



# “I Had to Make it Safe in My Mind”: Strategizing and Harm Insulation Among Sexual Assault Survivors

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Accepted: 9 January 2025

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## Abstract

**Introduction** Sexual assault remains one of the most underreported crimes in modern society. Survivors of sexual assault often face intense societal scrutiny and judgement for how they choose to navigate their experiences with sexual assault. Such judgments, often informed by oppressive ideologies, expose survivors to continued harm. We examined the strategies survivors used in navigating their experiences with sexual assault, and how survivors developed strategies to insulate themselves from harm.

**Methods** We used Boeije’s constant comparative method to conduct a secondary qualitative data analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews collected between 2018 and 2019 from survivors who were sexually assaulted between the ages of 12 and 17. The sample includes stories from an array of diverse voices across varying gender and racial identities.

**Results** Survivors in this study utilized five distinct strategies to insulate themselves and others from harm: story management, reframing, regulatory, avoidance, and re-direction. The survivor-generated strategies in this study demonstrated the powerful influence of oppression, and wider societal understandings of sex and sexual violence rooted in oppressive ideologies.

**Conclusions** The description of surviving as a process, in relation to sexual assault, assisted us in developing an Activated Strategizing Framework. This framework draws attention to the ways in which systems of oppression infiltrate one’s psyche and shape strategizing processes following a sexual assault or rape, and how the decisions made by survivors are guided by their desire and need for harm insulation.

**Policy Implications** Implications call for research, policy, and practice responses that are informed by survivor experiences and insights, while also reckoning with the influence of oppression on the manifestations of sexual violence and those who labor to survive it.

**Keywords** Sexual assault · Rape · Oppression · Strategies · Coping · Critical race feminism

## Introduction

Sexual violence is one of the most normalized and pervasive forms of violence known to the human experience. Global and domestic prevalence rates continually demonstrate that while sexual violence impacts people of varying social backgrounds, it is a targeted violence against oppressed groups, particularly women and individuals who exist outside of the gender binary (Armstrong et al., 2018; Langenderfer-Margruder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2018). One in five women will experience an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). Incidence of sexual violence and rape in the USA increases for individuals when accounting for the many intersecting identities they occupy (e.g., gender and race)

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within interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., sexism and racism; James et al., 2016; Langenderfer-Margruder et al., 2016; Larson, 2018; Shultz, 2019; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). While sexual violence is a broad term used to capture various forms of unwanted contact (e.g., verbal harassment, inappropriate gesticulation) that is sexual in nature, we focus on rape and sexual assault. Rape is defined as the attempted or completed act of penetration of any part of someone's body, while sexual assault refers to sexual acts committed against someone without their consent, which can include both penetrative and non-penetrative acts (Armstrong et al., 2018). This study uses the term sexual harm to acknowledge the adverse effects of sexual violence, sexual assault, and rape on survivors. We also reference harm generally but qualify our statements when we reference sexual harm specifically.

People who survive a rape or sexual assault may experience both physical and psychic injuries that they must work to heal (Dworkin et al., 2017; Pegram & Abbey, 2019; Ullman & Lorenz, 2019). When survivors choose to engage with formal institutions or systems (i.e., hospitals, criminal legal system) following their assault, they are often exposed to further harm. Secondary victimization, or encounters with institutional actors and others that minimize or negate survivor experiences, is a common occurrence in post-assault interactions (Kennedy & Prock, 2018). Thus, in addition to their injuries, they must also bear the burdens of social derision and disdain for sharing their truth (Kahn et al., 2003). As a result, those targeted by sexual violence are forced to navigate a world where they may have to develop strategies to insulate themselves from further harms. This paper examines the development and utilization of strategies in response to the harm experienced by survivors of sexual assault or rape. We explicitly name and locate the strategizing process exhibited in survivors' stories within a complex multi-level oppressive environment. The strategies used by survivors in this study are identified to illuminate the complexity and obscurity of surviving and thriving as a process.

### Critical Race Feminism, Contexts, and Framings of Sexual Violence

Mainstream cultural discussions on sexual violence often focus on the interpersonal conflicts and antecedents (e.g., substance use; lack of communication; failure to act) that are believed to contribute to its prevalence (Fetters, 2020; Larson, 2018; Percy, 2023; Ullman et al., 2018). Narratives and rape myths that exist within the societal milieu tend to blame survivors for failing to prevent their own sexual assault or rape (Ahrens et al., 2007; Crenshaw, 2003; Huemmer et al., 2018; Larson, 2018). However, there is a long history in critical feminist and gender-based violence literatures that frames sexual violence as a form of structural violence

(Armstrong et al., 2018; Collins, 2000; Davis, 1981; Ritchie, 2017). Structural violence is a synthetic violence that utilizes economic, political, and cultural mechanisms to limit or prevent those who experience it from living a full and abundant life (Lee, 2019). Drawing upon Critical Race Feminist (CRF) theory, we acknowledge sexual violence as a manifestation of structural violence that exists to oppress people with marginalized identities, specifically feminized persons (Wing, 2015). CRF is an intersectional synthesis of critical race, critical legal, and feminist theories that uniquely recognizes the construction of law to maintain oppressive social hierarchies that disenfranchise women and people of color (Wing, 2015). We employed CRF to guide our critical approach to this study. More specifically, we focused on three theoretical components from CRF to examine sexual violence and strategy development: anti-essentialism, multiplicative identities, and spirit injury.

One of the most notable components of CRF is the discussion of *anti-essentialism*. Anti-essentialism operates in CRF as an analytical approach that refutes the idea that there is one essential voice or experience by which other experiences can be evaluated (Wing, 2003). As sexual violence literature has a legacy of centering the experiences of white women (Crenshaw, 2003; Davis, 1981), the guiding tenets of CRF hold us accountable in our commitment to uplifting the diversity of experiences pertaining to sexual violence. In alignment with Black feminist and intersectionality theories (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2003), CRF acknowledges the reality of multiple interlocking systems of oppression that shape social identities and require multidimensional interventions to avoid exclusionary responses and care (Wing, 2003). This acknowledgement aligns with one of the primary objectives of this study, which is to uplift stories of survivors to help inform better care and system responses to sexual violence specific to the unique needs of each survivor. A second component used in this study is *multiplicative identities*, which CRF theorist Adrien Wing defines as the fact that people are indivisible and imbued with multiple levels of consciousness associated with each of their intersectional identities (Wing, 2015). Holding space for multiplicative identities ensures that we acknowledge the full spectrum of identities produced through various social constructs (e.g., race, gender, class, immigration status) and how the social construction of these identities is used to make social hierarchies that increase the likelihood of victimization and cumulative experiences of harm for some individuals (Armstrong et al., 2018). Finally, CRF refers to the sustained and chronic exposure to systematic harms perpetuated against marginalized people as *spirit injury* (Wing & Marchàn, 1993). Spirit injuries are the harms committed against marginalized people that when experienced over time or consistently, can erode their spirit, self-esteem, and well-being (Wing & Marchàn, 1993). The attention to spirit injury in this study

highlights not only the trauma and losses related to sexual violence, but also the continuation of violence as survivors navigate post-assault interactions.

### Strategy Development and Utilization Among Sexual Assault Survivors

Survivors of sexual violence are often making decisions and developing strategies in response to the initial harm created by the rape or sexual assault, while simultaneously and continuously confronting further harm as they attempt to regain power and control (Ullman et al., 2018). Specifically, post-assault interactions with both informal (e.g., family, friends) and formal supports (e.g., police, hospitals) are often infused with oppressive beliefs and attitudes that directly impact how survivors are treated (Armstrong et al., 2018; Koss, 1985; Newins et al., 2018; Wilson & Miller, 2016). Rape myths and sexual scripts are two of the most prevalent oppressive mechanisms externally imposed upon survivors. These mechanisms can be understood as oppressive because their inherent purpose serves to limit survivors' ability to talk about their rape or sexual assault without ridicule and judgement (Larson, 2018). Rape myths (i.e., stereotypical and false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and people who cause sexual harm) and sexual scripts (i.e., socially constructed beliefs about the performance of sex, what qualifies as sexual activity, and how people should behave during sex) confine rape and sexual assault to narrow and often false understandings of those experiences that tend to blame survivors, absolve the person who caused the sexual harm, and minimize or reject the acts of sexual violence (Larson, 2018; Newins et al., 2018; Rossetto & Tollison, 2017; Shaw et al., 2016). Erroneous beliefs about sexual violence, like rape myths and sexual scripts, are so pervasive that they manifest within our institutions (e.g., criminal legal institutions, colleges and universities). For example, Shaw and colleagues (2017) conducted a content analysis of police records and found that police officers often endorsed rape myths and tended to blame rape victims in their official written reports.

Similar to the manifestation of rape myths, sexual scripts, and other oppressive beliefs within our institutions, survivors are also subject to internalizing these same attitudes. The acceptance of and adherence to sexual scripts and rape myths often dictate how survivors make sense of their experiences (Kennedy & Prock, 2018; Newins et al., 2018; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). For example, internalizing oppressive beliefs about sexual violence makes it more difficult for a survivor to perceive and acknowledge their experience as a rape or sexual assault. Termed, "unacknowledged rape," 40–70% of survivors whose experiences meet the legal definition of rape do not initially perceive or label their experience in that way, likely impacting how they process and attempt to heal from it (Koss, 1985; Wilson & Miller,

2016). These internalized untruths can foster feelings of self-blame among survivors, and can encourage more negative social reactions from others (Ullman, 2023). Of course, internalized harmful beliefs about sexual violence that discount its significance or misplace blame do not operate independent of other forms of internalized oppression. Oppressive ideologies, such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism, are associated with higher levels of rape myth acceptance (Aosved et al., 2006; Larson, 2018; McGuffey, 2013). Thus, just as interlocking systems of oppression shape how institutions engage survivors, these systems also weave a tangled web of oppression within survivors themselves, particularly those with multiple marginalized identities, influencing how they perceive their own assault and the harm insulation strategies they choose to employ in response (Koss, 1985; Larson, 2018; McGuffey, 2013; Newins et al., 2018).

The routinely prescribed strategies offered to survivors to legitimize the harm experienced and grant access to structural resources are to seek help and report to formal supports. Yet, the vast majority of survivors choose not to use these strategies; prior research finds that only 5–35% of rape survivors report to police and about 20% seek post-assault medical care (Ahrens et al., 2007; Huemmer et al., 2018; Kahn et al., 2003; Lonsway & Archambault, 2012; Rennison, 2002; Sabina et al., 2012; Shultz, 2019; Zinzow et al., 2012). While the decision to not report to police or seek post-assault medical care is often presented as a failure to act, Huemmer and colleagues (2018) viewed non-reporting as a means to exercise agency and reclaim control in a way that is more aligned with survivors' wants and needs. Indeed, additional research focused on coping and adaptive strategies used by survivors of rape finds that they use various tools, outside of formal supports, to reduce post-assault anxiety, prevent further victimization, and work towards recovery (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979; Ullman et al., 2018). Tsong and Ullman (2018) investigated strategy utilization among Asian American survivors, specifically, and found that they more often used acceptance and self-distraction strategies and were less likely to use humor or denial. However, there remains much to know about the variation of strategies among diverse groups of survivors.

This study explored strategy development exhibited by survivors of rape and sexual assault, while acknowledging the ways oppression informs individuals' responses to being sexually assaulted or raped. Using qualitative analysis, we examined the experiences of 22 survivors of adolescent sexual assault, and the strategies they used to prevent or mitigate the harm they experienced prior to, during, and after their assault. It is hoped that by centering strategies utilized by survivors, we can increase awareness and understanding of multi-layered oppressions within the context of surviving sexual assault. Furthermore, we strive to honor the labor and efforts demonstrated by the survivors in this study to exist

freely in an oppressive world and ascend beyond the harms created by sexual violation. We contribute to further understanding and discussion of post-assault coping and highlight the precarious and difficult choices that many survivors are forced to make in response to sexual harm.

## Methods

The research team engaging in this work all have varying experiences with structural violence, as it manifests as gender-based violence. Our research team comprises of two people who identify as cisgender women and one member who identifies as femme-presenting, and these identities often mark us as likely targets of sexual violence. Our experiences as humans living in a society that normalizes sexual violence impacts how we conceptualize and understand its effects on the people we interviewed for this study. The primary author of this manuscript lives at multiple intersections of oppression as a fat Black and Chicana woman and has been required to develop strategies of her own to navigate structural violence. This gives unique insight and creates a relationship to the data that necessitated continued processing and acknowledgement of potential biases to ensure the stories and experiences of survivors in this study stood on their own. We committed to honoring the lived experiences of the survivors we spoke with and relied on their verbatim quotes to ensure that what we learned was in alignment with the words of each survivor.

The current study was a secondary analysis of qualitative interview data collected in 2018–2019 as part of a larger primary study focused on adolescent sexual assault and mandatory reporting (Shaw et al., 2022). Qualitative interview data derived from 22 semi-structured interviews with survivors of adolescent sexual assault in one Northeastern state. The present study uses these qualitative data for the purpose of investigating additional research questions that specifically look at survivor-generated strategies and was approved by an institutional review board in 2020. Each author was a member of the original research team that collected all the data for the primary study. The first author of this paper also conducted 19 of the 22 interviews with the survivors whose stories inform this study. As members of the original research team, the close relationship to the data allows for more in-depth knowledge of the data collected, familiarity with the participants, and increased understanding of the primary research process that provided the data for this secondary analysis (Heaton, 2008).

## Participants

The data for this analysis originated from 22 interviews with sexual assault survivors that focused on their post-assault

experiences. While interview participants had to have been sexually assaulted when they were between 12 and 17 years old to be eligible for the primary study, most participants had experienced multiple sexual victimizations earlier and later in life and were provided space to speak about any of their experiences. Potential participants learned about the opportunity to participate in the primary study from one of several partnering healthcare, rape crisis, or domestic violence service providers who posted or provided information on the study (see Shaw et al., 2022). In the present study, each participant was given a pseudonym to conceal their identity but also humanize their experience (see Table 1). A significant number of survivors identified as cisgender female ( $n = 16$ ). Several survivors ( $n = 5$ ) identified as gender-expansive, or with a gender identity outside of the male/female paradigm. There was only one self-identified cisgender male in the sample. Many of the survivors in this study self-identified as white ( $n = 15$ ), with one of these participants identifying as white Ashkenazi. The remaining participants identified as Black ( $n = 4$ ), Black and Puerto-Rican ( $n = 1$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ), and Korean, Mixed-Asian heritage ( $n = 1$ ). Participants ranged in between 15 and 55 years of age, with the average age being 26 years old. The educational attainment level in this sample was as follows: still attending high school ( $n = 3$ ), some high school ( $n = 1$ ), high school diploma/GED ( $n = 3$ ), some college ( $n = 4$ ), associate degree ( $n = 1$ ), bachelor's degree ( $n = 6$ ), post-secondary degree ( $n = 2$ ). Two additional survivors were attending graduate school at the time of the interview. Twenty-one survivors were raped or assaulted by someone they knew ( $n = 21$ ). Only one person indicated that they did not know the people who sexually assaulted them. Some survivors were interviewed within a few weeks of the focal assault that made them eligible for the study, and others spoke with us several decades later.

## Primary Study Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews conducted for the primary study were held in a rape crisis center to offer participants additional supports if needed during or following the completion of the interview. All participants were consented/assented at the time of the interview. Parental/guardian consent was required for all participants who were minors ( $n = 3$ ) and was obtained in-person at the time of the interview or via phone. Interviews lasted 1–2 h, and each participant received a \$40 cash stipend for their time. With the participant's consent, each interview was recorded and transcribed. The primary study's interview protocol focused on five areas of interest: (1) what happened in the assault; (2) post-assault disclosure and pathways to post-assault medical care; (3) expectations during the post-assault resource-seeking process, especially as it

**Table 1** Survivor demographics

Survivor pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Age at time of focal assault	Time between interview and assault	Ethnic/racial identity	Gender identity	Relationship to person who caused sexual harm
Amari*	15	13	2–3 years	Black	Female	Relative's boyfriend
Barbara	55	14	41 years	White	Female	Boyfriend's friend and brother's friend
Corinne	35	17	18 years	White	Female	Boyfriend's friends
Demi	25	17	8 years	White	Female	Acquaintance
Erica	22	17	5 years	White	Female	Boyfriend
Faith	16	16	2–4 weeks	Black/Puerto Rican	Female	Strangers
Glen*	39	35	4 years	White	Male	Step-father
Heather	25	17	8 years	White	Female	Classmate
Iris	20	15	5 years	White	Female	Friend
Jordan	19	17	3 years	White	Female-presenting	Casual friend
Kai	20	13	7 years	Mixed race/Korean	Transmasculine	Girlfriend
Laura	21	17	4 years	White	Female	Causal friend
Mary-Beth	21	17	4 years	White	Female	Boyfriend
Miracle	16	15	2.5 months	Black	Female	Casual dating partner
Noel	22	15	7 years	White/Ashkenazi	Gender-fluid	Close friend
Parker*	32	14	13 years	White	Non-binary	Step-parent
Raven	20	14	6 years	White	Female	Casual friend
Sade	35	15	20 years	Black	Female	Casual dating partner
Veronica	22	17	5 years	Hispanic	Female/non-binary	Boyfriend
Wynona	29	13	16 years	White	Female	Close dating partner
Yelena*	13	23	11 years	White	Female	Close family friend
Zora	37	14	23 years	Black	Female	Acquaintance

\* indicates a survivor's focal assault discussed in this study that is characterized by on-going abuse

relates to reporting the assault; (4) survivor experiences with post-assault system personnel such as hospital staff, police, and rape crisis center staff with attention given to the alignment of expectations and actual experiences with identified post-assault system personnel; and (5) what it was like to participate in the research interview, recommendations for future research interviews, and recommendations for system personnel. Sample questions from the primary study's interview protocol included as follows: *In as little or as much detail, can you begin by telling me about what happened when you were assaulted as a teen? Who was the first person to find out what happened? Thinking back to your experiences, what do you think is important for people to know when they are responding to teen sexual assault survivors?* There were no direct questions about strategy development and utilization or related topics. Any indication of strategy development and use within the participants' narratives in this study arose spontaneously in the participant's telling of their experiences. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked specific demographic questions related to social identities (i.e., gender and racial identities) and educational attainment.

## Data Analysis

The first author coded each interview using NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software. This study utilized Boeije's (2002) model for using the constant comparative method (CCM) to analyze qualitative interviews. CCM is a qualitative analytical technique used for code and category development while Boeije's model provides a flexible, data-responsive, five-step process for implementing it (Boeije, 2002; Miles et al., 2014; Tie et al., 2019). This application model of CCM foregrounds the processes of fragmentation and connection through its five steps: (1) comparison within a single interview, (2) comparison between interviews of the same group, (3) comparison of interviews of a different group, (4) comparison among pairs, and (5) comparison between pairs. As our interviews were not dyadic, the present study utilized a three-step process that included as follows: comparison within a single interview, comparison between interviews within the same group, and comparisons between interviews from different groups.



### Comparison Within a Single Interview

An open coding process was used to develop categories and create an initial understanding of strategy development among survivors to inform a provisional coding tree. Specifically, any discussion of strategies or tactics used to mitigate harm were coded and used to inform the provisional coding tree. Next, these codes were compared to find commonalities, discrepancies, and contextual elements of each code. In this stage, the intention was to develop the preliminary categories of strategies. All within interview comparisons were completed for each survivor story while identifying holistic or more general codes, and making annotations to indicate differences among emerging codes and categories as the analysis progressed.

### Comparison Between Interviews Within the Same Group

As codes and categories started to form, they provided provisional codes and categories to begin comparing within the same group; in this study, participants were compared within the contexts of being survivors of adolescent sexual assault that occurred in a specific state-level geographical location. Provisional codes that emerged from the first step in the analysis were modified, revised, deleted, or expanded to accommodate the strategies identified during the analysis of the other interviews of the same experience (Saldaña, 2016). As this step focused on further developing study conceptualization, axial coding was used to refine the codes as they emerged during the open coding or the within interview process (Boeje, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This step focused on further refining and understanding the development and utilization of strategies described in survivors' stories. Specific clusters or types of strategies were formed, with respect to underlying motivations for harm insulation.

### Comparison of Interviews from Different Groups

Consideration was then given to the differences in experiences among survivors from different racial and gender groups. The interviews were viewed as the survivors' accounts in trying to understand their experiences of sexual violence and subsequent development and utilization of strategies post-assault (Sandelowski, 2011). Most of the sample consisted of predominantly white and cisgender women, and that perspective may be overrepresented in code and category development. Critical Race Feminist theory was an essential guiding framework in resisting essentialism and compartmentalization of survivor identities (Wing, 2015). To ensure that minoritized voices were uplifted, and that new strategy types could be identified if evident, the analysis focused on how category types may have differed among survivors of different racial and gender backgrounds.

Another component that was used as a point for comparison was the developmental age of survivors. This was done by comparing survivors who were adolescents at the time of the interview with survivors who were adults at the time of the interview.

The outlined constant comparison method allowed for the re-telling of a collective experience, while ensuring that unique occurrences were highlighted. Throughout the analytic process the codes and categories were discussed with the second author of this article, who was also the principal investigator for the primary study. These discussions were instrumental in ensuring that developed codes remained close to the data and accurately depicted the survivors' experiences within the context of the study.

## Results

Survivors discussed a variety of strategies they developed and used to insulate themselves from the harm experienced because they were sexually assaulted or raped. Strategies were not only created to shield from external harms, such as being blamed or shamed by other people, but survivors also used strategies to alleviate internal psychic pain that emerged following a rape or sexual assault. It was apparent that gender, race, and developmental age were contextual factors that influenced the strategizing process but were not directly observed in survivor stories for each strategy type. Still, variations related to survivors' multiplicative identities are noted when explicitly discussed by survivors. Survivor-generated strategies created pathways to harm insulation, but also offered opportunities to regain power and control. The findings revealed deeper understanding of what motivates the development of certain strategies—in other words, what need was being met and what harm was reduced or eliminated by each strategy. Here, we present a strategizing typology consisting of five types: story management strategies, avoidance strategies, reframing strategies, regulatory strategies, and re-direction strategies. Table 2 shows a concise outline of each strategy and subtype with incidence of appearance within survivor stories. Every survivor used at least one of the outlined strategies observed in this study.

### Story Management Strategies

Story management strategies were the most utilized strategies, with all but one survivor discussing them when sharing their story. The fear of being blamed or shamed for their own victimization was a consistent concern among the survivors in this study. Story management strategies stemmed from the recognition of harm that is potentially created in sharing the experience of rape or sexual assault with others. Story management strategies included choosing not to tell anyone

**Table 2** List of strategies and definitions

Strategy type	Definition	Emergences in survivor stories
<b>Story management</b>	<b>Survivors were intentional and thoughtful about their decision to tell, how to tell, and under that conditions to tell their story</b>	<b>21</b>
Not telling	<i>Survivors elected not share their story with others because they did not feel it was safe, nor were they ready to do so</i>	19
How to tell	<i>Survivors were thoughtful about how to share their stories with others so as not to cause alarm or judgement</i>	14
Conditions for telling	<i>Survivors decided what the desired conditions were to share their stories with others based on their comfort level and desire to prevent further harm to themselves or others</i>	13
<b>Avoidance</b>	<b>Survivors created separation from the internal or external forces of harm to alleviate their suffering and avoid further harm</b>	<b>16</b>
Suppression	<i>Survivors consciously or unconsciously suppressed the memory their assault which limited their ability to acknowledge its occurrence</i>	13
Compartmentalization/ "powering through"	<i>Survivors compartmentalized the feelings and thoughts associated with their assault to continue to participate in their everyday activities and complete responsibilities</i>	7
Physical avoidance	<i>Survivor literally hid or made sure to avoid encountering the people who were causing them harm</i>	4
<b>Reframing</b>	<b>Cognitive reframes utilized by survivors that allowed them to organize their thoughts and perceptions in ways that helped them make sense of their experiences to facilitate effective coping and increased control</b>	<b>13</b>
Absolving others	<i>Survivors reframed their interactions with others in ways that absolved others of blame, placed blame on themselves, or provided reasoning for the harm they experienced</i>	9
Romanticizing the assault	<i>Survivors reframed their assault in ways that were idealistic and in alignment with perceived loving and desirable relationship experiences</i>	5
Something else	<i>Survivors reframed their assault in ways that labeled their experience so that it did not elicit uncomfortable or painful emotions</i>	3
<b>Regulatory</b>	<b>Survivors attempted to regulate aspects of their behavior, the behavior of others, and the contexts of their environment to insulate themselves from anticipated harm or harm that was actively occurring</b>	<b>13</b>
Setting boundaries	<i>Survivors communicated their boundaries to others that outlined the appropriate behaviors, settings, and activities most in alignment with the survivor's well-being and comfortability</i>	9
Self-monitoring	<i>Survivors altered their behaviors, aspects of their identity, and activities to reflect societal norms</i>	5
Shifting behavior	<i>Survivors attempted to influence or shift the behavior of others in ways that adhere to social norms or scripts</i>	2
<b>Re-direction</b>	<b>Survivors re-directed the energetic and emotional remnants produced by sexual violation to another source to alleviate their suffering and avoid continued harm</b>	<b>10</b>
Self-inflicted harm	<i>Survivors engaged in (survivor identified) self-harming behaviors that allowed the survivor to process and work through the aftermath of a sexual assault or rape</i>	9
Replication	<i>Survivors engaged in consensual relationships or behaviors that replicated aspects of their assault in efforts to re-direct control and process the aftermath of a sexual assault or rape</i>	4
Harm to others	<i>Survivor engaged in behavior that harmed others that re-directed the sensations associated with the assault to another source</i>	2

about the assault, deciding how to discuss their assault, and identifying when to use the power of their story. The decision on if, how, and under what conditions (i.e., who and when) to tell their story was where survivors' multiplicative identities became much more salient. The discriminatory beliefs about social identities (i.e., race, gender, and age) proved influential on the ways stories were managed by the survivor.

The most common form of story management was choosing to remain silent about the rape or sexual assault. When survivors chose *not to tell* anyone about what happened, it

was a choice that allowed the survivor to avoid anticipated mockery and blame. Nineteen survivors talked about choosing not to disclose their assault to prevent further harm from occurring. Most of the survivors did not tell anyone immediately after the assault occurred as they were hyper-aware of and concerned about what would happen if they told anyone. Some waited days, and others waited years before they disclosed. Specific contextual nuances informed these choices. One such nuance, or reason for choosing silence, emerged as the "upset the apple cart" concept. This term was introduced by Barbara, a 55-year-old white cisgender

woman who experienced multiple rapes over the course of her life. Survivors in this study considered how disclosing or reporting their assault could impact themselves and others. Essentially, survivors could tell their story and experience social upheaval (i.e., upset the apple cart), or they could keep it a secret and preserve the status quo, keeping everything “normal.” Kai, a 20-year-old transmasculine man with Mixed-Asian heritage who was assaulted by his girlfriend at age 13 years old, talked about all he had to consider when deciding if he was going to tell school staff about being assaulted on school grounds. He shared:

It was, um, it was partially— it was a challenge to masculinity. Um, it also— another part was, like, I didn’t want to, like, um, make— ‘cause, like, we were the only two gay kids in school, and I didn’t want to make, like, gay people look bad, I guess. Um, like, if these are the only two gay kids and 50 percent of them are rapists, like, that’s not a good look for gayness as a— on a whole, um, in like, my relatively homophobic school. Um, I was worried about that.

Kai shows here the complexities that were involved when he was deciding to tell his story. As someone trying to assert his masculine identity at the time, Kai emphasized the additional harm he had to navigate simply because of the intersectional identities he held. Kai had to consider how perceptions of “gay people” could be further impacted by a story of sexual violence. Not only this, but Kai also shared that his girlfriend at the time had not come out, and he felt responsible for keeping her identity concealed from her family. As with Kai’s story, several survivors were concerned with disrupting the life of the person who caused them sexual harm, as many were in relationships with that person. However, Kai’s strategy development and utilization was especially influenced by his gender and sexual identity, and he consistently noted how his identities influenced his experience throughout his interview.

For Kai, Barbara, and other survivors in the sample, to upset the apple cart was to lose social capital and possibly incur more harm to themselves and others. For some survivors, to upset the apple cart with a disclosure was also to risk losing tangible resources that they depended upon. Amari, a 15-year-old Black cisgender young woman, was sexually assaulted by a relative’s boyfriend between the ages of 9 and 13. Amari’s story captures her dilemma critically, she shared:

He drove my [relative] around and like, um, we kind of had to, like, depend on him. But my [relative] mostly, like, she depended on him a lot. And we had to, too, because he’s the only person that had a car. And my mother [Pause] sh-her car, it was like on and off, so. ‘Cause she couldn’t pay the bills, and there was a lot

of car crashes and tickets. So, she just didn’t have a car for a while. And so, we had—I had to depend on him to take me to school, and like [Amari sneezes] excuse me [pause] but um, yeah like, he even had to take my brother to school. Like it was like, we had to depend on him to get around everywhere.

Amari talked about her family’s dependence on her relative’s boyfriend and even though she was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with his behavior, she did not want to take away needed resources from her family. In Amari’s case, there were two important yet competing needs: individual safety and transportation for her family. If she chose to tell, her relative would lose her support system, and her family would lose their reliable transportation. If she didn’t tell she would remain unsafe and would be subject to more abuse. As a 13-year-old, these were the choices she was already forced to contemplate.

Fourteen survivors managed their stories by figuring out *how to tell* others in a way that would minimize alarm, disruption, or judgement. Survivors often did this by describing their sexually violent experience as inconsequential. Demi, a 25-year-old white cisgender woman who was assaulted by an acquaintance at a party when she was 17 years old, shares that she specifically didn’t describe her assault as such because she was still processing it and did not want to upset her friend. Demi recalled walking home with her friend from the party where she was raped:

I started off by saying, ‘I think I had sex.’ Which [pause] is not really a— and I think about it now I’m like, yeah I knew at the time somewhere that something was wrong. Because [pause] I wish I could say, like, I know we— I know I had sex because we talked about it. And, I know that he did th— I know he put on a cond— like, I know he did this. I know he did that. ‘Cause I know she asked me like, ‘oh, did he use a condom?’ I couldn’t—couldn’t tell her. I don’t know if I just blacked that part out or, I don’t know. But I was worried that that would be concerning to her.

Demi noted that she knew something was wrong but was not completely able to verbalize what occurred when telling her friend. However, she knew that her inability to recall events would alarm her friend and perhaps force Demi to confront what happened to her before she was ready.

Finally, survivors discerned *under what conditions* they wanted to share their story. Survivors in this study chose who to disclose to, when to disclose, and where to disclose based on their sense of readiness and safety. Often survivors used the power of their story to promote healing, advocate for themselves and others, and to ensure their story was authentic to their experience. Thirteen survivors discussed the conditions and purposes for sharing their story. Sade, a



35-year-old Black cisgender woman who was raped by her boyfriend when she was 15 years old, talked about how healing it was for her to be able to share her story with a friend:

So, it was, sort of, like, this moment where we both just started talking about what had happened to us. And I felt like— the first time that I felt like safe, because with that story— because, like, she immediately believed me. And, like, just that feeling of, like [pause] being able to, like [pause] just, like, um...have this weight off my shoulders, um, and be honest about something that I, like, literally thought about every day, was really huge for me.

Sade was able to share her story with her friend and heal some of the wounds caused by sexual harm, namely bearing the weight of silence. She was also able to build connection with her friend as they both created a safe space to talk about what happened to them. This was particularly important for Sade, as she was raped by a white person and talked about the racial and class dynamics that initially made her afraid to share her story. She stated “He is white, I am Black. And I felt, like, there was just, like, everything against me, like—and I just didn’t think that anybody would believe me.” For Sade, her Blackness was an additional consideration in her decision to not tell anyone that she was raped. Sade was critically aware of how Black people were treated in society and anticipated that her Blackness would automatically bring in questions around the validity of her experience. Every survivor who identified as Black and one survivor who identified as Asian discussed how their racial identity impacted their strategies related to story management. It is worth noting that only one white survivor discussed their racial identity in relationship to story management, and it was in recognition of their privilege in being able to share their story with others and be believed.

### Avoidance Strategies

Avoidance strategies were those that allowed survivors to avoid harm by not having to confront the internal or external forces of that harm. When possible, being able to avoid harm physically or mentally was a necessary and useful strategy for survivors. Sixteen survivors in this study discussed using avoidance strategies because they did not have the resources, either tangible or intangible, to deal with the harm during certain periods of their post-assault process. Avoidance strategies emerged as suppression, compartmentalization, and physical avoidance.

To insulate themselves from psychic harm, some survivors *suppressed* their assault to continue functioning. Thirteen survivors talked about trying to suppress the memory of the assault and pretending that it didn’t happen. Jordan, a 19-year-old person still discovering their gender identity but

stated that they presented as a woman, was assaulted by a casual friend at the age of 17 years old. They discussed their use of suppression that helped them continue to function in life as they wanted:

Um, I mean, like, at the time, I really didn’t take it seriously, and tried to, like, just, like, forget it and push it away and not think about. And, like, that was my strategy for, like, a really long time. Um, so, like, I just didn’t really take it seriously to myself.

Suppressing memories of the assault was an effective strategy for Jordan until they had the capacity to address their assault. Like all strategies employed by survivors in this study, suppression was not necessarily permanent and could be a temporary strategy until capacities increased and the person was ready to engage.

Some survivors were able to *compartmentalize* their experience with sexual assault but did not have the bandwidth to address the implications of their assault at the time. The seven survivors who used this strategy fully recognized what happened to them, they simply had other responsibilities to contend with. Faith, a 16-year-old Black and Puerto-Rican cisgender young woman who experienced a drug facilitated sexual assault by multiple people while inside a club party, also talked about trying to “forget about it” and move on with her life as she said, “I just have to. I can’t, like, dwell on it because I have a lot of other things going on.” Faith had been assaulted 1 month prior to attending our interview. As Faith notes, the responsibilities of life do not stop once someone is sexually assaulted, and some survivors simply do not have the time or resources to process their assault.

The final avoidance strategy involved survivors *physically avoiding* further interactions with the person who sexually harmed them. This included literally hiding or running from the person who caused them sexual harm, because the person continued to try and interact with them. Four survivors discussed this physical avoidance as a strategy for harm insulation. Laura, a 21-year-old white cisgender woman who was raped by her dormmate, had to continue to stay in the dorm where the person who harmed her also lived. Her dormmate continued to harass her and she had to hide from him in a another dormmate’s room to avoid further violence. She described:

And, like, sure enough he came up [to her room], um, really drunk and was banging on the door. And, um...we just...uh, we stayed there. He found me in-in my friend’s room. And my-my friends were just like, ‘Nope.’ They were, like, these, like, big guys and so they were just like— they’re like ‘No, we’re gonna hang out with her, like, you know, like see you later. Go to bed, see ya.’

Laura was fortunate to have allies in her dorm to advocate on her behalf. Avoidance strategies could be perceived as an unwillingness to address the harm experienced; however, survivors in this study demonstrate the necessity of avoidance strategies in continuing to participate safely in social life.

## Reframing Strategies

Reframing strategies organized the survivors' thoughts and perceptions about their assault in ways that provided relief from harmful thought processes. These reframes helped survivors make sense of their realities in ways that facilitated effective coping and increased control. Thirteen survivors used reframing strategies in their story. When reframing their experience, survivors sometimes absolved the people who harmed them from responsibility, romanticized the assault, or reframed their assault as something else that elicited less harmful thoughts and emotions.

*Absolving others* emerged in this study as a reframing strategy that provided alternative explanations for the harm caused by others. Nine survivors discussed absolving others, which usually manifested as survivors blaming themselves. Absolving the person who caused the harm meant that there must be legitimate reasons for the rape to occur, or for their friends and family to treat them poorly post-assault. Erica, a 26-year-old white cisgender female who was assaulted by her boyfriend at 14 years old, reflects on her process of trying to understand why the person who caused her sexual harm dismissed her obvious distress, she said:

Yeah. And it's, like, oh well, like, he didn't mean it, like, he didn't know. It, like... it's like, oh maybe he didn't know I was crying. Or, like, maybe he just, like, thought it was, like, gagging or something, I don't know. Like, yeah, it's so easy to make those excuses. Um, and I remember, like, he, like, did, kind of, acknowledge I was crying, but, like, not really. And he's like, 'Oh it's just 'cause it was your first time.'

Erica tried to comprehend why her boyfriend ignored her emotional distress and chose to rape her and reframes the assault as a potential accident or misunderstanding, where perhaps her distress did not register to him. Erica also noted her age and limited sexual experience as factors in her understanding and processing of her rape when she was a teenager.

Some survivors *romanticized* their assault which reduced dissonance and allowed them to process the assault and continue to function. This strategy was helpful for five survivors in alleviating psychic pain because it allowed them to frame their experiences in ways that would be understood as loving or desirable. Barbara described being raped by her brother's friend at a gathering when she was 16 years old, and the

confusion that followed which led to her romanticizing the assault. She stated:

And I [pause] was in a relationship with him [brother's friend]. I broke up with [previous] boyfriend. I stayed with him [brother's friend] for two or two-and-a-half years because it was too much for my brain [pause] to think that everyplace I go is not safe. Every person I—every person I think— because he's my brothers' best friend, he'll protect me, he'll take care of me. So, I remember thinking, I must really love him because I had sex with him. I totally dismissed the 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no,' part and um, it was— embarrassed and humiliated for [pause] staying with this guy and how can you, you know, years later say that was rape.

It was more manageable for Barbara to think of the person who raped her as her boyfriend because it allowed her mind to reconcile the internal turmoil that occurred after being raped by a family friend in a setting surrounded by friends. Barbara also shared that she, "couldn't think that there was no safe place to be in the world, so I had to make it safe in my mind." Her ability to *reframe* the assault as a loving sexual encounter and then enter a romantic relationship with that person assisted her in scaffolding a story to help her mind feel safe, which allowed her to function. Barbara was a survivor who had the most time in-between the interview and the assault, which allowed her forty years to reflect on this assault and its meaning in her life. She was able to not only provide exceptional insight into the strategies she employed but was also able to speak directly to why she believed she used specific strategies and made deep connections to her cognitive understandings as a teen.

This next reframing strategy emerged as somewhat disjointed initially. However, among the three survivors who were observed to use this strategy, it was clear that reframing their experience as *something else* helped to provide reprieve from harmful thoughts and emotions that may arise from acknowledgement of rape or sexual assault. This type of reframing strategy did not involve romanticization or feelings of love. Instead, the survivor categorized their experience as something else, which granted them abilities to understand and manage the aftermath. Survivors reframed their assault as just another hook-up, sexual encounter, or something else that made them feel "weird." Heather a 25-year-old, white cisgender woman, who was raped by her classmate described how she reframed her experiences with sexual assault as a skill she possessed in subsequent consensual sexual encounters. Heather shared:

My [laughter-expressing irony] for a while I reclaimed giving oral sex, and my friends and I started calling it the {participant's initial}-special. I'm identifying—

um, but, um—which is bad in itself, um, but I did definitely reclaim it, so that I wouldn't have to go through the process of being forced to again.

By reframing her experience in ways that allowed her to be in control and feel empowered, Heather was able to reduce the harm experienced following multiple sexual violations. Heather stated that she felt empowered but also acknowledged the existing dissonance when she notes that it “was bad in itself” to identify with the rapes she experienced. Reclaiming the act was empowering but also produced conflicting feelings. Again, like other strategies, reframes were not always fixed, they were fluid and sometimes needed further cultivation.

### Regulatory Strategies

Experiences of sexual violence caused instability in the survivors' social environment and within the survivor themselves. To regain stability and prevent the incurrence of further harm, survivors used regulatory strategies. Regulatory strategies involved attempts made by the survivor to regulate their behavior, the behavior of others, or the contexts of their environment to insulate themselves from anticipated harm or harm that was actively occurring. In this study, thirteen survivors used regulatory strategies to regain control and increase a sense of personal safety. Regulatory strategies in this study looked like survivors setting boundaries, engaging in self-monitoring, and shifting behaviors to deescalate violent situations.

*Setting boundaries* was the most common regulatory strategy, with nine survivors discussing their efforts to establish boundaries. Survivors set boundaries with their friends, family, and partners that outlined which behaviors, settings, and activities were agreeable to the survivors' well-being and comfort level. Erica's previous experiences with sexual violence motivated her to begin setting boundaries early in relationships. She shared that she now talks to her partners before they engage in any sexual activity:

So, um, that's something else is, I'm at a place in my life and I'm at a point, in, kind of, like, my journey, where it's, like, 'This is my body and if you don't like the rules around it, like, I'm not gonna compromise them for you.' I've been very fortunate that my past few partners have been very understanding, and really, uh, accommodating and respectful.

Erica let her partners know that she is in control of her body and set boundaries that any potential partner must adhere to. Moving forward this regulatory strategy allowed her to feel empowered to lead in her sexual relationships.

Regulatory strategies that involved *self-monitoring* were used to alter the survivors' behaviors that would better align

with societal norms and subsequently provide insulation from further harm. Five survivors discussed using this type of regulatory strategy. Wynona, a 29-year-old white cisgender woman who was raped by her boyfriend at age 13 years old, talks about how she conformed to what others wanted her to be and what society deemed appropriate to insulate herself from harm. She shared:

So, um... uh, since I had a really hard time having value within myself, since the rape— and, I-I grew up in an abusive home. Um, I spent my time— my mechanism of dealing was, alright, let's watch what society... values, and I'm gonna nail it. So, if society values, a submissive woman, who is good at school, and gets a job, and makes lots of money— because lots of money gives you value in this world, it gives you power. Alright, that's what I'm gonna do. So, that's what I did and I was fine with it.

Wynona's awareness of what norms she needed to follow to align with ideas about femininity and womanhood was information she used to insulate herself from further harm. She chose to emulate what she perceives society values and associates with power to help her deal with feelings of self-devaluation that developed after being raped.

One of the regulatory strategies that was especially enlightening was when survivors attempted to gain control by *shifting behavior* to diffuse increasingly harmful situations. Survivors who used this strategy tried to create a shift in behavior by drawing attention to violations of expected gendered social norms and sexual scripts. This manifested in two survivor stories as survivors attempted to shift the behavior of the person who was attempting to rape them, by appealing to their ego or using humor. Barbara mentioned utilizing this regulatory strategy to simulate attraction to her boyfriend's friend as he was attempting to rape her. She was not attracted to him but felt that appeasing his ego would give him the gratification he needed and perhaps he would abandon the plan to rape her. She shared:

And with him, it took me a long time to realize— because I had a conversation with him, because I was nice to him, because I didn't do anything to hurt him. Um, I just said, 'You know, if you didn't have a girlfriend.' Like I-I did all the right things, that was it. I wasn't stupid that time... And I was nice, and I was— and I didn't say oh, you're a fat slob and I don't want anything to do with you. I was— you know, I said the appropriate—that was me, always be appropriate always be polite, always be nice. And I did all of that.

Barbara, in fighting off an attempted rape, quickly discerned that she needed to try and appease this person to deescalate the violent situation. She simultaneously regulated her own behavior by choosing to be “nice” to him

instead of being able to speak her truth. Additionally, she hoped that by acknowledging that they were in relationships with other people, that might influence adherence to typical sexual scripts where the expectation is that people in committed relationships only have sex with each other. However, what ultimately ended up preventing the assault was Barbara hitting him with the cast on her arm and jumping out of the car.

Laura, who was raped by her dormmate when she was 17 years old, similarly tried to shift his behavior by drawing attention to hygiene related sexual scripts. As he attempted to rape her, Laura tried to diffuse the tension and encourage calm. She explains how she attempted to shift his behavior by... “trying to make jokes about it. I was saying like, ‘You know, like, I’m—I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet this morning, like, I’m in my pajamas, like, what are you doing?’”. The shifting behavior strategies used by both Barbara and Laura demonstrate how much sexual behavior is regulated by social norms, scripts, and expectations. Both Barbara and Laura were cognizant that challenging a violent man could escalate the situation, and both believed that by being non-threatening they could escape being raped. Additionally, both survivors tried to get the person to recognize that sex under the current contexts was in violation of expected or normalized sexual encounters. Their strategy development and utilization capture the dynamism of strategizing as a process and shows how strategizing sometimes occurred amidst the assault.

### Re-direction Strategies

The final type of strategies that emerged was re-direction strategies. While re-direction strategies were the least observed in survivor stories, they still emerged among ten survivors. Rape is an experience that creates certain ideas about a person, and it can generate psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual pain. Survivors are left with the intense energetic remnants of such an experience and are then challenged to re-direct that energy to prevent further harm. The purpose of re-direction strategies for survivors is to re-direct those energetic remnants produced through acts of sexual violence and re-align it in ways that honor the survivor’s humanity, body autonomy, and right to personal safety. In this study, the re-direction strategies that emerged involved self-inflicted harm, replication, and harm inflicted onto others, which allowed survivors to re-direct the pain absorbed from sexual harm as a means of preventing further harm and exercising their agency.

Nine survivors used re-direction strategies in the form of *self-inflicted harm* as a part of their process in mitigating the difficult emotions and sensations associated with the experience of being raped or sexually assaulted. Self-harm of self-injurious behavior is typically defined as individuals

willingly engaging in behavior that causes physical pain and suffering (LaGuardia-LoBianco, 2019). But self-harm manifests in many ways beyond physical injury, and some of those manifestations appeared in survivor stories. For example, this included forms of self-sabotage, getting into harmful relationships, engaging in sexual behavior that survivors categorized as harmful, abusing substances, or trying to hurt themselves through attempting suicide. Re-direction strategies allowed some survivors to process the harm they experienced through self-harming activities or behaviors. Corinne, a 35-year-old white cisgender female, was raped by three of her classmates while at a social gathering when she was 17 years old. She shared how she channeled the pain from the harm she experienced and turned it inward:

Um, [pause 7 seconds] and-and I [sigh] [pause] so much of the road to recovery was-was control. And [pause] you know, being, like, very much, like, the honor student type A, like, I was already a control freak, and then I lost control of my entire world. And so, regaining control was very— there was a lot of thrashing going on to do that. And some of it was, like, going out and fucking around with a ton of people, and making a ton of stupid mistakes and, like, getting myself in abusive relationships, ‘cause then I wasn’t the bad guy anymore. I was dating someone who was the bad guy instead. And, and it took me years to realize that’s what all that behavior meant, and that’s how I was trying to regain control.

Corinne talks about “thrashing” or needing to do things that may be harmful to yourself that help you to re-direct feelings associated with loss of control. As Corinne states, it took her several years to gain awareness of the motivations behind her behavioral choices, as a young person she just knew it helped her feel more in control.

Re-direction also occurred through *replication* where the survivor processed sexual trauma by engaging in consensual relationships or activities that mirrored some of the dynamics of their assault. The utilization of replication as a strategy emerged in four survivor stories. Yelena, a 23-year-old white cisgender woman who was raped by a close relative’s friend, when she was 15 years old, described how she was trying to manage the pain of being raped by replicating parts of her assault through consensual encounters that allowed her to remain in control. She shared how she recognized this pattern through another relationship:

Um, but, he [boyfriend at the time] would always tell me I was, um, like, too sensitive and too [pause] like [pause] needy, and like, all these different things. And I definitely see it now, like, I-I— I wanted him to be a replica of that older man. And then— and I-I— it took me a long time to know that’s what it was. I just

thought like, he's a shitty boyfriend. And then, like, a couple years ago, I was like, hmm, [hollow laughter] that's probably more of what it was.

This took much effort and self-awareness for Yelena to recognize how the strategy she used stemmed from her past experiences with rape as an adolescent. Corinne and Yelena were able to understand how replicating the dynamics of their assault in consensual interactions allowed them to regain control, but only upon years of reflection. Replication also emerged in discussion of rape fantasies. Two survivors discussed consideration of rape fantasy play, which could be viewed as re-directing feelings associated with loss of power to restoration of both power and control. Wynona shares that she discussed rape fantasies with partners and shared with them that “a lot of people, like, have, like rape fantasies, to kinda, take back. Like, process it and stuff.” As with other survivors who used re-direction strategies, the replication of violence to transcend the violence committed against one's body is complex, but nonetheless may be effective in insulating against harm for some survivors.

Only two survivors did things that *harmed others* to reduce their suffering and avoid continued harm. When harming others, the survivors were defending themselves. Zora, a 37-year-old Black cisgender woman who was raped by an acquaintance at the age of 14 years old while she was incapacitated, had no memory of the rape itself. Upon being informed by a friend that the person who raped her was stating that he had consensual sex with her, Zora was left with confusion, anger, and what she felt was a tarnished reputation. She then took it upon herself to change that experience and re-claim her power and identity as someone who is not to be violated. Zora explained how she used violence as a re-direction strategy:

I don't feel like a victim in that situation. 'Cause I punched the shit out of that n\*\*\*a, I got a few good hits. He remembered me after that. And he never fucked with me again. No hi, no bye, no pushing, no none of that. I grew up in a rough neighborhood where the boys would pick on the girls a lot. I beat a lot of n\*\*\*\*s asses in my lifetime. I used to fight only boys, I didn't fight girls.

Zora re-directs the harm she experienced by inflicting bodily harm onto the man who raped her as an adolescent. Zora shares that in her neighborhood sexual violence was a common experience among young girls who lived there. She reported that girls who had been assaulted were egregiously labeled as “demos” or people who could be exploited for the sexual gratification of others. Zora was aptly aware of the neighborhood culture and strategized how to prevent further violence or harm that may have followed after the story of her assault became more widely known. This strategy

allowed Zora to demonstrate her power and authority to her community while also communicating to others that her body was not subject to violence without penalty.

## Discussion

The stories shared in this study create opportunities for further understanding of the strategies that survivors used to insulate themselves from the harm they experienced. We explored strategy development purposed for survival, healing, and harm-insulation, while recognizing the omnipresent influence of oppression and structural violence on the identified strategies. Our findings showed five types of strategies: story management, avoidance, reframing, regulatory, and re-direction strategies. These strategies emerged within the context of sexual violence and were developed and used by the survivors in this study during specific moments in response to sexual harm and other associated harms. While there was variation in the strategies used and contexts in which they were employed, the strategies served the same purpose—to mitigate or prevent harm from occurring.

### Claiming the Power and Importance of Survivor Stories

Story management strategies were the most common strategies employed by survivors. These strategies allowed survivors to exercise their agency and control in deciding if, how, and under what circumstances they shared their story. In this study, *not telling*, at least initially following their assault, was the most utilized story management strategy. This is an important observation because many times not telling is perceived as inaction on the part of survivors. This study aligns with other research that finds this is not the case (Ahrens et al., 2007; Huemmer et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2018). Whether to tell or not tell was an intentional and thoughtful decision that many survivors made to protect others and themselves. For example, the anticipation of scrutiny was ever present as survivors decided whether to tell their story. There was a consistent understanding among survivors in this study that there exists an essential survivor experience. The myth of such an experience haunted survivors by creating a disempowering false narrative to which many survivors in this study felt beholden. While each story in this study demonstrates that there is no such thing as an essential survivor experience or “perfect” survivor, participants understood that any deviation from this false narrative could invalidate one's story or open one's story to harsh evaluation. Thus, a decision to not tell allowed them to maintain ownership of their story and insulate them from harm. Similarly, when survivors were ready and willing to tell their story, they again did so to prevent further harm

to themselves or others. Indeed, many survivors agreed to participate in this study to share their stories in hopes of alleviating or preventing the pain of others—they thought that sharing their story could help others feel less alone (Shaw et al., 2024). Thus, while different survivors made different choices—to disclose, to not disclose, or to disclose under very particular circumstances—each disclosure decision was made intentionally to mitigate harm.

CRF reminds us that it is not at all surprising that specific story management strategies employed to reduce harm were different across survivors, and for the same survivors at different points in time. This variation among the survivors in our sample demonstrates the importance of anti-essentialism in allowing for and validating the full complexity of surviving sexual assault or rape (Swanson & Szymanski, 2020; Wing, 2003). This variation in utilization of story management strategies also makes apparent the influence and importance of survivor's multiplicative identities. As CRF states, individuals are holistic beings, therefore survivors do not experience sexual harm in a vacuum, it is connected to who they are and the intersections they occupy within interlocking systems of oppression (Wing, 2015). We observed this directly as survivors discussed their selection and use of story management strategies in relation to their racial identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. We also observed the influence of age and lived experience as survivors' strategies changed and evolved over time. This evolution appeared to be a function of their developmental growth that helped to facilitate reflection (e.g., see Spencer & Swanson, 2013), as well as adolescent survivors' unique position within adultist systems that make many of their decisions dependent on the actions of adult caregivers and other authority figures (Bailey et al., 2024).

### Recognizing the Labor of Surviving

Reframing, regulatory, and avoidance strategies provide exceptional insight into the labor required of survivors to insulate themselves from harm following a rape or sexual assault while also grappling with internalized oppression. Reframing, regulatory, and avoidance strategies illustrate how internalized oppression shapes cognitive and behavioral responses to sexual violence in a way that reifies oppression through labor distribution (David & Derthick, 2014; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Survivors (i.e., people who are oppressed) bear the burden of regulating their own thinking and behavior to avoid others inflicting harm upon them; that onus should fall on those inflicting harm (i.e., the oppressor). However, in an oppressive society, the people who are oppressed shoulder this labor, as the perpetual management of their own behavior is normalized, and too often, this labor remains the only means for any reprieve from harm (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Reframing strategies allowed survivors to perceive the people and situations related to their assault with alternative perspectives that alleviated mental anguish, albeit temporarily. Barbara talks about “making it safe” in her mind so that she could continue to operate in a world where danger was not around every corner. By utilizing reframes, Barbara and other survivors take up the necessary labor to create a different reality where the rape or sexual assault did not occur, thus keeping them safe within their environment, relationships, and even in their own mind. Regulatory strategies were motivated by survivor's inherent recognition that safety was not guaranteed, and that to obtain safety they needed to monitor and coordinate their own, and even others' behaviors. Instead of expecting or demanding others to labor towards change, survivors assumed control and ownership of their own safety by creating boundaries and living inconspicuously by tailoring their own behavior to mirror societal expectations. Regulatory and reframing strategies show just how harmful oppressive ideologies like rape myths and sexual scripts can be, because survivors often evaluated their thoughts and behaviors using warped ideas about sex, sexuality, and sexual violence permeating societal culture (Larson, 2018; Rossetto & Tollison, 2017; Ullman et al., 2018). The significant labor required of survivors was further evident in their utilization of avoidance strategies. These strategies demonstrated how exhausting it can be to hold space for healing post-assault, but also then be expected to continue to live in a society that demands consistent engagement with other social apparatuses. Surviving rape has emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and social costs. Hence, avoidance strategies were about prioritization and reserving resources to recover from current and potential losses, while increasing insulation from harm. Faith pointedly brings attention to the costs by stating that she could not focus on her assault because there were other priorities in her life that required her labor; other survivors mentioned the privilege in having the time and resources to focus on healing.

In CRF, spirit injury refers to the persistent and often incremental disregard for the humanity in others (Williams, 1987). The intentional erosion of the human spirit—and resistive embodiment of one's humanity—is evident in survivors' stories, especially in their use of regulatory, reframing, and avoidance strategies. Survivors employing strategies that allow them to hold on to their sense of self-worth, desire to live in a safe world, or simply for the right to pursue a life that makes them happy is an attestation to the many mechanisms in place that extend the suffering after a rape or sexual assault. Spirit injury, and survivors' attempts to survive it, highlights the labor of survival, but also significantly gives voice to the collective participation occurring in our society that makes strategizing necessary (Williams, 1987; Wing & Merchán, 1993).



## Reconceptualizing Maladaptation and Honoring Survival

The least observed strategies were re-direction strategies. This is a unique contribution because it forces the reconceptualization of behaviors that are often viewed as maladaptive. The psychology of oppression describes how we recreate our deleterious relationship with our oppressors in other relationships because while the oppression is harmful, it is known to us and makes us feel safe. In their book entitled *Native American Post-Colonial Psychology*, Duran & Duran (1995) declare that the self-inflicted harm exhibited by oppressed people are efforts made to metabolize intense pain that cannot be exerted against their oppressors. Anger, rage, and other emotions following spirit injury that cannot be fully expressed create opportunities for the dynamics of oppression to be reproduced in relationships with the self and with others (Davis, 1981; Duran & Duran, 1995; Kaba, 2021). Re-direction strategies reveal survivors doing what they felt was necessary to regain control of their bodies, mind, and spirit. Zora's and Corinne's stories show that sometimes the behaviors others may judge unfairly can be the concerted efforts of a survivor trying to transmute a great harm. Zora choosing to punch the person who raped her, or Corinne engaging in various "risky behaviors," were a part of their process of re-direction. Whether it be through retaliation or "thrashing," each survivor desired to reclaim their power and control in ways that were necessary and meaningful to them.

Re-direction strategies invite a different conceptualization of what it means to be anti-essentialist in our understanding of what healing looks like, especially in recognition of the chronic and devastating effects of spirit injury after rape or sexual assault. Anti-essentialism challenges analyses that would view survivor experiences through a fragmented lens that ignores the nuance and complexities of their survival (Crenshaw, 2015; Harris, 2003). It was anti-essentialism that inspired a departure from viewing survivor strategies as maladaptive, because survivors were actually adapting to the intensity of spirit injuries that produced feelings of rage and anger after sexual harm, and subsequent harm following their assault (Duran & Duran, 1995). The losses both actual or potential, produced through spirit injury or chronic harm, made re-direction strategies an adequate method of reclamation.

### The Activated Strategizing Framework

The survivors in this study, and the works of several notable Black Feminist and oppression scholars (David & Derthick, 2014; Davis, 1981; Duran & Duran, 1995; Collins, 2000; Hooks, 2001; Lipsky, 1987; Scott, 1991; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), helped conceptualize a harm-insulation process we

labeled as *activated strategizing*. Activated strategizing captures the process where the accumulation of resources, knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by the survivor (i.e., survival instincts, resiliency, worldviews, spiritual assets) are "activated" by stressors produced through collusive forms of oppression (i.e., structural, interpersonal, internalized), and then used to create a protective strategy. The use of the term "activated" was intentionally used to describe the many moments where survivors instantaneously or gradually assessed their situational contexts and identified strategies to use for harm insulation. Activated strategizing acknowledges not only the innovation and efforts survivors demonstrate in the development of these strategies, but also draws attention to the continuous "activation" occurring when living in an environment marred by oppression (Lipsky, 1987). This framework is concerned with the source of "activation" (i.e., the structurally violent nature of sexual violence), with who consistently is being "activated" or forced to navigate sexual violence (i.e., those who are targeted with this violence), and finally what is being "activated" (i.e., strategy types) in response to experiencing sexual harm. By using this framing, we recognize strategy development as a dynamic process influenced by temporality, context, available resources and capacities, and finally relational factors (Maslow, 1943).

The Activated Strategizing Framework is intended to honor the processes of surviving, and even thriving, after sexual harm. During the process of reflecting on survivors' stories in this study, it became increasingly clear that paths to healing are non-linear and surviving is riddled with complexities that are not immediately discernible. In developing this framework for conceptualizing survivor's post-assault strategies, it was important to us to eliminate judgement of the ways survivors chose to navigate and heal from harm, especially when we account for the reality of oppression in our society. This framework foregrounds survivors' agency and self-knowledge that informs their decision-making processes. The intensity and impact of the harm experienced is, and necessarily must be, determined by the survivor, and thus so is selection of the necessary strategy to attend to it. However, it is vital to acknowledge that oppression saturates our systems and ideologies. Therefore, we expected, and observed in this study, that oppression impacts survivors' perceptions of self, their assault, and subsequent strategy development (Lipsky, 1987; Scott, 1991). In a discussion with Adrienne Maree Brown on the #MeToo movement and transformative justice, Mariame Kaba reminds us that we must be vigilant in recognizing the ways that systems live within us, and that until our society reckons with this, we won't be able to "make a dent in this problem" (Kaba, 2021). This means that because oppression exists, there must be a mindfulness about what is feeding our perceptions and decision-making, especially after harm is experienced. Still,

survivors in this study labored in struggle to find their truth and pursued safety and healing in ways that honored their desired timing and outcomes.

While we were able to identify different types of strategies, we reiterate that this framework highlights the specific strategies identified in these 22 survivor stories and is not an exhaustive list of all strategies used by survivors of sexual assault and rape. Reflective of Critical Race Feminist theory, this framework acknowledges the influence of spirit injuries resulting from rape and secondary victimization (Wing & Merchán, 1993), but also recognizes the processes of mending led by survivors themselves, and sometimes by trusted supporters. Additionally, the necessity of strategy development to avoid sexual harm and the continued harm that follows is oppression manifested and directly impacted the well-being of the survivors. Activated strategizing highlights and honors the efforts made by survivors in this study, but more proficiently illustrates the landscape that survivors must traverse to experience their lives in ways that honor their humanity and dignity.

### Limitations and Future Research

There are several considerations that should be noted for continued engagement with this study and future research in this area. First, the initial research questions did not address strategy development related to the experiences of sexual assault and rape as this was a secondary data analysis of qualitative data. While this method is not considered a limitation, it did, however, shape the depth of this analysis. Specifically, this study relied on spontaneous discussions of survivor strategies for navigating harm, meaning there were not additional opportunities to explore survivors' strategy development in more detail as the primary study methods were chosen to require the least amount of labor for survivors. However, the use of secondary analysis of qualitative data to explore concepts that arose within the data is a common approach and can yield more nuanced understanding of the initial research objectives (Hinds et al., 1997). In this case, the findings were able to illuminate the strategies used by survivors specific to harm insulation. Future research could use the Activated Strategizing Framework to expand or amend the purported typology among other samples of sexual assault survivors.

Second, we used activated strategizing to acknowledge the role of oppression in how survivors respond to sexual violence and develop strategies to experience less harm. However, it is necessary to explore this topic with more intersectional experiences. While we honored intersectionality and multiplicative identities in the framing of our analysis, the sample was predominantly white cisgender women. We were fortunate to speak with several survivors who self-identified as Black, Asian, or Hispanic, and other survivors

who identified as queer or gender expansive. Survivors occupying varying intersections within interlocking systems of oppression are certainly “activated” by various forms of oppression and must develop multi-layered strategies that address their needs. For example, Kai and Sade both discussed their marginalized locations as direct influences on whether they decided to tell their stories. Racial identity has been shown to be a determining factor in how survivors choose to navigate their post-assault process (McGuffey, 2013). To more fully understand the variation of strategies employed by survivors and under what conditions, it is important for future researchers to examine harm insulation strategies among diverse survivor samples. We believe analyses documenting strategizing differences across or within groups would be beneficial to expanding the research on strategy development in response to sexual harm.

As indicated in our methods, respondents were selected based on their experiences with sexual assault when they were 12–17 years old. With the acknowledgement of multiplicative identities, a CRF framing would call us to recognize that sexual assault experiences are qualitatively different when they occur across varying developmental periods and age groups within adultist systems (Bailey et al., 2024; Wing, 2003). This raises temporal dimensions that should be considered when engaging with this research and attended to more critically in future research. Although survivor perceptions and decisions were evidently influenced by their developmental age at the time of their adolescent assault (Spencer & Swanson, 2013), their reflections on past decisions and perceptions sometimes mirrored their adult selves. Still, it is important to share that some survivors specifically talked about the influence of their age and limited agency to make decisions for themselves without an adult or caregiver. The impacts of adultism and the extent to which young people can navigate their post assault experiences were not able to be captured as intentionally in this study, but other work is beginning to uplift adultism as a significant oppressive experience in relation to sexual violence (Bailey et al., 2024). In alignment with research that focuses on the diversity of multiplicative identities, future research should continue to interrogate adultism within system responses to sexual assault that impact adolescent survivors (see Bailey et al., 2024).

Beyond these specific recommendations that are informed by the current study's limitations, future research and scholarship should continue to name and investigate the fundamental role of oppression in creating the necessity for strategies outlined in this manuscript. The application of this typology and accompanying framework could offer additional insights into the strategies used by survivors of other forms of structural violence. Of course, structural violence manifests in a multitude of ways and it is important that we do not to overgeneralize the experiences and impacts of it.

However, we know that structural violence has its origins in oppression and that different forms of oppression rely on the same mechanisms to function (Pharr, 1997). This may suggest that survivors of other forms of structural violence (e.g., police violence) may use similar strategies (Harris & Amutah-Onukahga, 2019). We developed the Activated Strategizing Framework to foster empathy and understanding for survivors and the myriad of decisions they make, knowing each decision is made intentionally to mitigate harm. In exploring whether this framework can be applied to survivors of other forms of structural violence, we can examine the extent to which the same or different strategies are employed across contexts. Furthermore, adopting or exploring the Activated Strategizing Framework in whole or in parts across different samples and settings invites us to account for the insidious nature of oppression and the humanity in those who are subject to it (Collins, 2000; Wing, 2015).

### Implication for Policy and Practice

We believe our recommendations for future research can be useful for policymakers and practitioners, especially those recommendations that call for the naming of oppression in understanding sexual violence and survivor-generated strategies. However, policymakers and practitioners are in unique positions to not only understand, but respond directly to the needs of survivors. Therefore, we offer three recommendations to strengthen policy- and practice-based interventions. First, we encourage policymakers to heed the anti-essentialist and anti-oppressive stance put forth in the Activated Strategizing Framework. Sexual violence is perceived, understood, and navigated differently based on one's intersectional experiences (McGuffey, 2013; Shultz, 2019). Thus, practice- and policy-driven interventions should address survivors' multiplicative identities and experiences. For example, in our study, Kai talked about how his transmasculine and mixed-raced identities made him a target for sexual violence, but also made it more difficult to find resources and supports that met his specific needs due to services being tailored for white, cisgender women. Even when culturally specific services are developed, they can invoke and default to what intersectional feminism refers to as the "implicit prototype" (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Researchers that focus on a specific marginalized group can often essentialize individuals who hold privileged statuses in relation to other aspects of identity. For example, "heterosexual cisgender men of color are the implicit reference group in research on race and racism" (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017, p. 504). Culturally specific or group-specific sexual assault policies, services, and programming have the potential to default to a similar implicit prototype such that a program offering services to Asian American survivors, for example, may design services with heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied

Asian American women in mind. Such programming, interventions, or policies continue to leave survivors like Kai in the margins. As such, it is critical that interventions and resources are designed to address the needs of survivors with multiplicative experiences, while accounting for the ways systems of oppression compounds the effects of such violence (Crenshaw, 2015; Wing, 2015).

Second, one of our most pressing offerings for policymakers and practitioners who respond to sexual violence is to be mindful of framing survivors and their choices in ways that recognize their agency, imbued knowledge, and power in forging their own path towards healing and restoration (Solórzono & Yosso, 2002; Wing & Merchán, 1993). Some of the strategies used in this study would be categorized as maladaptive (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979; Dworkin et al., 2017; Spencer & Swanson, 2013) and could be discouraged by clinicians and other professionals that respond to survivors. However, the judgement of survivors' strategies should be postponed until a critical awareness and comprehension of the role that structural mechanisms play in necessitating the types of strategies outlined in this study has been fostered (Shultz, 2019). Certainly, once such awareness and comprehension is acquired, such judgments will likely be moot. Reservation of judgement and a critical, comprehensive, contextualized understanding of survivor experiences can help create survivor-centered policy changes and interventions. For example, policy implementations in states like California and New York provide survivors with "lookback windows," albeit temporarily, to pursue legal recourse for sexual harm experienced that was previously prohibited under statutes of limitation (Wigdor, 2023). While there is a need to expand beyond legal system responses to sexual harm, these temporary policy allowances support survivors' use of story management strategies by providing survivors a chance to share their story on their own terms and receive possible reparations.

Finally, we encourage further increased conscious awareness and educational opportunities for both policymakers and practitioners to understand the nature and manifestation of internalized oppression. Empowered by the survivors in this study, we spoke candidly about rape myths and sexual scripts, as well as other forms of oppressive beliefs. The internalization of such beliefs can be a deterrent or barrier to seeking out resources or even fostering self-support among survivors of sexual violence. Practitioners with a keen awareness of internalized oppression strengthen their ability to help survivors identify possible influences of internalized oppression. This can build a survivor's capacity to make decisions rooted in their truth as opposed to false truths used to normalize and undermine sexual violence (i.e., rape myths, sexual scripts). Policymakers can also be adamant in resisting the construction of policy that is influenced by oppressive beliefs or that punish survivors

who are still working through the internalization of those beliefs. If one thing could be discerned from these findings, it would be that survivors were always trying to make the best choices that would ensure their survival and reduce their risk for continued harm (Ahrens et al., 2007; Kahn et al., 2003). Because safety is an essential human need, the constant threat to personal safety, especially following an incidence of sexual violence, makes harm insulation and prevention strong motivators for behaviors and strategies (Maslow, 1943). Therefore, it would be restorative and beneficial to both survivors and responders to consider the Activated Strategizing Framework in creating survivor centered responses.

## Conclusion

In the documentary, *On the Record*, music producer and survivor of sexual assault, Drew Dixon spoke of the burden that survivors carry when she said “The words are on your mouth. You’re the one who has to disgust the world.” Society often fails to recognize the cruelty placed on survivors for telling the truth and forcing us all to contend with the reality of our world. The strategies created by survivors in this study showed their ability to navigate extremely complex situations and systems, but also demonstrated their capacity to care for themselves and others by making the effort to prevent or reduce further harm. Any attempt to support survivors of sexual assault must recognize and understand what they live through and be responsive in ways that alleviate harm rather than continuing to perpetuate it.

**Author Contribution** All authors contributed in varied degrees to study conception and design. All authors participated in study procedures and data collection. Abril Harris conducted the analysis and Jessica Shaw contributed significantly to refining and reviewing the analysis in its final steps. The first draft and subsequent drafts were written by Abril Harris, with Jessica Shaw and Caroline Bailey supporting in the revision process. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding** This project was supported by Grant No. 2017-SI-AX-0001 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, US Department of Justice.

**Data Availability** Due to the nature of the research and ethical commitments, supporting data is not available.

**Code Availability** Codes are not available due to ethical commitments.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** Not applicable.

**Consent to Participate** Each participant provided verbal and written consent to be included in this study. Parents of participants who were minors at the time of data collection provided either written or verbal consent.

**Consent to Publish** Not applicable.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Disclaimer** The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

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