your partner, or your employer, or your community has to say, 'we value your ability to mother your children.' "

The need to counter ingrained messages arises on many levels of the ecological model, and is not always an exchange between an individual and the wider culture. Sometimes, as one man pointed out, the resistance is very, very close to home. One interview question asked about the ripple effect of sexual violence as the impact moved outward from individuals to communities to national and global societies. He saw it in terms of the intergenerational transmission of violence, which he calls the "normalization of that behavior across generations."

> It's not that it happens across the community. It happens across generations, so the community is not necessarily condoning it, but by virtue of not interceding, by virtue of

> the separation, they are allowing for it to continue across generations. Until somebody can break that cycle.

This comment neatly exposes the contrast between a culture of resignation (not condoning, but also not interceding) and a culture of resistance, conceived as empowering the "one" who breaks the interminable cycle. Whether it is breaking the cycle of violence or exposing the insidious nature of societal messaging that seems to feed certain types of violence, the central action is about changing the flow of power.

Literature that searches out cultural expressions of gendered violence and explicates the dynamics of dominance and submission is plentiful, as power-over is a common theme in all forms of violence against women, particularly sexual violence. Feminists promote the concept of power-with others as a principle of empowerment and social change. Elisheva Sadan (1997) envisions empowerment as a social change process that is effected by community members in the context of their communal life. He describes this endeavor as contributing "to the discourse on social problems, since it exposes the extent of oppression, discrimination and stigma in the lives of vulnerable populations" (Sadan, 1997, p. 19). Israel and colleagues (1994) also define empowerment in the context of community, as "the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal social, economic and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations" (Israel et al., 1994, p. 152).

During the interviews, community members offered suggestions for how a community could respond and prepare itself against paralysis when sexual violence happens among their neighbors. Along the way they engaged in a dynamic process that explored the memory of their experience of sexual violence within their community. Their narratives are at once individual

stories and one story of a community that continues to feel the emotional impact of a type of violence that is privately suffered and publicly mourned.

Strengths

The primary strength of this study is in the richness of the narratives that were gathered in the interview process. The outcome was enhanced by some unique factors and relational dynamics, which are related to my position as a participant-observer doing research in my own community. Previously established relationships with each of the participants and their generous interest in participation contributed to the relaxed nature of the interviews, in spite of the fact that sexual violence, as a topic of conversation, is not comfortably part of everyday parlance. The fourteen community members demonstrated commitment to the project, evidenced by their earnest reflection and the depth of their answers to the interview questions. This, and the demographic mixture of the study sample allowed me to collect pertinent and useful data from a number of individual perspectives that accurately reflects community processes. My understanding of the community's personality as a product of its particular history and sociopolitical dynamics helped me to recognize that what I was hearing was grounded in a shared experience of communal life, which contributes to the validity of the study.

Using qualitative methods to explore community members' perceptions of sexual violence in their own community and their thoughts about how a community can best respond to violence that happens privately, uncovered a wealth of implications for further research into areas of gendered power dynamics, sexual violence prevention education, interactions between individuals and their communities, communal responses to crisis, generational variations on social change processes, and more. The subjective nature of the qualitative data also offered insight into the impact that sexual violence has on community members, who know not only both

the victim/survivor and the perpetrator, but also their families, all of whom are located in a historical and social context. From the literature reviewed, this study design and process appears to be unique. While it is not generalizable, it may be adaptable for researchers who seek to study the nuances of individual and communal perceptions and responses to sexual violence in small, rural places, towards developing more effective healing of this social problem. Another strength of this exploration was that community members who did not engage in a communal process at the time of the sexual violence were given an opportunity to talk about their confusion, share their thoughts and questions, allow themselves to articulate their fears, and be affirmed in the pain that many of them experienced, but out of deference to the victims/survivors of the sexual violence, did not voice at the time. Now seven or eight years later, these community members had as much to say about what they remember, as they did about what they cannot forget. This research process has given voice to a form of secondary trauma that is rarely considered in the literature.

Finally, the interviews revealed that the respondents place high value on volunteerism as an important aspect of community membership, and this attribute was mirrored by their participation in the research study. Many specifically stated that they hoped their contribution would be potentially beneficial to the community, and all participants wanted to receive a summary report of the findings; together these suggest that one of the strengths of this study is yet to be realized.

Limitations

The most notable limitation of this study was also unavoidable. Participants were asked to keep in mind events that occurred in town seven to eight years ago, in which sexual violence happened between people that they knew. For ethical and privacy reasons, it was built into the

interview process that these events would not be named or described, nor would the discussion be about what had happened or about the people or families involved. I had three reference events in mind; although some participants made it clear which events they recalled, with some, I did not know for sure that we were referencing the same cases. A certain level of ambiguity was present and had to be tolerated by both parties during the interviews. A related matter arose, as one of the events implicated minors. This case was by far the most specifically recalled by the participants, which resulted in the community members' thoughts and feelings being focused on child sexual abuse, and not exclusively on violence against women. As a result, particularly the emotional content of the responses was likely altered, even though gendered violence was still a factor. It was beyond the scope of this study to take into account differences in people's affective and cognitive experiences when considering the victims of sexual violence variously as children, young women or adult women.

Although the study concept and design could be adapted to other contexts, the findings of this study are not generalizable, as they specifically pertain to an exploration of perceptions about sexual violence in a particular rural context located in New England, where there is little racial or ethnic diversity. Further, the socioeconomic variance within the sample is slight, within the middle to upper middle class, and does not represent the full range of financial or social positions in the town's population. While I had hoped to interview a balance of men and women, the two participants who declined the invitation to participate were both men, and I did not choose to invite others, as fourteen interviews were within the desired number – therefore, with responses from five men and nine women, the findings were not gender-balanced. Although I achieved my goal of recruiting three generations of town residents, a larger number of younger participants would have helped to achieve more perspective on the degree of change over time in

social perspectives about sexual violence. This could yield useful information for identifying patterns of thought and behavior that may or may not be ingrained in society and may or may not be contributing to the problem of gendered violence. As a participant-observer, I may have been influenced by my own interest in ameliorating the problem of violence against women. Finally, the interviews that were conducted resulted in far more information than I had imagined, because I was uncertain that the participants would have so much to say about a topic that I perceived as something few want to discuss. I was proven wrong on that count, and as a result, I was unable to fully utilize such a wealth of information in the time that I had available for this research.

Implications for social work

Community social workers and clinicians alike are often consulted when violence intrudes upon people's lives, yet knowledge of the causes, impact and interrelatedness of various forms of violence continues to evolve (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004; Guterman & Haj-Yahia, 2008). Since the 1990s and out of necessity, the social work profession has begun to focus on the multiple levels of physical and mental health issues embedded in the wider psycho-social concerns that have to do with forms of community violence (Guterman & Haj-Yahia, 2008). While there is not yet consensus on how the term, "community violence" differs from other forms of violence (Guterman & Haj-Yahia, 2008), it is useful here to conceptualize the gendered interpersonal violence that is the focus of this study under the rubric of community violence.

Contextualizing sexual violence against women within a community highlights the multiple relationships impacted by these events. When individuals who survive or perpetrate violence are members of communities, the impact of the violence is felt not only by those directly involved, it also registers on a communal level. Because social work's particular

professional jurisdiction sits at the intersection where individual and community meet, and because impacts of violence appear to be a growing concern, this study could help social work practitioners gain a deeper understanding of how the people they serve perceive their experiences of violence, and whether they see them as individual or collective problems. This data may offer social workers guidance on building hopeful constructs for communities to support survivors in recovery and to stand by family members who are in pain. Information of this sort could help social workers lead communities to educate and empower themselves around this issue, so that they are not solely dependent on "experts," when they need help. Negotiating agreements to become allies in preventing sexual violence in their communities can be a valuable process for social workers to initiate with community leaders. When working in community systems, social workers could benefit from getting to know the organizations, their functions and their leaders. With this contextual knowledge, a worker can offer a community's leadership encouragement and information on how to work collaboratively to educate and create awareness about sexual violence among their community members. Social workers also can support individuals and communities by becoming aware of local treatment options for individuals and families who have been impacted by sexual violence and connect communities with prevention and education programs, specifically those that are oriented toward bystander intervention.

Recommendations for Further Research

The data collected in this study cries out for more community-oriented research on how sexual violence is perceived and handled in rural communities. While I chose to conceptualize the stance of one rural community as conceivably poised to be a pocket of resistance to the pressing sociopolitical processes in the wider society, the participants shared myriad thoughts that indicate additional avenues for fruitful exploration. An uneven awareness of sexual violence

as an issue became apparent in the interviews, as did a poor working knowledge of how gender power dynamics are constructed and maintained in society, then reflected in unique configurations in small communities. However, the *impact* of the hidden forces associated with violence against women, was noted by the participants and described with solid insight and a high level of frustration. What to *do* about it was more difficult for them to visualize, seemingly because a sense of inevitability prevailed, with regard to the perceived monolithic nature of problems such as violence against women, the undisciplined and powerful media, and the ongoing structural and institutional "battle" for power between men and women, which everyone seemed rather tired of fighting, either literally or metaphorically.

Underneath patriarchal systems is an image of male attitude and behavior that has been harnessed to a nearly universal construct of masculine dominance in gendered power dynamics. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is recognized as a legitimizing principle for the subordination of women to men on a global scale that is perpetuated as normative, even though only a statistical minority of men may actually enact it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This discrepancy was highly visible in the data from this study, as both male and female participants regarded the inequities and confusion about gender roles in a changing society as one of the underlying causes of sexual violence. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), interdisciplinary research in fields such as education, criminology, media, men's health and organizational studies has yielded evidence that militates against the idea of essentialist masculinity and points to multiple negative costs and consequences of preserving these assumptions in social practices.

Research that is specifically oriented toward empowering individuals and communities to confront sexual violence on a local level is needed. Misogynistic social attitudes and conflicted

messaging about gender continue to be powerfully embedded in both individual and communal psyches, in spite of the considerable progress made, primarily by feminist movements, to expose them. Community education about issues such as sexual violence should be contextualized in the layers of historical assumptions and social norms that continue to cause damage interpersonally and collectively. This research should not remain solely in academic discourse, but be designed for delivery into communities through programs that can be made to fit into a variety of local contexts and be utilized by local institutions and leadership without the direct assistance of an "expert." If communities can construct an understanding of sexual violence through education that pertains to the peculiarities of their own setting, social dynamics and values, they could develop a stronger commitment to prevention and/or bystander intervention. Researchers could explore what characteristics of community members' personal relationships with victims/survivors, perpetrators or their families help determine the level of commitment for community involvement in sexual violence prevention, education or intervention.

Sexual violence should also be defined more clearly in the literature, so that specific characteristics and sequelae of violence that is sexual in nature can be differentiated from other forms of interpersonal violence. While such distinctions are critical, it is also important to view sexual violence within the context of other forms of violence that appear in communities. Connections with violence in general and with sexual violence in a variety of cultural contexts are valuable categories of information that can add to a public understanding of violence against women. These various perspectives combined with clarity of definition could create a more comprehensive picture for understanding sexual violence as a phenomenon that can and should be part of a public discourse. Study participants believed that communities should overcome the

stigma around sexual violence and that talking openly about this issue as a local problem would help both individuals and communities.

In two important ways, the study sample's generational span was a useful factor in support of creating an atmosphere of open dialogue around the topic of sexual violence. Interviews with three generations helped to locate responses to past local sexual violence within the community's history; representatives of different generations also offered a hopeful perspective on how things have changed over time, and evidence that they do, in fact, continue to change. While a town's isolation is no sure protection against the infiltration of social problems from the wider society, because the same problems do exist in microcosms everywhere, concepts such as social constructivism and community empowerment can boost a small community's sense of agency when crises arise. Further, being able to contextualize a problem such as sexual violence in history and as a shared dilemma across cultures opens more options for communities to engage in a collective, objective discourse that can reduce the paralyzing concern such as the one voiced by the study participants – the fear that a communal response would invade the privacy of the individuals or families who were directly impacted by sexual violence.

While rural communities can often accomplish a great deal with internal resources, they also need supports when dealing with sexual violence; often found in surrounding towns, these include law enforcement, the county court, fire and emergency services, sexual and domestic violence advocacy agencies and the like. Research should look into ways whereby groups in rural areas that are likely to encounter victims/survivors and/or perpetrators of sexual violence are uniformly trained by their professional disciplines to manage these encounters. Research on various aspects and contexts of sexual violence is found across disciplines and should be shared more extensively and more deeply. Areas such as criminology, rural studies, cultural studies,

public health, legislative law, social justice, theology, gender studies, community psychology, anthropology, and more have a shared interest with social work in investigations related to systemic and interpersonal violence against women. Interdisciplinary and cross-national collaboration on this problem could create stronger resistance to the perpetuation of violence against women by building a wider, more visible knowledge base and calling upon more sociopolitical entities to create change in the multiple systems that foster violence against women.

Many respondents lamented the power of the media to misinform, mislead and infiltrate society and families with mixed messages about interpersonal relations and respect for women. It was striking how automatically the participants pointed to the media's association with sexual violence. Young people use media technology in very different ways than they did even five years ago; it is a ubiquitous and powerful tool for the communication of social messages, especially to younger generations. Research into how social media can be used for social change in gender politics could be culturally transformative on a global level.

Conclusion

This study explored the thoughts and feelings that community members experienced when sexual violence occurred in their New England village some years ago. I originally conceptualized sexual violence as a topic that no one wanted to discuss, because at the time the community did not engage in a communal discourse. Through the interviews, I discovered that it was not sexual violence itself that prevented public conversation. The personal relationships that community members had with the people who were most directly impacted by the violence discouraged gossip and generated compassion and respect for the family's privacy. The interviews revealed that participants are strongly attached to the community, its people and the

values that are co-created by town residents in response to communal history and daily life. This sense of belonging carried implications for how the relationship between individuals and their community can be put into the service of healing after sexual violence occurs. It also seems promising as an environment for education about sexual violence and the establishment of prevention programs that can be shared by the Town, the school, the three churches and a number of the villages interest groups.

The interviews verified that underlying social forces continue to have negative implications on how gendered power dynamics are played out in society, visibly, symbolically and in daily discourse. Communities of resistance that recognize the damage that is inflicted upon individuals and their respective collectives are able to work together to change their own culture, thereby impacting the wider society or culture in which they live. Without open conversation about sexual violence, which is, more often than not, a direct manifestation of these sociopolitical power dynamics, it is possible that communities and their members will continue to suffer unnecessarily. Communal discourse about sexual violence and the institution of prevention programs that illuminate the causes of gendered violence and contextualize them on both the local and global levels can highlight the fact that the issue of violence against women is both personal and political, and in both directions. Using the concept of "both and," instead of the "either or" construct created by ubiquitous binary views opens the landscape for navigating the many intersections where sexual violence occurs in numerous local contexts. "Both and" lends itself to dialogue across contexts and boundaries and cultures; it invites interdisciplinary discourse and introduces more ideas for how things happen in real life.

At the outset of the study, I wondered if community members thought that sexual violence was a private or a public concern – "both and," came the answer. Personal concern for

the individuals harmed by sexual violence held back the communal conversation; yet the same concern prompted the unanimous feeling that the community has a responsibility to be educated and prepared to handle sexual violence by means of a public dialogue. I found it interesting that, in the conversational interviews about gendered violence, the conceptual line between what is deemed private and what is seen as appropriately public was crisscrossed by many other lines traditionally suspended between two poles: men and women; local and global; individual and community; male and female; powerful and oppressed are a few of them. Quite an intricate web complicated thematic organization of the data, as layers of social history and myth were woven into the issue of sexual violence against women. This was a small study conducted in a rural village, yet the data is permeated with evidence of global forces, evidencing in itself, a good example of "both and" in action.

While on some level it is not news that, in this day and time, worldly influences would appear in remote places, this may be exactly why, in the context of this study about the issue of sexual violence, pairing "remote" with "worldly," and "large" with "small" seems to be another slip into binary thinking. The concepts we name "local," "global," "individual" and "community," along with their respective spatial connotations, develop deeper relationships with each other when they are viewed dynamically, as they must be, in the conversation about violence against women. The ecological model helps make these interactions visible and shows that the influence and impact of each realm can be multi-directional. These non-binary perspectives could be useful tools for social constructivist ideas of community empowerment and social change. By contrast, the dualistic joining of "men and women," "male and female," "powerful and oppressed" in the context of this discussion are also dynamically arranged, but too often an oppositional energy emerges alongside these binaries. The early grass roots efforts of

the feminist movement were highly effective in exposing and changing patriarchal society. Currently, the reality of a vast number of intersections where violence against women continues to occur calls out for reconsideration of the adversarial models that perpetuate binary constructions of gender centered on patriarchal power. This is not to say that damaging forms of patriarchy have been eliminated, but that they are alive and well, in spite of tremendous gains in deconstructing them. But, to quote one of the study participants, "we can do better." While larger societal forces that press upon a smaller collective absolutely have to be recognized, they can also be resisted and transformed. The local context is always part of a larger context, and it has a great deal to say.

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DIAGRAM 1

POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

Duluth Model

APPENDIX A

School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 5, 2012

Mary Thompson

Dear Mary,

I continue to be impressed by your thoughtfulness and what that says about you as a student and a future social worker (only a few months now!). Your changes were very good and well done. Your project is now officially approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

In many ways this is a very neat study and I do hope that you remember to send me a note when you present it this summer. Good luck with your project!

Sincerely,

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Dear ___________,

As you may or may not know, for the last few years I have been a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work pursuing a Master of Social Work degree. The program requires completion of a research project, and I am writing to ask for your help with a study I am doing here in (town's name). Some years ago, several incidents involving sexual violence occurred in our community that involved people many of us know. These became public knowledge at the time, and have now become part of our communal history. My study *will not focus on what happened* to whom or by whom in our town. I am interested only in shedding light on the issue of sexual violence, as perceived by residents in a small, rural village where such events are known to have occurred.

I have designed this research study to explore community members' perceptions of sexual violence as a social issue in our own rural context, in relation to how sexual violence is perceived in the wider society. I am hoping that you will accept my invitation to share with me your own thoughts and feelings about sexual violence by means of a conversational interview. I am writing to you specifically, because you seem to value your membership in this community, lived here at the time of the violence, and *(depending on the person) you are a leader in the community/ have lived here all your life/ moved here from somewhere else/ serve this community in so many ways / represent an important perspective because of your role in the community.*

As a pastor in the community when these events occurred, I was aware that this type of violence is very difficult for people to talk about. This made it almost impossible for me to discern how news of sexual violence impacted individual members of the community and how, if at all, this knowledge may have affected the community's overall sense of itself. Today, these and other questions remain with me, although as a community member and social work student now conducting a research study, I am looking for insight from a very different position. I have

learned that there are significant gaps in the research concerning sexual violence in rural places, and that, worldwide, researchers are finding this to be important information to have. Much of this may be due to the fact that every village has its own collective perspective, which is related to the way people in each place think and feel about the issue. It seems that a better understanding of the larger social phenomenon of sexual violence relies precisely upon talking about what no one wants to talk about. For a number of reasons, I believe that residents of (town's name) have much to contribute to the growing collection of data that ultimately focuses on eliminating a social problem that causes enormous suffering in a variety of contexts throughout the world, including here in our hometown.

The enclosed is a formal letter of consent, which offers more details about the study itself, my commitment to confidentiality regarding anything you tell me, risks and benefits, and what to expect from the interview process. Please review the enclosed letter and feel free to contact me with any questions; my contact information is on the consent form. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee, Dr. David Burton, with any questions or concerns about this study at (413) 585-7974. In about a week I will phone you to ask if you would like to participate. If so, we can then set a time to meet for the interview. When we meet, and before we begin the interview, I will ask you to sign the letter of consent and will give you a copy for your own records.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Best regards,

Mary Thompson

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Study Participant,

My name is Mary Thompson, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. For my MSW thesis project, I am conducting a research study in our town about community members' perceptions of sexual violence against women. Several years ago, when a series of such incidents occurred in our community over a short span of time, my role as a pastor to the community was very different than it is today. However, years later, questions I had at that time remain with me, and they have helped shape this research, which combines my personal experience as a community member with social science research methods.

The purpose of this study is to explore how isolated cases of sexual violence occurring in our rural village impacted the community as a whole, and how community members who were not directly involved, thought and felt about their own knowledge of the violence. The study will also examine the meaning of community members' perceptions in light of local and global social opinion concerning violence against women.

Not much is known about current views of sexual violence and violence against women in small rural communities, and your perspective and insights are valuable to this study, which is designed to understand local attitudes about this issue. The research will be used for the Smith College School for Social Work MSW thesis presentation and possibly for publication. It may also be used as the basis for presentations for area human service groups, professionals, or community leaders to encourage exploration of attitudes about this issue in their own communities that could lead to the reduction of sexual violence in our society.

Your choice to participate in this study means that you are one of 12–15 people who have agreed to participate in this research because you are a member of this community, serve the community as a formal or informal leader, resided here at the time these events occurred, and you have told me you are willing to talk about this topic with me.

You are being asked to engage with me in an audio-taped confidential interview, which will take place at a mutually accessible and agreed upon location, where we can be guaranteed uninterrupted privacy. I estimate that this process will take about an hour and a half or less. The focus of the interview will *not* be on the past events themselves or about the people involved, but it will be about the thoughts and feelings that *you* had at the time and since, regarding the occurrence of sexual violence in our community and elsewhere. At the end of the interview, I will gather some basic demographic data, such as your age, education level, how long you have lived in town, etc. I will be audio-taping the interview, because it will be the most accurate way to obtain your thoughts, and it will release me from having to take copious notes, so that I can give you my undivided attention. I will transcribe the tapes and any notes that I do make myself. If I do require help, I will ensure that my assistant does not know you and signs a confidentiality agreement to protect your privacy.

There may be some risk in participating in this study, as the memory of violence in the community that involved our neighbors or friends could bring up feelings of sadness, frustration, anxiety and the like. I will make every effort to minimize this possibility during the interview, and I will provide you with a list of national, state and community resources, should you need some support or information at a later time. It is possible that you could become uncomfortable discussing your thoughts and feelings about sexual violence, or you may be concerned that others in the community will find out what you said or have a negative view your participation in this study. I want to stress that confidentiality and protection of your privacy is a priority, and we can revisit how this works at any time before or during the interview.

I am unable to offer you compensation for your time, but you may find some benefit in sharing your perspective and feelings about this sensitive issue. Being able to talk about distressing events is often therapeutic, even though you may not have felt comfortable doing so at the time. Another possible benefit is that you may gain some useful insight that could make the topic more accessible or less anxiety provoking for you. By sharing your thoughts, feelings and your experience of these events, you may be gratified to know that you could be making a significant contribution that may help others. The data collected in this study may be of use to mental health workers, social services agencies, school personnel, clergy, legal aid advocates, law enforcement and community leaders in addressing the issues of domestic and sexual violence in rural communities.

Confidentiality and protection of your identity will be observed at all times and protected in a number of ways. Your audio-taped interview and any notes I make will be kept confidential and in a secure location. I will ask you not to publicly discuss your interview while the study is in progress (until June 15, 2012), because I will also be interviewing other people in town. During this process, I will be mindful of the personal pain that some of our neighbors and their families have endured and would ask you also to be respectful of their presence in the community, should you want to discuss any aspect of your involvement with this study, even at a later date.

I will personally process the audio recordings. If I find it necessary to receive any assistance in transcribing the data, it will not be from anyone known to you, and that person will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. As a student, I am obligated to share my work with my research advisor, but all identifying information will be removed from the data discussed with her. No raw data will be shared in the written report or presentations, nor will our town or state be named; any quotes or stories used will be disguised. The data I collect will be presented only in the aggregate, by means of compiled reports or presentations of the findings, which protects your identity. All data, audiotapes, notes, electronic communications and consent forms will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years, as stipulated by federal guidelines, after which time they can be destroyed or continue to be maintained securely, until no longer needed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer a question, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and I will destroy the data I have collected from you. However, if you want to withdraw after your interview data has been analyzed and integrated into the study, it will not be possible to separate your data from the report. The last opportunity for full withdrawal will be April 1, 2012. If, at any time, you have questions or concerns about this study, you may reach me at the email or phone number listed at

the bottom of this consent form, and I will be happy to address them. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee, Dr. David Burton, with any questions or concerns about this study at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant ____________________________ Date_____________

Signature of Researcher____________________________ Date_____________

Researcher Contact:
Mary Thompson

Contact Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
E-mail Address: xxx@smith.edu

APPENDIX D

LIST OF REFERRAL SOURCES
NATIONAL

National Sexual Violence Resource Center 1-877-739-3895

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline1-866-331-9474

National Center for Victims of Crime, Stalking Resource Center 1-800-394-2255

National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233

National Association of Social Workers
***For a referral to a local counselor*
750 First Street, NE, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002
202-408-8600
http://www.socialworkers.org

American Psychological Association
***For a referral to a local counselor*
750 First Street NE
Washington, DC 20002
Telephone: 800-374-2721 or 202-336-5500
TDD/TTY: 202-336-6123
http://www.apa.org

American Psychiatric Association
***For a referral to a local psychiatrist*
1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
1-888-35-PSYCH or 1-888-35-77924
www.psych.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-TALK (8255)
http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

LIST OF REFERRAL SOURCES
STATE & LOCAL

Given only to participants; for confidentiality reasons, this page is left blank.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE

* Starred questions are dependent on certain answers to previous ones, and may not be asked of all participants.

Individual Perspective on Past Events:
These questions are about the events that occurred in our town some years ago. I'd like you to keep in mind that <u>I want to know only about your own thoughts and feelings about the fact that sexual violence happened</u>, we won't talk about any details or about the people directly involved, just about your thoughts and feelings about the situations.

1) Are you aware that three different events associated with sexual violence and involving people in our town occurred in series over a relatively short span of time (two years or less)?
   - **If yes**, <u>continue with questions 2, 3 & 4, etc.</u>
   - **If yes <u>and</u> no** (e.g. knew about 1, but not any others) <u>continue as above.</u>
   - **If no**, ask: So just to clarify, you are not aware of any incidents of sexual violence occurring in <u>(name of town)</u> in the past 5 or 6 years? <u>Continue with questions in community section.</u>

2) Do you recall when and how you learned the news? (At the time or later/ at the store, a phone call, grapevine, newspaper)
   - Same way for each incident? Differences?

3) Can you please talk about what your *thoughts* were when you heard the news?
   - I'm wondering if your thoughts changed in any way if and when you learned more information about what happened.
   - How were your thoughts influenced when you heard about the other events that happened later?

4) Can you please talk about what it *felt* like to hear the news?
   - External focus – e.g. sympathy/empathy for those involved?
   - Internal focus – e.g. destabilizing sense of personal security?
   - * I'm wondering if your feelings changed in any way as you became aware of the other events?

5) What was helpful to you *at the time* in dealing with the impact this information had on you?
   - <u>If nothing:</u> Can you describe what might have been helpful or supportive to you then?
   - <u>If something:</u> Can you say how you think that helped you?

5) * Do you remember approximately how much time passed before you did not dwell on this (these) event(s), and what was helpful for you in getting there?

6) * When you spoke with others at the time about what had happened, did you find that you shared similar perspectives and opinions about the violence?

- * If not, can you talk about the differences in the way you and others viewed what happened?
- * Did you find these conversations helpful to your own ability to process your understanding and experience of the news?

7) What do you know about resources in the area that are available to support victims and survivors of sexual violence?
    - Would you ever call upon these people/agencies to help you deal with your own feelings about this happening to someone you know?

On Community:
We've been talking about your thoughts and feelings as an individual. Now I'd like to spend a few moments talking about your thoughts and feelings as a community member.

1) What, in your opinion, is the "recipe" that makes a town a community?

2) What is your impression of <u>(name of town)</u> as a community?
    - How have things changed over time? (Lifelong residents)
    - What aspects of community life drew you to move here? (Newer resident)
    - What do you value about having grown up in this community? (Young person)

3) Can you speak about how you think and feel as a *community member* about sexual violence happening in your home town?

4) How did the fact that these things happened here change your view of this community, if at all?

5) Do you have a sense of how these events may have impacted the community as whole?

6) Do you have any thoughts on what a communal response to incidents of sexual violence among our neighbors should or could be?
    - Ideally, how would you have liked our community to respond to these events?
    - Why/why not?

About the Issue:
Now I would like to shift the focus away from <u>(name of town)</u> and get your thoughts about the issue of sexual violence itself. Not all sexual violence is male on female, but most of it is; women and children are by far the most frequent victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. When I speak about sexual violence in this interview, I am speaking also about the larger issue of violence against women.

1) Would you say that sexual violence is more or less of a problem (or about the same) for women today than when you were young? Can you elaborate on that?

2) How would you describe this community's level of awareness of violence against women?

3) Do you think a town or village the size of ours has a collective responsibility to be informed about sexual violence and what to do when it happens? If so, why? If not, why?

4) Can you say whether you ever encounter this issue personally or in your line of work, and if you feel equipped to manage what you may learn has happened or suspect may be happening to someone else?

5) Do you have a picture in your mind of the "typical" sexual offender? Would you share it with me, please? (Male/female, poor/wealthy/middle-class, white/non-white, educated/non-educated, stranger/intimate/acquaintance/family member.)

6) Do you consider violence against women to be widespread in American society?
   - Do you believe it happens more in other places?
   - What characteristics would these "other places" have?

7) Can you describe how our society teaches us about gender roles? (Family, religious institutions, school, media, community values, social mores, history.)

8) How were ideas about gender roles passed down in your family? How did you feel about them? Have your views changed since? How so?

9) Do you connect gender roles with social, economic and political power?
   - If so, do you feel that there is gender equality in our society?

10) What are your thoughts about the causes of sexual violence?

11) Do you believe that sexual violence can be eradicated from a community such as ours?
   - What do you think would have to happen to achieve that?

APPENDIX F

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1) How old are you?

2) What is the highest level of education you completed?

3) How many years have you lived in town?

    - Did you move here from out of state or from within the state?

4) * For how many generations has your family lived in this town?

5) How many brothers and/or sisters did you have growing up, and what number were you?

6) Did you grow up in a two parent household?

    - If not, did you have a relationship with both parents?

7) Are you married?

APPENDIX G

PROFESSIONAL OR VOLUNTEER TRANSCRIBER'S ASSURANCE OF RESEARCH CONFIDENTIALITY

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer, or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, Mary Thompson, shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Mary Thompson, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

Signature Date 04/01/2012

Researcher: Mary S. Thompson Date April 3, 2012