

Culturally Diverse Female-Identified Students Discuss Sexual Assault Policies: Dialectics of Safety/Danger

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Abstract

This article presents dialectical themes that emerged from the grounded theory analysis of 42 focus groups about university sexual assault policies held at four universities in Nova Scotia, Canada. Fourteen cultural communities were represented. Data from female-identified focus groups representing five cultures is deployed to exemplify dialectical themes. When it comes to university sexual assault policies and services, students navigate conflicting needs for disclosure and privacy, justice, and protection. These tensions are intersectionally shaped by gender and culture. Our analysis and recommendations can inform practitioners, including social workers, as they support survivors/victims, particularly of campus sexual violence, in navigating the complexities of decisions about seeking support and/or justice.

Keywords

cultural competence/cultural humility, female faculty/students, gender-based violence, intersectionality, mental health

Introduction

A push for campus sexual violence/sexual assault (henceforth SV/SA) policy creation and reform emerged in Nova Scotia, Canada, in the 2010s after campus SV incidents were highlighted by mainstream media (Backhouse et al., 2015; Haiven, 2017; Mahon, 2014; Pace, 2017). The Province of

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Nova Scotia and the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents (2019) responded with guidelines and recommendations for stand-alone policies to direct and inform campus communities regarding SV/SA supports and investigative processes. Considering cultural differences among university students is crucial to developing campus SV/SA policies. The provincial guidelines and recommendations highlight the importance of cultural considerations but lack guidance on culturally responsive policy reform. Most US research examining students' perspectives on SV/SA has used culturally undifferentiated samples (Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2015), and the same is true in Canada. Definitions, perceptions, and consequences of SV/SA vary culturally (Boy & Kulczycki, 2008; Chan, 2009; Contreras et al., 2010; Dussich, 2001; Equality Now & Dignity Alliance International, 2021; Ilkkaracan, 2015). The Culture and Perspectives on Sexual Assault Policy (CAPSAP) study, which generated this article, deployed student focus groups to identify approaches that would render campus SV/SA policies and services more adequate to culturally diverse campus communities. Cognizant that gender is constructed differently across cultures, we applied an intersectional feminist perspective (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991) that focused methodologically on interactions between gender and culture characterizing participants' perspectives. Since most participants were international students, concerns specific to international student status also emerged among our results.

As one element of our findings, based on female-identified (henceforth, female) participant input, this article suggests decisions about engaging with SV/SA policies and services made by student survivors/victims may unfold dialectically in relation to conflicting needs. We explore tensions between the imperatives of disclosure and privacy and of justice and protection. Such conflicts may cause survivors/victims to dangle in liminal space following SV/SA experiences.

Literature Review

Dialectics has been defined by Bhaskar (2008) as "the art of thinking the coincidence of distinctions and connections" (p. 180). Rooted in both Eastern and Western traditions (Dafermos, 2018; Lister, 1997; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), the concept of dialectics appears in social research, including intercultural communications (Cheong & Gray, 2011; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Rodriguez, 2002), as well as psychology. For example, the Safety/Danger Dialectic developed in psychoanalytic literature suggests treatment progresses more effectively when analyst and analysand experience subjective safety and are willing to take risks. Thought processes regarding safety and danger appear within both the Disclosure/Privacy and Justice/Protection dialectics that organize our Findings section. Safety includes "freedom from anxiousness about possible bad outcomes (shaming, guilt, criticism, intrusion, conflict, etc.)" (Segalla, 2018, p. 582), whereas victim blaming reduces the likelihood of disclosure and reporting (Edwards et al., 2011). Like "safety," "trust" augments willingness to share. Individuals weigh interpersonal risks before deciding how to interact (Edmonson, 2004). Similarly, protection motivation theory (PMT) suggests individuals assess threat severity against their own vulnerabilities (Rogers et al., 1983), hence survivors/victims will choose to remain silent when they determine doing so will reduce danger and their fears.

Trauma and danger are related in that trauma can be experienced as helpless exposure, whereas subjective danger anticipates potential trauma (Sandler, 1960). "Institutional betrayal" occurs when "trusted or important institutions [...] respond negatively to traumatic events, such as sexual violence" (Smith & Freyd, 2017, p. 1118). Concepts of cultural safety and unsafety are also relevant. Practices detrimental to "the cultural identity and well-being of an individual" (Brown et al., 2016, p. 200) are considered culturally unsafe. Cultural safety is fostered by caregiver awareness of their own culture, cultural differences, and power relations. Female refugees to the US have reported a sense of danger in education or law enforcement contexts resulting from prejudice, lack of cultural

understanding, and language barriers. In contrast, members of this population also report feelings of increased safety that may result from escaping danger and/or idealizing the new culture (Semplak et al., 2008).

Disclosure/Privacy Dialectic

Most college students disclose SV to an informal support person rather than seeking formal support within the university (Branch & Richards, 2013; Chen & Ullman, 2010; Halstead et al., 2017; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Sabina & Ho, 2014). A great deal of research in this area focuses on barriers to disclosing SV/SA, with little highlighting conflicted feelings about or motivations for disclosure. Survivors/victims disclosing to friends, family, or romantic partners, often aim to gain emotional support such as reassurance that everything will be okay, being told it was not their fault, or having someone listen without judgment (Ahrens et al., 2007; Browne, 1991). Disclosures may be made to formal organizations to access direct help, accommodations, or advocacy (Demers et al., 2017). Demers et al. (2017) have examined tensions between the privacy yet isolation of non-disclosure and the potential for relief yet the risk of exposure attending disclosure.

Collin-Vézina et al. (2015) identify barriers to disclosure from within the individual, in relation to others, and concerning the social world. Respective examples are internalized blame, familial dysfunction/shame, and negative labeling of survivors (Babalola et al., 2015; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Orchowski et al., 2022). Ullman et al. (2020) recommend education to dismantle rape myths; address harmful cultural and familial reactions to disclosures; and inform of the mental, physical, social, and emotional benefits of support. Four categories of disclosure motivations emerged from interviews with 58 US university students: (1) psychological well-being; (2) fulfilling perceived social obligations or responsibilities; (3) seeking information or assessment; and (4) seeking action in the form of advocacy, accommodations, or, as will be explored in the next section, criminal prosecution. Babalola et al. (2015) extend these motivations to include medical support for SV/SA-related injuries.

Disclosure motivations and barriers vary intersectionally. Men appear less likely to disclose or report due to toxic ideas about masculinity and stereotypes about victim-perpetrator relationships (Walsh et al., 2010 in Mennicke et al., 2021), themes that arose in male CAPSAP focus groups, as reported elsewhere (Malinen et al., 2023). Immigrant women in Canada report disclosure barriers relating to language, cultural norms, legal or policy knowledge, service access, holding patriarchal beliefs, discrimination, and a desire not to worry family at home (Aujla, 2021; Babalola et al., 2015; Raj & Silverman, 2002). A nationally representative study in the United States showed that Latina, Black, and other racialized women are less likely to seek out services compared to white women (Amstadter et al., 2008). For example, McMahon and Seabrook (2019) studied nondisclosure among college students marginalized by racial/ethnic and sexual identities. A fear of how the SV would reflect on their communities was most prominent in Black/African American and Asian survivors/victims and to a lesser extent the LGBTQ community. To understand why Latinx women often do not seek help, Christensen et al. (2021) used decolonial epistemology and a critical feminist lens. They found many survivors/victims did not seek help in order to avoid shame. Shame avoidance involved prioritizing the family and prizing virginity. Another barrier to help-seeking for Latinx women was adherence to traditional gender norms. Similarly, South Asian survivors/victims attributed low help-seeking to religion, familial harmony, and other cultural factors (Lim et al., 2022). Researchers have indicated that Black or African American women are significantly less likely than white women to disclose sexual assault to anyone (McNair & Neville, 1996; Palmer & St. Vil, 2018). Palmer and St. Vil (2018) indicate stereotypes “rooted in the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery” and of the “strong Black woman” (p.38) form barriers to help-seeking (see also, Ullman et al., 2020).

Justice/Protection Dialectic

Survivors/victims may report to formal organizations to attain corrective action, including criminal prosecution (Demers et al., 2017) or investigation under university policy. The justice/protection dialectic provides insight into survivor/victim reporting decisions (Sears-Greer et al., 2022). Since reporting requires disclosure, many considerations discussed in the previous section also apply here, although some reporting-specific issues can be identified. In the conventional criminal justice system (CJS), justice is determined by colonial adjudication with fixed outcomes, wherein survivors/victims perceive that they have or have not been awarded justice. To address this gap, McGlynn and Westmarland (2019) argue for a justice system that accounts for what justice means to each survivor/victim and that engages recognition, voice, dignity, and connectedness as opposed to punishment.

Ceelen et al. (2019) indicate only 20% of 287 Dutch respondents reported their assault, yet 65% of nonreporters indicated that they would have liked to report. Reasons for not doing so included a lack of evidence, and feelings of shame, guilt, and other emotions (Ceelen et al., 2019), underscoring the need to remove reporting barriers (Magnussen & Shankar, 2019). Accounts of survivor/victim retraumatization by the CJS can also motivate silence. Economically disadvantaged people and people of color are significantly overrepresented in the CJS, making the decision to report particularly problematic for these groups (Kim, 2018). Furthermore, SV/SA is usually perpetrated by someone the survivor/victim knows (Boyce, 2013; McMahon et al., 2019; Ontario Women's Directorate, 2013) and may wish to protect (Garrett & Hassan, 2019). Following an assault, many survivors/victims struggle with a time-limited decision about seeking justice, given that most physical evidence will not be detected after seven days (Avalon Sexual Assault Center, 2020).

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” to convey how feminist and anti-racist movements often excluded Black women's interests. Even before this term was coined, many feminists of color were thinking intersectionally (e.g., Collins, 1986; Davis, 1983). Crenshaw's (1991) work has addressed gender-based violence by highlighting differential sentencing according to victim and perpetrator race. Specifically, Black male perpetrators have been subject to harsher sentences than their white counterparts while perpetrators of sexual violence against Black as compared to white women have received more lenient treatment. In this respect, CJS outcomes reflect colonial patterns in which women of color have been taken less seriously as survivors/victims than white women, while men of color have been labeled as dangerous (see also, Butler, 1993; Davis, 1983; Duru, 2004; Fanon, 1952/2008; Maynard, 2017). Understanding these inequities, which neither racism nor sexism alone can explain, is vital to SV/SA policy reform. Crenshaw also pointed out that nonanglophone recently settled immigrants, refugees, or undocumented women are sometimes dependent on abusive male partners to interact with the outside world. Furthermore, when Crenshaw wrote her 1991 article, some shelters would not accept women without functional English skills. Understanding the circumstances of the survivors/victims in question requires thinking intersectionally about gender, immigration status, and language (see also Malinen et al., 2023).

Methods

Using culturally and gender-matched student focus groups, the CAPSAP study examined culturally diverse students' understandings of SV/SA policies, supports, and services at four Nova Scotian universities (three with 4500–6500 students and one with 20,000 students). Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Boards at all participating universities and from Mi'kmaw

Ethics Watch. The research team comprised faculty from three universities across departments of Sociology/Anthropology, Education, Women and Gender Studies, Psychology, English Language and Culture, and Nursing. The team also included a Human Rights Officer, International Education Manager, a coordinator/research intern, and student peer facilitators.

Peer facilitators were compensated for 11 h of training and for recruiting, facilitating, and transcribing focus groups. Using provided posters and a snowball method, each facilitator recruited students who shared their gender, cultural identity, and campus community. To preserve confidentiality, no additional demographic information was collected. Some facilitators recruited participants through International Student Centres, university mailing lists, or university social media pages, while others relied on personal networks.

Countries and regions were used as proxies for culture, a decision with strengths and weaknesses explored elsewhere (Malinen, 2023; Moon, 2013; Ono, 2013). Cultural groupings were delineated ad hoc to maximize geographic coverage and participation. Included communities had potential to sustain a five to seven-person focus group of at least one gender identity within the given campus community. Resulting cultural groupings varied somewhat between universities and between national versus regional composition. Represented groups were African Nova Scotian; Canadian; North African; North Indian; South Asian; South Indian; West African; Caribbean, Bermuda, Bahamas; Chinese; East African; Latin American; Southeast Asian; Turkish and Middle Eastern. Phase One focus groups were held in-person; Phase Two groups were virtual due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions. In total, 197 participants took part in 42 student focus groups ranging from two to eight members and averaging five. Each participant received a 25-dollar gift certificate for their university bookstore (Phase One) or an online book seller (Phase Two). Focus group discussions were semi-structured. Facilitators were encouraged to follow relevant topical threads as they arose. Participants learned about their SV/SA policies, then discussed (1) their questions, (2) prior policy knowledge, (3) perceptions of policy relevance, and (4) imagined family views on the policy. They also discussed (5) supporting a friend following disclosure, (6) beneficial supporter characteristics, and (7) advice to others about supporting a survivor/victim.

We have deployed constructivist grounded theory analysis (GTA) techniques, following Charmaz (2014). Researchers from each institution coded their institution's transcripts, by "comparing data with data to find similarities and differences" (p. 132) within focus groups, across the data set, and in relation to cultural and gender-based categories. This process involved initial coding (e.g., victim blaming, choosing silence, speaking up, and repeat offenders) and focused coding (e.g., risk of being seen differently as reason for survivor silence, and survivor speech as good for the group). Axes of identity such as citizenship status or class sometimes emerged as relevant in analysis of focus group discussions, although we did not collect demographic data relevant to these categories. We amalgamated codes into themes, "enlisting" disciplinary terms (p. 133), such as "dialectic" where appropriate. The principal investigator and research intern consolidated and expanded institution-level themes and recommendations which the research team reviewed and approved.

We understand our research as interpretive work "created from shared experiences and relationships" among research team members, peer facilitators, and participants (p. 239). Charmaz (2014) presents a flexible understanding of theorizing, which minimally requires articulating relationships among abstract concepts. As she puts it, "The fundamental contribution of grounded theory methods resides in guiding interpretive theoretical practice, not in providing a blueprint for theoretical products" (p. 233). Nonetheless, Charmaz (2014) highlights analytical directions that are well-suited to CGTA, such as exploring "*what* people do in specific situations," how, and why (p. 228), while recognizing embeddedness of interactions in "structures, networks, situations, and relationships," including power relationships (p. 240). These analytical directions apply to the tensions regarding SV/SA policy and service engagement reported here. Grounded theorists often return repeatedly to their data, pursuing multiple analytic directions, while "disciplines and

genres” shape our use of literature and “extant theories” (p. 305). Accordingly, we continue to reanalyze our data and publish findings from diverse disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.

Findings

Findings presented below align with Disclosure/Privacy, and Justice/Protection Dialectics. The former relates primarily to participant thoughts regarding disclosure for purposes of survivor/victim support, and the latter to participant thoughts regarding investigative procedures and outcomes in university and/or police contexts. Although passages are drawn from a subset of represented cultural communities, female participants across cultures perceived both value and danger in engaging SV/SA policies. Whereas female participants often positioned themselves as potential survivors/victims, male participants often positioned themselves as potential respondents to SV/SA complaints, as discussed elsewhere (Malinen et al., 2023).

Disclosure/Privacy Dialectic Exemplar Passages

The passages below exemplify the tension between survivor/victim motivations of privacy and seeking support following SV/SA experiences. Disclosure to access support was valued by participants in all female focus groups across our study. However, the risks of disclosure articulated by participants varied. For example, Bermudian, Caribbean, and Bahamian participants focused on who could be trusted to maintain confidentiality and worried about retaliation by the perpetrator or their relatives. East African participants described normalization, silencing, and victim-blaming as typical following SV/SA in their region of origin. Participants from East and Southeast Asia except China (ESEA) focus group and Chinese focus groups emphasized the risk to the social status associated with revealing SV/SA experiences, and risk of self-harm associated with survivor/victim isolation.

Bermuda, Caribbean, Bahamian: “Do I Tell Someone or Do I Not?”. For Bermudian, Caribbean, and Bahamian female participants, thoughts about disclosure avenues revolved around who participants would be comfortable revealing such an experience to, and who would most likely maintain survivor/victim confidentiality:

- Participant One: I still wouldn’t feel comfortable sitting in front of someone and being like, “Hey, my name is so and so. Last night so and so happened.” No, I’d rather—
- Participant Two: I don’t know if I can say that to a counsellor *or* a friend!
- Participant One: Yeah!
- Participant Two: I wouldn’t know how to react. Obviously, I will be traumatized, and it’s like, do I tell someone or do I not? Like, what do I do? [...]
- Facilitator: Would you feel comfortable if a counsellor was from your home country? Like, would you talk to them, because they’re from where you’re from? Like, they understand where you’re coming from? [...]
- Participant Three: I don’t know.
- Participant Two: I don’t think I would want somebody from home to talk to me about that. Like people out here, they don’t know me.
- Participant Four: Yeah. [...]
- Participant Five: I would prefer someone from home to talk to.
- Participant Two: I wouldn’t feel right!
- Participant Four: I’m saying that I probably wouldn’t like to talk to somebody out here *or* someone from home. ‘Cause people from home—just, no.

- Facilitator: Like, we run our mouths like water.
 Participant Four: Yeah, I would rather talk to a family member, like my grandparents.

Participant Two took the trauma of SV/SA as given. The importance of disclosure was indicated by her seemingly urgent questions of whether “to tell” and “what to do”—phrasing that evokes suspension in the liminal space of the disclosure/privacy dialectic. Participant Four indicated she would not speak to a Canadian or a person from home, unless they were a family member. The facilitator doubted the confidentiality of people from home, stating, “we run our mouths like water.” Participants Two and Four disagreed as to whether they would feel safer disclosing to someone who knows them or someone who doesn’t. Sexual violence stigmatization is suggested by the importance placed on privacy by these CAPSAP participants. The dialectical tensions in the participants’ thoughts about campus SV disclosure avenues reveal complex considerations of confidentiality, trust, cultural understanding, and the need for support as they grappled with striking a balance between support-seeking maintaining privacy.

East African: Normal, Shameful, and Not Okay. Whether due to normalized coercion or victim blaming, East African female participants suggested perpetrators from their region tend not to be held accountable. In the following passage, they addressed the normalization and silencing of SV/SA in a systemically coercive environment.

- Participant One: I feel like for us, it is just such a natural thing to happen [...]. It’s just that we are used to sexual assault. We don’t really talk about it. [...]
 Participant Two: Back home, right?
 Participant Three: Right, like it happens, but it’s not something that is talked about.
 Participant One: Yeah, like, it is not something that people fight against. Right? Like, you know what I mean? It happens within schools, workplaces; that’s how you get your promotion, that’s how you get into that school, that’s how you get that good grade.

Whereas the previous passage explored silence about systemic sexual coercion, the following later segment links victim-blaming to nondisclosure in a context where young women experience limited autonomy.

- Participant Three: In Africa, like [...] if it happens, then it was your fault. Most times in Africa, they tell you, “They raped you because, I told you not to wear that short skirt,” or because, “I told you not to go to that party, so that is why it happened to you.”
 Participant One: [...] Especially how we just—because of how our parents are very strict, right? And then you end up going to a party without your parents knowing, and something happens to you. You can’t say it. And you live with it for the rest of your life, right? And then nobody will ever know because you weren’t allowed to go there [...] and meet your friends in the first place, so if it happened, it is *definitely* your fault. So, you have that blaming mentality for the rest of your life. So, I feel like the advice would be, like, let them know that it is not okay that it happened.

Victim blaming, shame and stigma are rife in the phrase, “if it happened, then it is *definitely* your fault,” as well as the explicitly gendered, “I told you not to wear that short skirt.” A “blaming

mentality” renders disclosure dangerous, generating an inclination toward silence. At the disclosure pole of the dialectic, Participant One’s suggestion to “let them know it is not okay that it happened” indicates belief in the relevance of consent, the value of disclosure, and the importance of countering normalization of sexual violence and victim-blaming. These participants engaged dialectically with conflicting perspectives regarding cultural norms and perpetrator accountability. They recognized the silencing effects of systemic coercion and normalization that enables sexual violence to persist and expressed a desire for change, including supports that counteract culturally upheld feelings of self-blame.

Chinese and East and Southeast Asian: Dangers of Disclosure, Dangers of Isolation. Participants from ESEA and those from China expressed similar views with respect to disclosure/privacy. They emphasized survivor/victim vulnerability, advocating abundant caution when interacting with people who have experienced SV/SA. They suggested either a discursive misstep on the part of a supporter or survivor/victim isolation could be catastrophic. Chinese participants discussed dangers associated with exposure of victim status, including compromised marriageability (Leung, 2017), criminalization, and mental health disruption.

Participant One (Chinese): As we all know, this is something that can damage the honor of that friend. What if her future boyfriend knows about this? What if her future husband know this, right? You need to understand that what she thinks about it—or even leave the PTSD afterwards. [...] Especially international students here, who are from places where sex is a taboo topic, or even you get penalised for adultery. That alone can take enormous courage, determination to stand up, when no one else shares concerns.

Participant Five’s final remark introduced dialectical tension by suggesting that disclosure or reporting is valued as a courageous act in the face of the barriers she described. Survivor bravery and risks of disclosure and solitude were also discussed among ESEA participants.

Participant Two (ESEA): I agree with, like, most of the other participants’ point that you need to listen and you have to choose the right wording because, like, they are vulnerable [...]. Because like, it’s like, those kind of actions really affect your mental health; and you have to be brave to be one of the survivors. So, and also [...] I tend to be very er, protective of my friends. [...] I’ll make sure that they are not alone and [...] I’ll be supportive of them because like, being alone in that state of mind is very dangerous.

Similarly, Participant Three (ESEA) advocated choosing words carefully “due to the butterfly effects. Like, one small advice or word like, leads to, er, bigger consequence. [...] So, it will be so dangerous for them to talk too much about that.” For this reason, Participant Four (ESEA) suggested refraining from asking victim/survivors about the incident, instead “discuss[ing] about the feelings; like, ‘how are you feeling about the situation?’” Chinese participants also advocated social support for survivors/victims to mitigate risk of self-harm.

Participant Five (Chinese): If I, uh, had this kind of experience, I just want a friend who like, do, like, the things together. Like eat, uh, eat, like, meals with me; like, sleep with me; like, go to class with me. Um, because ya know,

some girls who have this kind of, like, experience, like, after that, uh, they like, would kill themselves—kill themselves.

Risk of suicide or self-harm was referenced by participants not only from China (male and female) and South Asia (male), but also from Canada (female), and Bermuda, Caribbean, Bahamas (female). According to Shoib et al. (2022), most research on suicide is conducted in the West, although “more than half of suicides occur in Asia” (p. 1). In Asia and among Asians in the West, they found sexual violence was significantly linked to depression and suicidality (p. 10). Among Asian university students, they found living alone increased risk of suicidal ideation. The importance of social support discussed by participants in Chinese and ESEA focus groups emerged in tension with dangers of harm to reputation or honor. Locating these dialectical tensions offers insight into the delicate nature of supporting victims/survivors, emphasizing the importance of sensitivity, empathy, and mindfulness of potential consequences. Participants expressed concern for victim/survivor well-being while navigating the challenges of disclosure, social support, and mental health in the aftermath of sexual violence, thus highlighting the need for trauma-informed and culturally aware policies and practices.

Justice/Protection Dialectic Exemplar Passages

In this section, survivors/victims are consistently imagined as interested in pursuing justice against the perpetrator. However, the dialectically conflicting desire for protection is given various intersubjective positions. Bermudian, Caribbean, and Bahamian participants worried about financial cost, policy efficacy, confidentiality, and retaliation; North Indian participants explored institutional betrayal; a Southeast Asian participant discussed survivor/victim protection of known perpetrators; and a Chinese survivor/victim reported that her parents sought to protect her by discouraging her from pursuing prosecution.

Bermudian, Caribbean, Bahamian: Justice at What Cost? Bermudian, Caribbean, and Bahamian participants expressed myriad concerns about whether effective protection would be provided by their university SV/SA policy. They worried about financial cost, efficacy of consequences for perpetrators, confidentiality, and retaliation.

- Participant Three: Okay, so if you are reporting it, like, um, formally, would you have to pay for it, or the school does? Or does your insurance cover it? [...] Like, going through trial and stuff, if it gets to that. Who’s going to pay for that?
- Participant One: You all know you all have to pay for that. [laughs] [...]
- Participant Six: I forgot about the lawyer. Jesus Christ.
- Participant Two: I feel like they don’t want to report it, ‘cause what if nothing comes out of it?
- Participant Three: It would be the opposite for me. I would hope that it doesn’t get to—
- Facilitator: It wouldn’t go to court, though, ‘cause it’s under the school policy. If you decided to [...] call the police [...] you’re on your own, in terms of lawyer and courts.
- Participant Three: Ah, okay. [...] If it’s like that, then nothing is going to come out of it, period. What can the school do? [...]Uhm, I would take it legal. Like, sue, or get them arrested. [...]
- Participant Two: It’s not about you saying, “Yeah, you can’t come back to the school.” That isn’t going to do nothing.
- Participant One: I feel like the victim would still be scared.

- Participant Two: He's still going to see me off campus.
- Participant One: Yeah, like, what if you go to the mall and see that person? Then what?!
- Participant One: The man walking free, and I can't sleep at night. [...]
- Participant Three: And [...] that don't stop him from contacting you, like, social media-wise. 'Cause, he can threaten you. The school can't change that. [...] Or his family members might even come after you. That's why I feel like I would take it to court, to get out of that situation. 'Cause he would have to pay a price if he breaks the law. [...]
- Participant Two: There's not much a school can do. [...] The hardest part is going through all of that and nothing happens.

In the discussion above, Participant Three prioritized reporting to police as the best strategy to ensure safety within and beyond the campus perimeter, repeatedly suggesting universities are powerless to provide justice or protection, in particular from perpetrator retaliation. Participant Two agreed that "there's not much a school can do" but doubted she would report through any avenue, alluding to psychological or emotional risk: "the hardest part is going through all of that and nothing happens." Participants Three and One also raised financial concerns about pursuing a sexual assault case through Canada's CJS, highlighting the financial stress many international students experience due to higher tuition. Dialectical tensions between justice and protection reflect complex considerations when navigating campus sexual violence policies. The participants desired perpetrator accountability and comprehensive protection for survivors/victims. These insights accentuate the need for policies that address financial costs, confidentiality, and retaliation concerns and provide victims/survivors with a range of options, including legal pathways.

North Indian: Institutional Betrayal. North Indian participants took part in a discussion that exemplified how ideas about the safeness or unsafeness of SV/SA policy are relayed among communities of students and may shift dialectically based on information received.

- Participant One: Yes, [...] I learned about this [sexual consent training] through my friends [...]. Uh, there was a really healthy atmosphere, I must say. [...]. So that was a good thing that I saw in there. [...]
- Participant Two: Basically, I wanted to agree with Participant One. It was an audio-video; it was correct; all the information was correct, it seems. It was absolutely good—
- Facilitator: Great!
- Participant Two: —They told us [...] how it was going to be in the university; that they made the policy. [...] Like [...], if we face anything like, uh, harassment, you can go to and contact that person. But I have not seen that policy completely working.
- Facilitator: Okay.
- Participant Two: I have been in contact with two or three friends that have gone with this whole thing—that have gone through the violence, but they have not received any justice. [...]
- Facilitator: Can you share [if you're] comfortable, like—why you didn't—why you weren't able to get the help? Like, what was the thing—
- Participant Two: Yes, I can. They gave them the numbers when we had the orientation. [...] And the thing happened with one or two of my friends in December—the same thing. So, they went to everybody—the whole of who they can

contact, and nothing went up. And it just created—the person who feared all this, she was so much terribly, like, tortured, that she can't go [on], and she leaves all her case. Like, especially [here], we have the justice regarding this—they have the policies. Her case is in court also, but then she withdrew that one.

Facilitator: This is the fear, because she did not get supported from the university?

Participant Two: Yes, exactly.

Facilitator: That is terrible.

Participant Two: Everybody asked; everything was recorded; everything was done. But she did not get any justice regarding that. Because they said, it's like—uh, it's a sexual violence, but it's not one hundred percent sexual violence. It's like, fifty percent—sixty percent sexual violence, so.... But even if it's one percent, it's still violence.

Participant One's perceptions of a "healthy atmosphere" and a "good thing" at the information session suggested a sense of safety was established there. Participant Two agreed with Participant One that attendees acquired trust in their policy: "it was absolutely good, how they told us everything; how it was going to be in the university." She then indicated dangers of trust by providing concrete examples of how her university had failed others in her social circle. Friends who had followed the policy had, "received no justice" and ended up feeling "tortured" and "afraid." In some ways, the policy functioned as expected: "everybody asked; everything was recorded; everything was done." However, the ultimate result of the process was institutional betrayal. Concluding this passage, Participant Two interpreted her institution's rationale for not proceeding with her friend's case: "They said [...] it's a sexual violence, but it's not one hundred percent sexual violence [...]. But even if it's one percent, it's still violence." Her account suggested that, in contrast to the sense of understanding and positive expectations acquired at the policy information session, an undisclosed threshold for investigation exists. The dialectical tension between justice and protection in this passage exemplifies how a sense of safety can be replaced by a sense of danger in circumstances of institutional betrayal, causing a survivor/victim to retreat from the pursuit of justice in an attempt to re-establish safety.

Southeast Asian: Protecting the Perpetrator. The tension between justice and protection may involve an inclination to protect the perpetrator, as demonstrated in the following exchange between Southeast Asian participants.

Participant Two: I don't know what's going to happen to the people when we report them? [...] I don't know how to express this. Kind of like, you know, when—when it's just, like, sexual assault, then how—then what's the penalty? And, like, for a violence involved [...] what's the penalty? [...] So, because I think sometimes when the person who reported, and the person who are being reported, maybe they are their friend, or even a classmate. He—and sometimes they would want to keep it a secret, because they don't really want [...] the whole thing to happen to that person. I don't know if that makes sense.

In this passage, Participant Two highlighted potential desire to protect perpetrators who are friends or classmates by "keep[ing] it a secret," and suggested knowing exactly what the "penalty" would be may allow survivors/victims to weigh the benefits of justice against harm to perpetrators in decision-making about initiating investigations. The dialectical tension between justice

and protection exhibited by Participant Two illustrates the complexity of reporting incidents involving perpetrators known to survivors/victims.

Chinese: Seeking Justice Against Parental Advice. A Chinese participant with experience reporting SV/SA to police recalled tension between her desire to pursue justice, her parents' desire to protect her from the trouble that might come with that pursuit, and a culturally conservative norm of victim-blaming.

Participant Four: I did tell my mom about the sexual assault when it happened to me, but [...] Chinese culture is very conservative. Older parents, grandparents—they would [...] probably think the reason is because of you: “You overdressed too sexy in the public. You did something and that caused the sexual assault,” instead of the people who [...] did the crime have too bad attention to you. So, it’s really hard to explain to my parents, ‘cause I actually told my parents, “the police told me if they found the guy who did this, I might have to go to court [...] . I would [...] have to be the one to say ‘he is the one.’” [...] But my parents would rather I am not going: “But I don’t want you to get in trouble; I don’t want it to be on your record.” But I will say, “I want to catch the bad guy.”

In this passage, Participant Four bravely shared her internal and interpersonal struggle relating to her decision about seeking justice. She began by relating how difficult it was to disclose to her parents because of their culturally conservative perspectives. It appears Participant Four reported her experience of sexual assault to the authorities before she disclosed to her parents: “I actually told my parents, ‘the police told me if they found the guy who did this, I might have to go to court’.” She described her parents’ negative response to her desire to engage the CJS. The phrases, “I don’t want you to get in trouble” and “I don’t want it to be on your record” suggest a desire to protect their daughter and perhaps family from victim-blaming and shaming common in Chinese and Western cultures. It is unclear from our data whether this participant ultimately took her case to court. Participant Four’s internal conflict reflects the dialectical interplay between cultural expectations, family dynamics, and the personal desire for justice. Understanding this tension is crucial in designing campus sexual violence policies that are sensitive to culture while creating a supportive environment for victims/survivors to feel empowered in seeking justice.

Discussion and Recommendations

By highlighting intercultural perspectives, this work helps remedy a gap in SV/SA research, policy, and support. The data we have presented do not represent perspectives uniformly held within, or restricted to, the cultural communities from which they were derived. Rather, they capture some experiences to consider in pursuing culturally responsive policies and services. The dialectics presented here illuminate reasoning that may contribute to survivor/victim decisions about engaging university SV/SA policies. Attending to barriers and motivators of policy/service uptake articulated by members of diverse cultural communities on campus can support culturally relevant SV/SA strategies.

The contrasting and conflicted narratives above suggest that decisions about disclosure and reporting are complex, variable, and nuanced. Participants recognized that enhanced safety or emotional wellbeing could result from disclosure or reporting. However, they also believed disclosing or reporting could result in shame, re-traumatization, loss of honor, compromised marriageability, criminalization, discrimination, or vulnerability to retaliation. We offer several recommendations to reduce

students' feelings of danger and enhance their safety relative to the possibilities offered by university SV/SA policies and services.

To increase disclosure-related privacy, information and support can be provided via (1) a service such as KeepMe.Safe, which connects students with culturally matched mental health professionals worldwide or (2) anonymous texting or online communication with relevant staff. To engender helpful, confidential peer disclosure responses, universities can offer (1) information and supports for friends of survivors/victims; and (2) education that deconstructs victim-blaming.

Because retaliation was perceived as a danger associated with reporting, SV/SA policies should (1) prohibit retaliation against complainants and (2) identify interim measures available to protect students following a report, and a timeline for implementation. Concerns were expressed about the likelihood of reports being believed or taken seriously and, contrastingly, impacts on respondents, including in terms of sanction severity. Thus, we suggest (1) explaining what can serve as evidence of SV/SA for purposes of a university investigation and (2) indicating the range of consequences likely to follow various policy violations. We suggest addressing discomfort with repeated disclosure or reporting by appointing single points of contact to who victims/survivors can report without having to retell their stories. Given the importance of social support articulated by some participants, we recommend highlighting that students can involve friends or family members as supporters and offering to contact chosen support people. A one-pager for parents/guardians highlighting key policy points and available sexual assault resources would be useful. Finally, participants cited here identified some concerns as culturally specific. As elaborated elsewhere (Malinen, Brigham, et al., 2023), competing frameworks including Cultural Safety and Cultural Responsiveness address different needs articulated by CAPSAP participants and it would be useful for university-based service providers to receive education in both.

Conclusion

The CAPSAP study aimed to identify approaches that would render campus SV/SA policies and services more adequate to culturally diverse campus communities. Dialectics can be useful to care provision, including social work and/or SV/SA response. They can help practitioners grasp the complexity of social problems and health issues, the multiple, often conflicting perspectives to be taken into account in developing effective interventions, and the dynamic and evolving ways individuals and communities respond to their environments. Dialectics can help practitioners navigate tensions and contradictions inherent in their roles, such as balancing the need for individual autonomy with the obligation to protect vulnerable clients.

Considering cultural differences among university students is crucial to developing campus SV/SA policies and services that are effective throughout diverse campus communities. This article has aimed to shed light on how dialectical tensions of safety/danger, disclosure/privacy, and justice/protection may shape how student survivors/victims navigate campus sexual assault policies. Participants' contributions suggested forms and sources of perceived safety and danger were intersectionally shaped by gender and culture. Our data supports insights that are both intersectional and dialectical. The aspiration behind this work is to help move practitioners toward grasping the complexity and multiplicity of conflicted ways survivors/victims relate to SV/SA service provision and response, and on that basis develop nuanced, effective interventions that are attentive to diversity.


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