The Role of Sexual Violence in Shaping Women's Understanding of Possibility

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines women's understandings of the relationship between sexual violence and their expectations for the future. Rooted in an anti-oppressive feminist theoretical framework, this thesis uses narrative inquiry in its analyses of individual interviews with eight women to develop "possibility" as an analytical concept that holds relevance to social work practice. It identifies and describes a possibility story structure common to women's accounts of the impact of sexual violence on their sense of possibility, and it positions these possibility stories as sites through which to connect the individual psychological impacts of sexual violence with the economic, educational, employment, and other social costs of sexual violence. This thesis makes connections between sexual violence in shaping women's possibility stories and the power that dominant systems, structures, and attitudes hold in shaping notions of opportunity, hope, and imagined futures in the lives of survivors of sexual violence.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"The possibility of renewal exists so long as life exists. How to support that possibility in others and in ourselves is the ultimate question." (Maté, 2018, p. 3)

In her powerful memoir about her experience of sexual assault, Susan J. Brison (2002) draws attention to the complexity the future holds for women who have experienced sexual violence. She writes,

> those who have survived trauma understand well the pull of that solution of [suicide] to their daily Beckettian dilemma, 'I can't go on, I must go on,' for on some days the conclusion 'I'll go on' cannot be reached by faith or reason. How does one go on with a shattered self, with no guarantee of recovery, believing that one will always 'stay tortured' and never 'feel at home in the world'? One hopes for a bearable future, in spite of all the inductive evidence to the contrary. After all, the loss of faith in induction following an unpredictable trauma also has a reassuring side: since inferences from the past can no longer be relied upon to predict the future, there's no more reason to think that tomorrow will bring agony than to think it won't. So one makes a wager, in which nothing is certain and the odds change daily, and sets about willing to believe that life, for all its unfathomable horror, still holds some undiscovered pleasures. (p. 66)

The stories at the centre of this thesis echo Brison in both her apprehension of and hope for a future following sexual violence. Like Brison, the women who shared their stories as part of this thesis variously embrace and view cautiously the futures they hope for, fear, and must confront as they navigate the aftermath of sexual violence. Also, like Brison, for the women whose stories are shared in this thesis, their

relationship with the future and the possibilities therein stand as a significant preoccupation in the healing process, as well as a gauge of present well-being.

Nonetheless, despite what we can glean from Brison's own struggle to imagine, embrace, and navigate the future following sexual assault – a struggle echoed by the women who share their stories in this thesis – how sexual violence shapes the stories women hold about their possible futures has received limited attention in sexual violence research. In its exploration of what I refer to as the possibility stories shared by eight women survivors of sexual violence, this thesis seeks to deepen understanding of the impact of sexual violence on the expectations women have for their futures and the sense of possibility they imagine within these futures.

Current research provides a detailed account of the effects and challenges women face in the aftermath of sexual violence across a variety of life domains (Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral, 2009; Dowrkin, 2018; Herman, 1992; Littleton & Breitkopf, 2006). In doing so, this research implicitly provides a picture of what women who experience sexual violence might expect their future to hold in terms of their health, relationships, sense of self, economic security, access to justice, and numerous other factors. Some studies in the area of post-traumatic growth and resilience (i.e. Ai & Park, 2005; Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998), as well as studies that ask women to share their own stories of healing, offer futures where women find ways to positively integrate experiences of sexual violence and discover strategies for what McKenzie-Mohr (2014) describes as "living well" (p. 70, see also Cole & Lynn, 2010; Draucker et al., 2009). For most, however, current research paints a stark picture of the future following sexual violence. Across this literature, some studies of the experiences of sexual violence survivors have investigated important contributors

to future perspectives, such as the availability of informed support (Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Herman, 1992; Ullman, 2010) and the broader social context (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). These studies begin to provide us with some information about what outside forces are at play in shaping women's futures following sexual violence. To date, however, sexual violence researchers, as well as researchers interested in the study of what this thesis will refer to broadly as future orientation (Seigner, 2009), have yet to explicitly engage with understanding how women themselves imagine, approach, and engage with their sense of possibility in the future in light of their experiences of sexual violence. Given the unique ways in which sexual violence creates a world in which "the past can no longer be relied upon to predict the future," "nothing is certain and the odds change daily" – to borrow Brison's eloquent description of the loss of control that often accompanies sexual violence – making space for understanding women's grappling with the future and the possibilities therein is imperative not only to supporting women in the creation of futures in which their lies some "undiscovered pleasures" but also in improving present well-being.

Background and Context

Sexual violence is a significant social, economic, health, and spiritual social justice issue in Canada (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Although limitations in data collection make it difficult to accurately state its prevalence, sexual violence is widespread (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Prevalence data from Statistics Canada indicates that 1 in 4 women are likely to experience sexual violence in their lifetime (Perrault, 2014). Recent high-profile cases and social media initiatives, such as the MeToo movement, confirm what feminist advocates and sexual violence researchers have long stated that current prevalence data is a vast underestimation of the rates

sexual violence, and it is unlikely that women in Canada today will not experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetimes.

Within Canada, certain groups of women experience an increased likelihood of sexual violence as a result of the intersecting oppressions they face involving race, culture, language, ability, age, poverty, and other demographic factors. In Canada, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women and girls self-report sexual assault at a rate of almost triple that of non-Indigenous women (Department of Justice, 2017). Women living with disabilities, racialized women, women who are immigrants, refugees, and newcomers, and those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ also all experienced heightened risks for sexual violence (Burlock, 2017; Government of Canada, 2019; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Trans PULSE, 2020). For many of these individuals, the impact of sexual violence can also be more profound because of the additional barriers they may experience in seeking support and the ongoing institutional and systemic discrimination many vulnerable and marginalized women continue to face when navigating the systems and supports that are supposed to offer help (Government of Canada, 2019; Sheey, 2012; Trans PULSE, 2020).

Sexual violence in women's lives carries the potential for profound physical, psychological, financial, and social consequences (Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral, 2009; Dowrkin, 2018; Littleton & Breitkopf, 2006). Among the many impacts associated with sexual violence are physical injury, PTSD, unwanted pregnancy, STIs, loss of income and employment, challenges with intimacy and relationships, shame, blame and stigma (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Littleton & Breitkopf, 2006). Sexual violence also carries a heavy economic burden for women, as well as for the Canadian government. Recent estimates suggest that sexual violence costs Canadians $4.6 billion annually (Hoodenbaugh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2014).

Despite these costs – and a growing dialogue about the prevalence and impact of sexual violence – the institutional response to sexual violence largely continues to fail survivors and their families. Again, numerous high-profile stories, such as an article in the *Globe and Mail* documenting the failure of police and RCMP forces across the country to properly investigate sexual assault complaints, is one of some of the recent examples confirming long-standing issues survivors of sexual violence face in navigating the criminal justice system (Doolittle, 2017). Although community-based sexual assault centres have long been recognized as effective resources for survivors (Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl & Barnes, 2001), across the country these centres are significantly underfunded, and in some cases are forced to make difficult decisions to limit the services they once offered to survivors due to a lack of adequate resources (i.e. Avalon Sexual Assault Centre, 2019; Ending Violence, 2021). As numerous other studies on secondary victimization demonstrate (Campbell, 2005; Ullman & Najdowski, 2011), despite an increase in awareness about the issue of sexual violence, and the Canadian government's stated commitment to addressing this issue (Canada, 2020), survivors continue to face significant barriers and challenges in accessing services following sexual violence.

This research demonstrates that sexual violence continues to contribute to the ongoing inequality and oppression experienced by women in Canada. As will be explored in this thesis, sexual violence carries a myriad of impacts in individual women's lives that can compromise the sense of possibility they may have once held related to their hopes, goals, and plans in the future. Moreover, a lack of institutional will to meaningfully address the systemic roots of sexual violence leave survivors largely on their own to carve out possibilities within systems that appear largely indifferent to their struggles. Although rarely framed as such, as I will demonstrate in

this thesis, research on the prevalence, impacts, and challenges associated with sexual violence collectively reveals a troubling story about possibility and the futures women might expect if they experience sexual violence. This story, as I will develop in this thesis through the possibility stories shared with me by the women I interviewed, is one in which the possibilities women may have once imagined for themselves become limited, circumscribed, and, at times, lost. While some women devise creative ways to protect, nurture, and reconnect with the sense of a possibility-rich future, they – like all women – are forced to do so while navigating the pressing daily realities of surviving in a rape-supportive culture that offers little support and at times actively works to further harm them. For others, the weight of finding hopeful possibilities within this culture becomes too difficult, and the future becomes a space where feared possibilities of further harm will occur.

Rationale

Over the past 10 years, I have had the opportunity to sit with many survivors of sexual violence and their families and loved ones, including the eight woman I interviewed for this thesis. As a volunteer on a rape crisis line, a gender equality policy analyst with provincial governments, and a researcher with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, I have born witness to many stories of sexual violence told in many different voices and many different settings: stories shared in a hospital room during a sexual assault examination and a police station while a woman makes a report of sexual violence. Stories told over the phone late at night on a crisis line or in a counselling office while women try to make sense of the violence they have experienced. Stories presented in policy briefs to provide rationale to governments for why change is necessary, and stories shared as truths presented at a federal inquiry in which the families and friends of those whose

lives have been taken as a result of violence honoured the strength and resiliency of their loved ones.

In these stories, women talk about often brutal acts of violence and harm. More than descriptions of violence, however, I have also come to see these stories as ones that are about the pathways women and their families are trying to find in the aftermath of violence. In listening to these stories, over time I began to notice what seemed to be a persistent theme wherein women grappled with the hopes and fears they held for where these pathways would take them in the upcoming years, and the grief and loss they carried in recognizing that these new pathways diverged from those they had imagined prior to experiencing violence. Nowhere was this more evident than in the stories shared by the families and loved ones of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls (Government of Canada, 2019). Here, the families gave voice to the hopes and dreams their daughters, sisters, aunties, and grandmothers had once held. These family members powerfully articulated how violence had not only taken their loved ones but also the possibilities contained in their hopes and dreams for the future.

As women described their efforts to navigate the aftermath of sexual violence and engage in what Judith Herman (1992) calls the "task of creating a future" (p. 196), they were faced with the difficult work of grieving the plans, hopes, and dreams that they had once imagined for themselves but that now in the wake of sexual violence seemed out of reach. Women described various strategies they were using to reconcile past ideas about the self before violence with future ideas of the self in the aftermath of violence. For some, these futures remained dark; but for others, the future was becoming the site of newly realized possibilities and revised goals that drew on experiences of sexual violence to author new selves and futures. Although

women were not explicitly talking about these struggles, losses, and achievements in what I came to think of as the language of possibility, it seemed that what they were describing was a subtle yet vital part of the story of sexual violence in women's lives that still needed to be told.

Despite the persistence with which I began to hear the theme of possibility emerging in the stories of sexual violence survivors and their families and friends offered, possibility as a concept was not one that I had encountered within the therapeutic and research literature on sexual violence. Moreover, possibility as a concept was most certainly not something I encountered in the policy, institutional, and legislative advocacy work I was involved in nor was it something that surfaced in conversations related to the need for systemic change to address sexual violence. Instead, efforts to document the impacts of sexual violence and to identify policy solutions that would help minimize these impacts focused primarily on what had happened in the past and how to address it in the present often within short-term, medicalized, and individualized frameworks. These frameworks as many feminist advocates and researchers have argued were ones that I also saw ignored what seemed to be the need for a systemic accounting the ways sexual violence shaped not only what was possible in women's individual lives but also for the communities in which they live. Without this, the powerful learnings that women survivors can offer about how sexual violence intersects with and shapes the possibilities in their lives in the aftermath of sexual violence and as they looked toward their futures were being lost.

Increasingly, I began to wonder how in not making space for and centring stories about the possibilities and futures survivors desired we were implicitly contributing to the many forces that work to limit the futures available in the aftermath of violence. Moreover, in not listening deeply to stories of these imagined

futures, I wondered how much we were failing to understand the profound but less visible impacts of sexual violence. This thesis is a response to these observations and seeks to begin to centre and open up something that is often implicitly denied survivors: their futures. While the stories women share in this thesis about their dreams for the future are not always hopeful or positive, I believe they are essential in supporting survivors in taking steps towards the futures they want to create and building systems that sustain them as they realize the possibilities they imagine for themselves.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how experiences of sexual violence shape women's sense of possibility. More specifically, this thesis seeks to understand 1) how women define and describe possibility; 2) how women understand the relationship between sexual violence and possibility; 3) what strategies women utilize to address the impact of sexual violence on possibility; and 4) what women's understandings about the relationship between sexual violence and possibility can teach us about how better to respond to and address sexual violence on both an individual and societal level. To do so, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question: What are women's understandings of the relationship between personal experiences of sexual violence and possibility in their lives?

Through individual interviews with eight adult women with various experiences of sexual violence, this thesis uses narrative inquiry to develop an understanding of possibility in the stories and lives of women survivors. In addition, drawing on an anti-oppressive feminist theoretical framework, this thesis explores how women's stories about possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence reveal new insights about the ways in which the structures and systems within which survivors

must live contribute to the ongoing oppression and inequality experienced by women in Canada. In this sense, this thesis contributes to a well-established body of feminist sexual violence research that challenges approaches that pathologize or medicalize women's responses to violence and trauma (Burstow, 2003; Herman, 1992; Wasco, 2003).

More broadly, this thesis seeks to explore 1) how the concept of possibility is relevant to understanding the individual experiences of sexual violence survivors, and 2) how the concept of possibility is a relevant area of focus for social work research interested in promoting structural and transformational change in the area of sexual violence. To this end, throughout this thesis, I continually attempt to offer an analysis of women's possibility stories that resists individualizing the problem of sexual violence and the process of healing from sexual violence. Rather, I engage in narrative analysis in order to demonstrate how recognizing, understanding, and articulating the relationship between sexual violence and possibility as this is articulated by women themselves is an important part of broader transformational and systemic change that is rooted in an understanding of the nuanced connections of violence, story, imagination, and opportunity and, more broadly, the power that systems hold in shaping notions of opportunity, hope, dreams, and imagined futures.

Significance for Social Work

Critical engagement with how individuals, communities, and societies tell stories about the future and the possibilities within those futures is an area of human experience and research that has received increasing attention (Seligman, 2017), including within the context of addressing complex social justice issues (Imarisha, 2015). The study of what has been broadly referred to as "future orientation" (Seginer, 2009) is increasingly demonstrating what and how we think about the future

as a vital area of analysis for understanding a myriad of experiences and for identifying and crafting new solutions. As part of this exploration, some researchers working primarily in the field of psychology have engaged specifically with how one's sense of possibility is present within one's future-oriented ideas. This research encourages the inclusion and investigation of future-orientation and the possibilities therein as an avenue for more fully understanding human experience. While the field of future orientation research has yet to engage explicitly with sexual violence, as I will explore in this thesis, it offers compelling evidence and tools through which to support an investigation of how experiences of sexual violence shape women's sense of possibility.

The prevalence rates of sexual violence indicate that social workers at some point in their practice are likely to work with survivors of sexual violence. Given what is known about the transformative role receiving positive and meaningful support holds for survivors (Drauker et al., 2009; Kirkner & Ullman, 2020; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014), it is imperative that social workers are equipped with the tools and understanding necessary to provide safe and meaningful support in the aftermath of violence. In its investigation of the way sexual violence shapes women's sense of possibility, this thesis contributes to this need for tools, strategies, and frameworks that can better ensure social workers are able to offer the support women need in the aftermath of sexual violence. It also offers new avenues for social workers engaged in social policy work to conceptualize the pressing need for systemic changes that can contribute to the eradication of sexual violence.

Despite the likelihood that social workers will at some point work with individuals who carry histories of sexual violence, education and training on sexual violence within social work programming and many formal practice settings, such as

healthcare, victim services, the justice system, and schools, is limited. Furthermore, within many of these settings, modes of conceptualizing the harm of sexual violence within medicalized models that pathologize and individualize the problem of sexual violence and a survivors' response to it persist as most dominant. Increasingly, social work's contribution to promoting anti-oppressive, intersectional, and systemic analyses of trauma, including sexual violence, have played an important role in challenging these dominant models (Brown, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). This study aims to support social workers in these efforts to produce a systemic analysis and understanding of the roots of sexual violence, and the impacts associated with it through its focus on the relationship between sexual violence and possibility. For instance, in Chapter Four, I outline the elements women survivors interviewed in this thesis identified as necessary to engage in the work of repairing their relationship to possibility and nurturing possibility-rich futures. While social workers may find this knowledge useful in working with individual survivors, I suggest that they are also well-positioned to support survivors by working to repair the possibilities that exist within the systems in which they work. In this sense, this thesis holds relevance for meeting social work's commitment to anti-oppressive practice. By opening up space for and making explicit the vital relevance of nurturing possibility in the lives of survivors of sexual violence, this thesis suggests that social workers have an opportunity to challenge dominant discourse about victimization that so often limits or actively denies women possibility-rich futures. Additionally, in its exploration of the concept of possibility this thesis offers a framework to support and complement growing efforts within social justice work, such as transformative justice (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020), to explore new ideas for creating more equal communities and relationships. In this area, this thesis holds relevance for social work

in its attempt to demonstrate and contribute to this growing field in which social workers can harness what I refer to as "possibility stories" as a concept that can be used to set out radical, transformative alternatives to current systems.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is presented in six chapters that collectively tell the story of how we can engage with and understand how sexual violence shapes women's sense of possibility. In Chapter One, I have introduced the purpose and rationale for this study, and I have offered my own stories about how I initially became interested in and committed to understanding the concept and experience of possibility in relation to sexual violence. In Chapter Two, I present the literature reviewed as part of this thesis in order to establish a conceptual framework within which my use of the term "possibility" is grounded. In this chapter, I review literature related to future orientation (Seginer, 2009) and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and sexual violence, including a review of literature documenting the effects of sexual violence and the influence of socio-cultural and discursive contexts on sexual violence. In Chapter Three, I outline the theoretical framework and methodology of this study. Specifically, I situate the thesis within anti-oppressive, feminist theory and narrative inquiry. Chapter Four presents an analysis of what I describe as the possibility stories offered by the women interviewed for this thesis. I introduce an overarching possibility story structure, and I describe and provide examples of the various thematic and structural elements within this story structure. In Chapter Five, I relate key findings emerging from the analysis of women's possibility stories to current research. I focus especially on how these findings can contribute to a more robust critical engagement with dominant rape and victimization discourse; to better documenting the cumulative impact of sexual violence on women's economic

security; and to identifying strategies that mobilize the concept of possibility to advocate for systemic changes geared toward ending sexual violence. Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude my thesis by considering the implications of the research findings for social work and identifying areas of future exploration.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

"Focusing on possible selves gave us license to speculate about the remarkable power of imagination in human life." (Markus, 2006, p. xi)

In this chapter, I discuss the literature that was reviewed as part of this study. I begin by establishing a conceptual framework within which my use of the term 'possibility' is grounded: this involves a review of literature related to what is broadly referred to as future orientation research (Seginer, 2009), and specifically one branch within future orientation research known as possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). I then review the extensive body of research documenting the effects of sexual violence with a focus on how this research engages with the concept of possibility. Finally, I review research exploring how current socio-cultural contexts and public discourse shape narratives of sexual violence, again with a focus on what this literature suggests about the way socio-cultural discourse informs the concept of possibility in these narratives. Through this review of the sexual violence-specific research literature, as well as a review of the broader future orientation and possible selves literature, this chapter sets up its own context within which the possibility stories as told by women survivors of sexual violence in this thesis can be read.

Conceptualizing Possibility

This section provides a review of the literature on future orientation (Seginer, 2009). It focuses particularly on one facet of future orientation research known as "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Markus and Nurius (1986), "'possible selves' encompass that domain of self-knowledge that 'pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future'" (p. 954). More specifically, possible selves research examines the notion of the future via the construct of self-concept (Erikson, 2007; Makus & Nurius, 1986). While the possible

selves concept has been applied to a variety of contexts, it has yet to receive attention in relation to sexual violence despite the significant consequences sexual violence has been demonstrated to have on self-concept (Draucker, Martsolf & Ross, 2009). The purpose of the following section, thus, is to describe how possible selves research can contribute to the development of a framework within which the concept of possibility explored in this thesis may be grounded.

Situating Possible Selves in Future Orientation Research

Although the images and stories, the hopes and fears, individuals hold about the future are core components of human cognition and public discourse, the scope and nature of our future imaginings has been relatively underexplored. Early scientific work in the area of future orientation is rooted in the field of psychology, where Lewin was one of the first psychologists to draw attention to and conduct research into what he called the "psychological future" as a potent area of exploration in understanding human emotion, behaviour, and well-being (Lewin 1942/1948 as cited in Seginer, 2009, p. 1).[1] For Lewin and his contemporaries, the study of the psychological future revealed important learnings about motivation, and for how and what individuals think about their futures reveals about present well-being and action. As Lewin observed:

[1] Early exploration of future orientation is attributed to various sources in the field of psychology. Some contemporary future orientation researchers point to the work of William James (1890, 1910), and his early conceptualizations of the self and the "potential social Me" (James, 1910, p. 191) as an early precursor to concepts such as possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & James, 2011). While James offers a conceptual framework for considering the notion of the future self, Seginer (2009) points to early behavioral scientists Frank (1939), Israeli (1930), and Lewin (1942/1948) as the first to engage in scientific study of future cognition. Working from different disciplinary lenses, each explored different facets of future cognition, including the ways future cognition could be used to motivate action in the present (Israeli, 1930), the role of future cognition in human development (Frank, 1939), and the influence of environmental or contextual factors in shaping future cognition (Lewin, 1939).

> The picture presented by this ‘psychological future’ seldom corresponds to what actually happens later…. But, regardless of whether the individual’s picture of the future is correct or incorrect at a given time, this picture deeply affects the mood and the action of the individual at that time. (as cited in Seginer, 2009, p. 1)

Since Lewin, research that considers how and what individuals think about the future, as well as the function future cognition serves, has gained momentum within a variety of fields, including developmental, cognitive, and neuropsychology (Oyserman & James, 2011; Seginer, 2009), and been popularized through the fields of positive psychology and its focus on prospection and future-mindedness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013). The field of narrative therapy also engages with future orientation through its focus on supporting the development of counterstories or alternative stories as spaces in which one can imagine different or preferred futures (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2001). As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis, concepts utilized within narrative therapy, such as identifying and storying “future unique outcomes” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 60), are tools through which individuals engage with ideas about the self in the future similar to those proposed by Markus & Nurius’ (1987) concept of possible selves.

Referred to variously as prospection (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Seligman, 2017), future time perspective (Nuttin, 1984; Nuttin & Lens, 1985), future mindedness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), possible selves or identities (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & James, 2011), or future unique outcomes (White & Epston, 1990), the field of future orientation research despite its difference in terminology maintains a commitment to the underlying theory that the stories

humans construct about their future are full of important insights into current behaviour and motivation, as well as information about the socio-cultural contexts that shape those thoughts and images of the future (Seginer, 2009).

In her review of the future orientation literature, Seginer (2009) identifies four broad theoretical frameworks underlying various approaches the study of future orientation of which the self-approach or possible selves is one.[2] First introduced by Markus and Nurius (1986), the concept and theory of possible selves contends that the images or stories individuals carry about themselves in the future are a vital and exciting part of the self-system or self-concept. The "repertoire of possible selves" one holds, according to Markus and Nurius (1986), include the selves one fears becoming in the future, the selves one hopes to become in the future, and the selves one expects one will become in the future (p. 954). As cognitive manifestations of our aspirations and hopes, possible selves provide information about the little studied area of what Markus (2006) calls "the space of what might be" as a vital part of human life and thought (p. xi). At the same time, despite being orientated toward the future, possible selves also provide important information that can help us understand "why we do what we do" (Markus, 2006, p. xi) not only in the future but in the past and present as well.

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[2] The other 3 approaches Seginer (2009) identifies are 1) motivational approaches; 2) goal approaches; and 3) personality or personal disposition approaches. In her review of the future orientation literature, Siegner (2009) focuses specifically on research in the field of psychology. As such, engagement with future orientation within other disciplinary fields, such as narrative therapy or social work, are not included in her review. Nonetheless, her review is one of the only such available overviews of this field of research, and thus provides an important foundation for understanding its conceptualization in this particular field. Because a similar review of the theoretical and practical engagement with the concept of future orientation or possible selves within social work literature does not exist, I dedicate a substantial part of Chapter 3 and its discussion of narrative inquiry to tracing the ways in which narrative concepts allow for the storying and analysis of future orientation and possibility in ways that are both similar to and different from those outlined in psychological research that engages explicitly with the concept of possible selves.

Possible Selves

While an exhaustive review of all possible selves research is beyond the scope of this project, the following section highlights some of the key directions and supporting research relevant to the application of this concept to the study of narratives of sexual violence. To date, possible selves research can be understood to fall into two broad areas: 1) research that considers the content of possible selves, and the contexts or factors shaping that content; and 2) research that considers the function of possible selves in motivation, goal setting and achievement, and well-being, with researchers exploring these two areas in relation to a variety of populations and issues, such as aging (Frazier, Hooker, Johnson, & Kaus, 2000; Hooker & Kaus, 1992; Hoopman, Gerstorf, Smith & Klumb, 2007), adolescence (Anthis, Dunkel & Anderson, 2004; Katz-Wise et al., 2017), parenthood (Hooker et al, 1996), education (Early, 2017; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), and career (Chalk, Meera, Day & Davis, 2005). Significantly, despite the breadth of research that applies the concept of possible selves to various life experiences, sexual violence remains an almost entirely overlooked area of focus. Existing research examining the impacts of sexual violence implicitly acknowledges the potential for these effects to factor into and alter how a survivor approaches her future and the possibilities therein. Nonetheless, sexual violence-specific research has dedicated little focused attention on explicitly engaging with the effect of sexual violence on how "the space of what might be" – that is, the sense or relationship a survivor has with the possibilities she holds for the future – shapes the well-being and healing process. In this sense, both possible selves-focused and sexual violence-focused research may be enriched by exploring this intersection.

The Content and Context of Possible Selves[3]

Central to possible selves theory as a way of conceptualizing the ideas and thoughts one holds of the future is its focus on the way these ideas and thoughts are personalized or individualized. Unlike some other theories of future perspective that consider the nature and function of future-oriented ideas and thoughts more generally (i.e. Gilbert & Wilson, 2007), possible selves refer to those “personalized images, conceptions, or senses of the self in the future” (Cross & Markus, 1991, p. 232). Erikson (2007) elaborates on the way possible selves are specifically concerned with self-concept:

> Possible selves are conceptions of ourselves in the future, including, at least to some degree, an experience of being an agent in a future situation. Possible selves get vital parts of their meaning in interplay with the self-concept, which they in turn moderate, as well as from their social and cultural context. (p. 356)

The possible selves one imagines reflect unique or individualized hopes, fears, and fantasies derived from one’s personal knowledge and understanding of one’s past and present and one’s social context (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As Oyserman and James (2011) describe “as components of the future self, possible identities are working theories of who one may become, based in current assessments of one’s own

[3] In their original article on the subject, Markus and Nurius (1987) ground their conceptualization of possible selves within a social constructionist theory of the self. A social constructionist approach to subjectivity recognizes that there is no singular, static, or “authentic” self; rather, the self is always under construction in relation to its social, cultural, and discursive contexts (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Burr, 2003). For Markus and Nurius (1987), the concept of possible selves offers a mechanism through which to explore the multi-faceted and constantly shifting nature of the self specifically in the context of what that self or selves might look like in the future. See Chapter 3 of this thesis for a more in-depth discussion of social constructionism and its application to theories of subjectivity and the self.

strengths, weaknesses, talents, and characteristics, as well as assessments of what is possible for people like oneself" (p. 119).

Understanding the individualized nature of possible selves has primarily been studied through a focus on examining the content of the future identities and selves people choose (Oyserman & James, 2011). In their review of research related to possible selves content, Oyserman & James (2011) found that across studies possible selves content – that is, what it is people hope to become, fear becoming, and believe they will become – are individualized in ways that reflect and focus on developmental tasks, phases, and transitions that align with an individual's developmental stage.

For example, studies using adolescent samples found that the possible selves they articulated centred on school and extracurricular activities (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Studies examining the content of possible identities held by young adults align with the salient life tasks and transitions associated with this period, including occupational and interpersonal issues, such as career aspirations and romantic relationships and marriage (Hooker, 1992; Klaw, 2008; Strauss & Goldberg, 1999). The possible selves generated by samples of those in middle-age reflect the subjects of parenting, family, and financial security (i.e. Hooker et al. 1996; Lee & Oyserman, 2009). Finally, research examining the possible selves of older adults, likewise finds a relationship between the typical concerns of later life and the content of one's imagined future self: studies that look at the possible selves content of older adults and aging found focus on health, relationships, and independence (Frazier, Hooker, Johnson, & Kaus, 2000; Hooker & Kauss, 1992).

A study comparing the possible selves of a sample of 114 college students between 17 to 23 years of age and 114 older adults between 55 to 89 years of age offers an illustrative example of the manner in which possible selves content can

reflect pre-occupations typical of or associated with an individual's developmental phase (Hooker, 1992). Focusing specifically on the presence or absence of health-related possible selves, the study hypothesized that given the health-related concerns that can accompany the developmental phase of later life, older adults were more likely than college students to generate health-related possible selves. After identifying all their hoped-for possible selves, participants in both groups were then asked to identify their most important hoped-for self from their self-generated lists, and to answer a further set of Likert-scale questions about that most important hoped-for possible self. These questions measured the self-regulatory process related to the possible self, and included such questions as "How capable do you feel of accomplishing your hoped-for possible self," and "How much time to do you spend thinking about this possible self?" (p. P86-87). This process was then repeated with a focus on the participant's most feared possible selves. In keeping with its hypothesis, the older adults were not only more likely to identify at least one hoped-for or feared health-related possible self but also they were more likely to identify this health-related possible self as one of their most important possible selves: 73% of the older adult sample as compared to 17.5% of college students identified health-related possible selves as either their most import hoped-for or feared possible self.

These studies demonstrate what possible selves an individual generates often reflect the developmental tasks typical of one's developmental stage (Cross & Markus, 1991). Nonetheless, while these personalized imaginings of the self are individualized within developmental contexts they are not "independently owned or controlled" (Markus, 2004, p. xii), and it is not only one's developmental phase of life that informs the possible selves content one devises. Rather, possible selves are shaped by the surrounding context, including other people, such as family or friends,

and broader social, cultural, and historical forces and discourse (Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & James, 2011). A growing body of possible selves research investigates how factors including gender (Anthis, Dunkel & Anderson, 2004; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Knox, 2006), race, ethnicity, and culture (Rathbone et al, 2016; Waid & Frazier, 2003), socio-economic position (Lee & Oyserman, 2009), and education (Chalk, Meara, Day & Davis, 2005) create variations in possible selves content. Given the ways in which sexual violence victimization is embedded in these contexts this research although not focused explicitly on sexual violence demonstrates the relevance of considering socio-cultural context not only as a way of shaping past or present experience but also in shaping notions of the self in the future and the sense of possibility therein.

Of relevance for this thesis are those studies that focus on better understanding how gender norms and expectations influence the formation, nature, and function of possible selves (Knox, 2006). Gender differences in possible selves, and their connection to the pressures of negotiating gender norms are evident in studies that examine possible selves in relation to parenting (Hooker et al, 1996; Lee & Oyserman, 2009), education (Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011; Lips, 2004), body image (Fahs & Swank, 2017), and social equality (Fetterolf & Eagly, 2011). In general, studies examining gender differences in possible selves have shown that women are more likely than men to generate possible selves or futures that concern interpersonal and relational themes, particularly when articulating feared possible selves (Anthis, Dunkel & Anderson, 2004; Knox, 2006; Knox, Funk, Elliott & Bush, 2000; Segal, DeMeis, Wood & Smith, 2001). In her review of research on possible selves and gender, Knox (2006) suggests that studies such as these may indicate the way traditional, heteronormative gender scripts in which women's identity and self-

concept has been traditionally more connected to tending interpersonal relationships continue to shape their imagined futures. Certainly, persistent findings that women moreso than men consistently identify more feared possible selves and the content of these feared possible selves centre upon the likelihood of fulfilling or not fulfilling traditional gender roles and expectations (i.e. as nurturers of relationships) suggest that in imagining their futures women may exhibit greater awareness of the challenges of navigating complex gender rules and codes than men, and that this awareness may limit or shape the possible selves they identify for themselves.

For example, Hooker et al. (1996) used the construct of possible selves to examine the impact of parenting on adult self-development among a sample of parents of children 12 months or younger (n = 108) and parents of children between 2 and 5 years of age (n = 120). Using the Possible Selves Questionnaire, study participants were asked to identify their 3 most important hoped-for possible selves and their three most important feared possible selves. The results of the collected data revealed that possible selves related to occupation and parenting were most common across both sample groups and genders. However, the nature of these possible selves differed by gender: while parenting was strongly represented among male and female respondents, mothers of infants and preschoolers were more likely (50%) than fathers (26%) to hold feared parenting possible selves, including specific fears relating to negative outcomes in a child's future; fears regarding single parenthood; and fears regarding challenges in balancing parenting with other commitments and being "stretched too thin" (p. 548). As Hooker et al. (1996) point out the gender differences in feared parenting possible selves suggests the way "gender-role stereotypes regarding who is responsible for children's developmental outcomes may still exist in

the mind of parents" (p. 548), as well as that "the responsibility for child-rearing weighs more heavily on women's psyches than on men's" (p. 548).

In another study, Fettrolf and Eagerly (2011) combined a focus on parenting and career possible selves to examine young women's expectations of experiencing gender equality as future mothers working outside of the home. In this study, Fetterolf and Eagerly (2011) examined young women's expectations of gender equality in relation to imagined future careers through an analysis of their career and marriage possible selves. Participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked to imagine themselves as a married mother of a preschool child and employed either full-time, part-time, or not at all, and having attained either an undergraduate or graduate degree. They were then asked to write about a typical day as that imagined person for 5 minutes, after which they completed a series of questionnaires designed to measure their and their husband's expected salaries, hours of work per week outside of the home, emotional well-being, and likelihood of attaining life goals.

Analysis of the data revealed that young women expected fewer employment hours and a smaller salary than their husbands, as well as more responsibility for housework and childcare than their husbands – findings that suggest that heteronormative and gender role expectations continue to shape women's expectations about the challenges they will face in their possible futures related to equality both professionally and personally. In this sense, this study demonstrates how possible selves can be useful in understanding the embeddedness of gender norms and inequalities: as the researchers observed, "the fact that even highly qualified young women anticipating future educational and career attainment still expect inequality in their future lives suggests that they do not expect much societal movement toward greater gender equality" (p. 91).

In her study of the possible selves of African American pregnant and parenting youth, Klaw (2008) complicates or deepens these analyses of the relationship between socio-cultural contexts and identity factors and possible selves by considering intersecting discourses about gender, race, age, economic status, and mothering. In the context of existing research that has demonstrated that discrimination and systemic racism lower the hopes and motivation for marginalized youth (Kao & Tienda, 1998), Klaw (2008) uses the possible selves concept to better understand the interaction of contexts such as family, school, peers, the media, and other systems and communities in the future selves and aspirations of African American adolescent mothers. Data collected through focus groups with 30 adolescent mothers and analyzed using a grounded theory approach, Klaw (2008) found that intersecting factors of poverty, race, age, and being a single parent are reflected in the possible selves the young women in this study imagined for themselves. While the majority of the participants identified hoped-for possible selves in which they were married, professional women with stable incomes, the likelihood of achieving these hoped-for possible selves were also complicated by the challenges they identified in accessing childcare, transportation, and financial support for pursuing further education. Klaw's (2008) study provides an example of how an intersectional analysis of the content and stories women tell about their possible selves allows space for not only learning about their hoped-for or ideal possible selves but also how the specific social contexts within which they live create barriers to the realization of these selves. In doing so, Klaw (2008) points to the potential for possible selves research to support social justice: by gathering women's stories about their hopes for the future and the specific barriers they see as interfering with achieving these hopes, possible selves research in her framework becomes a means of identifying and addressing the structural barriers,

such as the need for expanded healthcare and childcare, job training, and better financial support for education, that prevent the realization of possible selves rather than focusing on individual factors or limitations.

As these studies suggest, the content of women's possible selves, and particularly their feared possible selves, offer a rich area of analysis for exploring how socio-cultural contexts and dominant discourse about gender shape women's engagement with what might be possible in the future. In this sense, applied to the contexts of this thesis, the possible selves articulated by women survivors of sexual violence are not only sites through which dominant scripts about sexual violence and gender may be made visible. Possible selves are also sites through which to understand the power of these scripts in affirming possible futures that reinforce rather than challenge the limited stories about women's potential they often contain.

Possible Selves and Significant Life Events

As the above review has demonstrated, possible selves research has focused predominantly on understanding the relationship of possible selves to developmental tasks and transitions, as well as to understanding how specific socio-cultural and demographic contexts are reflected in possible selves content and the pathways through which these possible selves may or may not be achieved. In addition, in efforts to understand the nature, content, and function of the possible selves concept, researchers have also focused on mobilizing this concept in relation to a variety of human experiences, struggles, and achievements, such as aging (Frazier, Hooker, Johnson, & Kaus, 2000; Hooker & Kaus, 1992; Hoopman, Gerstorf, Smith & Klumb, 2007), divorce (King & Raspin, 2004), career development (Chalk, Meera, Day & Davis, 2005), and gender identity (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). To date, however, relatively few studies have considered the function or role of significant unexpected

life events, problems, or setbacks in relation to future self-concept (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Oyserman & James, 2011). Even fewer have explicitly considered the content and function of possible selves in relation to trauma, and specifically in populations of survivors of sexual violence.

One exception is a study of 198 adults conducted by Barreto & Frazier (2012) designed to investigate to what extent significant, stressful life events are present or integrated within an individual's possible selves repertoire. Barreto & Frazier (2012) rated the level of integration of significant life events as identified through the participant's completion of the *Social Readjustment Rating Scale* (SRSS) (Holmes & Rahe, 1976) within qualitative descriptions of each participants 3 most hoped for and most feared possible selves. The degree of integration was rated on a 5-point scale (0=no integration to 5=extremely integrated); a high degree of integration was noted in instances when the stressful event was explicitly discussed in the possible self, with the highest (5) being those instances when "a possible self (or selves) … totally emobd[ies] the stressful event" (p. 1795). For instance, an example of an extremely integrated stressful event would be noted when an individual who has recently remarried following a difficult divorce articulates her hoped for or feared possible selves in relation to the divorce (p. 1795).

In their analysis, Barreto & Frazier (2012) found that 76% of the sample reported possible selves that integrated stressful or significant events, a finding that demonstrates that possible selves are not only sensitive to developmental context but also to significant and stressful life events. Moreover, when they compared the stressfulness of the life event with the degree of integration, they found that the greater the stressfulness or salience of the event the greater the degree it is integrated into the possible selves repertoire. In other words, the future selves an individual

imagines for themselves is at least in some ways often a reflection of previous experiences of stressful or significant life events, and that the greater that stress or significance of that event the more likely it will inform how one thinks about one's future. A number of other individual studies have examined the influence or impact of changes in life circumstances that are unexpected or outside of normative transitions, such as terminal illness (Frazier, Cotrell & Hooker, 2003), delinquency (Oyserman & Markus, 1999), and divorce (King & Raspin, 2004) on possible selves. While the specific findings from each study varies, collectively they echo findings from (Barretto & Frazier, 2012) that significant life events are important to consider in relation to possible selves.

Sexual violence is not explicitly identified as a stressful life event on the *SRSS* used in the Baretto & Frazier (2012) study on significant life events. Although this scale does provide an indicator for "personal injury / trauma" – a category that participants may use to indicate an experience of sexual violence – this study does not provide a clear analysis on sexual violence. Nonetheless, in terms of opening up space for exploring the ways experiences of sexual violence are present in women's narratives of possibility, this study provides evidence of the likelihood that a stressful event such as sexual assault is more likely than not to become integrated into the possible selves a survivor imagines, and, in addition, to shape her motivation in moving toward or away from that future.

Acknowledging that certain unexpected life events can render the possible selves or futures an individual once imagines unattainable as a result of that event, some researchers approach the study of the role of significant, stressful, and traumatic events on possible selves repertoires through the concept of "lost" possible selves (King & Mitchell, 2015; King & Raspin, 2004). "Lost" possible selves are

“representations of the self in the future, which may have once held the promise of positive affect, but which are no longer a part of a person’s life” (King & Mitchell, 2014, p. 319). In one study (King & Raspin, 2004), researchers examined the significant life event of divorce among a sample of women who had been married for 15 years or more, and its impact on their possible selves. In this study, participants were asked to provide a written narrative account of their retrospective best possible self had they not got divorced. They were then asked to do the same activity but with a focus on their current best imagined future as they imagined it in the present moment. Participants also provided quantitative data related to the salience of the future self, including “how much they currently think about this possible self, how clear the scenario was, and how easy it was to imagine” (p. 611). In addition, participants completed measures related to subjective well-being (SWB) and ego-development (ED). Data was analyzed to measure the salience or role of “lost” possible selves in personal development, subjective well-being, and ego development.

Findings from this study are important first of all for its identification of the presence “lost” possible selves, and the manner in which these selves can continue to impact well-being, identity and meaning-making: through a correlative analysis, King & Raspin (2004) found that the salience (the more present) of the lost possible self was negatively related to SWB while the salience of the found (or current) future self was positively related to SWB. While this finding confirms previous research that demonstrates that imagining or visualizing a positive future is a contributor to well-being (i.e. Gonzales, Burgess, Mobilio, 2001), a more unusual finding concerned the positive relationships between the salience of lost possible selves and ego development or meaning-making. In a later study, King & Mitchell (2015) elaborate on this finding to suggest that contemplation of those “lost” possible selves may in

fact be an important opportunity for personal development, and potentially healing: "Placing unattainable goals in a developmental context provides a window to the processes by which traumatic experiences can spur personality development" (p. 311). Again, while these studies do not examine the specific issue of sexual violence, their conceptualization of "lost" possible selves, and the role these selves may play in present well-being is another important piece of exploring narratives of meaning-making that often accompanies the authoring of possible selves.

Sexualized Violence and Possible Selves

Research examining sexual violence as a significant life event in relation to the possible selves concept is limited to two recent studies (Anders, Olmstead, & Johnson, 2017; Anders & Olmstead, 2019). In the first study, researchers explored what they referred to as the "sexual possible selves" – "the expected and feared sexual selves that individuals hold for themselves in the proximal future" (Anders & Olmstead, 2019, n.p.) – among a sample of 282 first-semester undergraduate college students between the ages of 18 and 25. Using an on-line survey that required participants to complete a series of open-ended questions about their sexual possible selves, this study sought to identify what expected and feared sexual possible selves college students hold (i.e. the content, or how they describe them), the strategies students describe to achieve or avoid their sexual possible selves, as well as any variations in this data based on "sex, intercourse experience, relationship type, or religiosity" (pp. 730-31). Data collected from the survey was analyzed through a process of open-ended coding that identified six categories each for students' expected and feared sexual possible selves. Although this study did not focus explicitly on sexual violence, rape and sexual assault emerged as one of the six feared sexual possible selves held by first-year college students among 12.1% of the sample.

Among those who identified rape/sexual assault as a feared sexual possible self, 90% were women, who were also more likely than men (3.6%) to identify rape/assault-related strategies for avoiding this feared sexual possible self, such as not walking alone, not getting drunk, and various other protective measures. Moreover, although this study did not make an explicit connection to sexual violence in these instances, the emergence of the categories of feared sexual possible selves related to risky behaviours and reputation appear closely related to the issue of sexual violence wherein participants described situations that may make them more vulnerable to sexual assault, and/or being blamed or otherwise stigmatized in relation to sexual assault.

In a follow-up study, Anders and Olmstead (2019) used semi-structured interviews to explore how the sexual possible selves first-year college students' hold are developed and why they are important to their sexuality. In other words, rather than focusing on the content of the expected and feared sexual possible selves, this study looked to better understand the context or influence of sexual possible selves. As in the earlier study (Anders, Olmstead, & Johnson, 2017), participants in this study also identified experiencing sexual assault/coercion emerged as one of their feared sexual possible selves, with slightly more than half of the sample (51.4%) articulating this fear. In describing those developmental and behavioural influences that informed or shaped their sexual possible selves, participants identified alcohol, parties, and college or "hook-up" culture as connected to sexual assault and coercion and identified restricting attendance at parties or the amount of alcohol consumptions as strategies they could use to avoid this feared possible self.

In its exploration of the strategies employed to avoid the feared sexual possible self of rape or sexual assault victim, these studies offer preliminary evidence

of the manner in which the future selves one imagines shapes behavior in the present, and that for college-aged students, especially women, the threat of sexual violence in the future may cause them to limit various behaviours and choices related to socializing with peers, alcohol consumption, and how and when they move from one place to another (i.e. never traveling alone, etc.). Nonetheless, while these studies make connections between sexual violence and possible selves, their purpose is focused more explicitly on understanding sexuality and sexual behavior in relation to future conceptions of the self within the context of developmental tasks (i.e. transition to adulthood). Moreover, given that sexual violence is not an expression or experience of sexuality or sex but rather violence, these studies offer limited evidence for understanding how significant life events such as those associated with the trauma of sexual violence play out in the possible selves survivors of violence imagine for themselves.

The above review of possible selves research demonstrates the importance of considering the stories and thoughts individuals construct about their hoped for and feared possible future selves. As this review has demonstrated exploration of one's possible selves can reveal important information about current behavior and the contextual factors that shape that behavior. In this sense, in addition to providing insight into individual hopes and fears, possible selves also offer insight into understanding how socio-cultural factors shape those hopes and fears in expansive and limiting ways. In addition, possible selves research demonstrates that significant and unexpected life events that may include trauma-inducing experiences, such as illness, death, and divorce, play an important part in shaping possible selves. Nonetheless, to date, no studies look explicitly at how women as survivors of sexual violence think about their future in relation to the possible selves concept. As such, to

find a more closely related discussion of the impact of sexual violence on how women imagine their futures and the possibilities, it is necessary to look outside the possible selves literature to the current body of sexual violence research.

Sexual Violence and Possibility

Although there are currently no studies that apply the possible selves concept to the experience of sexual violence, sexual violence literature more generally does provide some preliminary explorations of women's understandings of the ways sexual violence shapes their expectations for the future and their sense of possibility. More specifically, as will be reviewed in the following section, sexual violence research engages with the topic of possibility as one part of larger studies focused 1) on identifying the impact of sexual violence in general, 2) on articulating models of recovery and healing, and 3) on exploring the socio-cultural contexts and public discourse that shape women's experiences of sexual violence.

The Impact of Sexual Violence

There is now an extensive body of literature that documents the many impacts sexual violence may hold across the lifespan. This research tells numerous stories about the various psychological, physical, social, economic, and relational challenges one might experience in one's future following sexual violence (i.e. Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009). A smaller body of research also tells stories about more positive change or growth in the aftermath of sexual violence (i.e. McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; Olsen, 2015) that can occur alongside these challenges. Within this now extensive body of literature documenting the impacts of sexual violence, studies that focus explicitly on the topic of possibility or, more broadly, the theme of future orientation are limited. Nonetheless, although not the main focus of current sexual violence research, understanding the role sexual violence plays in shaping women's

sense of possibility, including her hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future, is present to some extent in studies that look more generally at the mental health and psychological impacts of sexual violence, and those that document the longer-term consequences of sexual violence across a variety of additional social and economic domains.

The psychological consequences of sexual violence on possible futures.

Sexual violence is now widely recognized to have a significant impact on women's mental and psychological health (Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral, 2009; Dworkin, 2018; Koss & Burkhart, 1989; Resick, 1993). Amongst the extensive body of research that examines the psychological consequences of sexual violence are studies that point to findings that may help to understand how sexual violence shapes a survivor's orientation to her future and her sense of possibility.

In a meta-analysis of quantitative studies published between January 1, 1970 and December 31, 2014 examining the prevalence of specific DSM-defined mental disorders in survivors of sexual assault, Dworkin (2018) found that in nearly all the 39 unique studies reviewed survivors of sexual assault had a higher prevalence of DSM-defined mental disorders than people who had not been sexually assaulted. Sexual assault survivors were found to have a significantly higher risk for anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, lifetime bulimia nervosa, OCD, PTSD, and all substance use disorders (p. 8). In keeping with previous research, Dworkin (2018) found sexual violence to be a significant predictor of PTSD in women's lives (Campbell et al., 2009; Chivers-Wilson, 2006; Dworkin, Menon, Bystrynski, & Allen, 2017). More specifically, the meta-analysis of 39 studies revealed that 36% percent of sexual assault survivors reported lifetime PTSD and 26% reported past-year PTSD, prevalence rates that were significantly greater than the non-survivor comparison

group that reported 9% lifetime PTSD and 18% past-year PTSD, and that was also higher than in survivors of other forms of trauma (Dworkin, 2018, p. 14). Significant differences in depressive symptomology were also noted between people who had experienced sexual assault and those who had not: 39% of survivors reported lifetime depressive disorders and 24% reported experiencing depressive disorders in the past year; for people who had not experienced sexual assault, 17% and 11% reported lifetime and past year depressive disorders respectively (Dworkin, 2018).

Among the numerous studies that examine the nature of PTSD symptomology among sexual violence survivors are those that document specific symptoms that concern negative thoughts and feelings related to future orientation. For example, these studies describe the prevalence of feelings of vulnerability, hopelessness, and powerlessness (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985); changes in worldview, including "loss of belief in the trustworthiness of others, justice, and their own worth" (Littleton & Breitkopf, 2006, p. 107); decreased life satisfaction (Fergusson, McLeod, & Horwood, 2013); feelings of helplessness, paralyzed initiative, hopelessness (Godbey & Hutchinson, 1996), a "shattere[ed] sense of connection between individual and community" (Herman, 1992, p. 55), and a sense of a foreshortened future (Brison, 2002). In addition are those studies that consider the psychological impact of sexual violence specifically on self-concept or sense of self. Numerous studies document the many consequences of sexual violence demonstrated to impact self-concept include changes in self-worth and self-esteem (Ullman, 1996; Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2014; Perilloux, Duntley, & Buss, 2012); shame (DeCou, Mahoney, Kalan & Shannon, 2019); guilt and self-blame (Wood & Rennie, 1994); a sense of the self as stigmatized (Deitz, Williams, Rife, & Cantrell, 2015; Kennedy & Prock, 2018; Littleton &

Breitkopf, 2006); and difficulty in self-forgiveness (Davidson, Lozano, Cole, & Gervais, 2013).

More recently, those seeking to challenge the embeddedness of conceptualizations of the psychological impacts of sexual violence within discourses of illness and pathology have argued for an understanding of the impact of sexual violence that makes room for more positive psychological outcomes in its aftermath (Ai & Park, 2005; Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004; Gavey & Schmidt, 2011; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). For example, in her grounded theory study involving 10 women rape survivors, McKenzie-Mohr (2014) examined how women challenged dominant and harmful narratives about rape and survivorship to engage in "living well" (p. 70). According to McKenzie-Mohr, women survivors utilize what she describes as "tightrope talk' – a discursive strategy "whereby women storying their lives are discursively required to hold both active and acted upon positions simultaneously" – in order to engage in a form of "'both/and' counterstorying" (p. 76). Women invoke strategies of 'tightrope talk' and 'both/and counterstorying' in ways that challenge dominant, limiting narratives and instead "legitimiz[e] their experiences as rape (deflecting self-blame by acknowledging that they had been assaulted), while also promoting empowering descriptions of their active engagement in daily living" (p. 76). Ultimately, these practices support women in realising the possibility of "living well" in the aftermath of rape – a possibility that runs counter to the bulk of research literature emphasizing the negative impacts of sexual violence.

Additional studies further identify examples of what 'living well' might look like as it relates specifically to self-concept in the aftermath of sexual violence (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004; Woodward & Joseph, 2003). In their narrative study involving 29 adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse,

Woodward and Joseph (2003) identified three areas of positive change: inner drive toward growth (factors that were internal to the person); vehicles of change (positive changes that were triggered through interactions with others); and psychological changes (p. 273). Among those responses related to psychological changes, study participants identified positive changes in self-perception that included increased self-awareness, increased ability to express and tune into feelings, increased awareness of inner strengths, and renewed understanding of additional changes in needed to enhance self-concept.

These studies offer important avenues for considering the aftermath of sexual violence in ways that challenge the many negative psychological impacts noted in current research. However, even within these studies, researchers have yet to explicitly engage with an exploration of how sexual violence plays a role in shaping the possibilities survivors imagine for their future. One exception is a quantitative study examining the factors associated with posttraumatic mental health among sexual assault survivors (Stermac, Cabral, Clarke & Toner, 2014). In this study, researchers identified "Hope Agency" (i.e. having goal-directed energy or will) as positively coorelated to post-traumatic growth and less distress in sexual assault survivors. Findings from this study echo those in post-traumatic literature more generally that identify the significance of hope in positive change following trauma (Elliot, Witty, Herrick, & Hoffman, 1991; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997; Snyder, 1995). While the function and nature of hope is a key component of delineating the nature of future orientation (Oyserman & James, 2011), sexual violence-specific post-traumatic growth literature has yet to consider the role the hopes survivors hold for their future as part of their understanding of 'living well' in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Collectively, literature examining the psychological impact of sexual violence demonstrates implicitly that how women think about and orient themselves to the future may be shaped by the mental health and psychological challenges that often follow experiences of sexual violence. Nonetheless, while these studies are important in providing evidence of a relationship between sexual violence and the concept of the possibility in general terms, they do not explicitly position this relationship as the focus of study nor do they ask how women themselves understand the relationship between sexual violence, self-concept and other factors of psychological well-being, and their hoped for and feared possible selves.

The socio-economic consequences of sexual violence on possible futures.

In addition to research focusing on the psychological effects of sexual violence, research that considers the consequences of sexual violence in the socio-economic domains of women's lives offer further avenues for exploring the connection between sexual violence and possibility (Dhir, 2018; Hyman, 2000; Hoodenbagh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2018; Monnier, Resnick, & Kilpatrick, 2002). The economic consequences of sexual violence on women's lives are still only sporadically documented in statistical and research data (Hoodenbagh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2014; Johnson & Dawson, 2011). In general, research that examines the economic costs associated with sexual violence in Canada has focused on the costs incurred to the government in providing services to respond to sexual violence (Hankivsky & Draker, 2008; Hoodenbagh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2014). For example, the most recent data available from Justice Canada estimates that sexual assault and other sexual offenses cost Canadians $4.8 billion in 2009 (Hoodenbagh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2014).

Some effort has also been made to better understand the costs of sexual violence carried by survivors themselves. The same Justice Canada report (Hoodenbah, Zhang & McDonal, 2014) estimated costs to survivors associated with "lost productivity," which includes lost current income, lost household services, lost education, lost childcare services, lost future income, long-term disability costs, and mental health disability costs. In 2014, the total costs in lost productivity was estimated at more than 200 million dollars ($210,169,873). In addition, this report also estimates the intangible costs associated with sexual violence related to a survivor's pain and suffering – a cost that was estimated at over 3 billion dollars (Hoodenbagh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2014). It is interesting to note that costs associated with sexual assault and other sexual offenses are significantly greater than the other forms of violent crime measured in this study, including assault, criminal harassment, homicide, and robbery. In fact, the costs associated with assault ($840,135,857) were the second highest but were still almost 5 million dollars *less* than the costs incurred as a result of sexual assault and other sexual offences (Hoodenbagh, Zhang, & McDonald, 2014).

The inclusion of categories such as 'lost education,' 'lost current income,' and 'lost future income' when considering the economic impact of sexual violence are important indicators that begin to conceptualize the impact of sexual violence on the possible futures survivors of sexual violence that have only just begun to be explored in sexual violence literature. In her study, Hyman (2000) explored the economic consequences of childhood sexual abuse for adult lesbian women. Drawing on data collected as part of the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (NLHCS), Hyman (2000) looked specifically at a sample of 1,889 lesbian women ranging in age from 20 to 80 years of age who had experienced childhood sexual abuse in relation to the

variables of health, mental health, education, and economic welfare. Analysis of the data revealed that when controlling for other variables women who had a history of childhood sexual abuse were less likely to complete a college or post-secondary degree (Hyman, 2000). As well, women childhood sexual abuse survivors experienced an adverse negative impact on their earnings both directly as an effect of the childhood sexual abuse and indirectly through the impact of the CSA on her health, mental health, and educational attainment. In her discussion, Hyman (2000) points to the need for better understanding how childhood sexual abuse may impact women's decisions about education and career – or, in other words, women's hoped and feared possible educational and career selves – for instance by influencing factors such as "her information about occupations, her risk-taking behaviors, and her self-confidence" (p. 208). Learning about the ways women survivors of childhood sexual abuse formulate their possible selves in the domains of education and occupation may be one way to strengthen understanding of the lasting socio-economic impact of sexual violence.

Additional studies likewise demonstrate the adverse effect of sexual assault and abuse on women's educational and occupational pursuits (Schilling, Aseltine Jr., & Gore, 2007; Loya, 2015), and their economic security (Loya, 2014). In their study examining the relationship between depressive symptoms and functioning in the domains of education, work, and intimate relationship in a sample of young women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, Schilling, Aseltine Jr., and Gore (2007) found what they described as "the widespread reverberations of these experiences in multiple domains" (p. 119). Specifically, this study found that in general women with histories of childhood sexual abuse had lower attendance at 4-year colleges and experienced less enjoyment at school than those without a history of childhood sexual

abuse – a finding that Schilling et al. (2007) argue is troubling in considering the future career prospects and subsequent economic security of survivors: "because career pathways involving college education lead to employment in better paying and more prestigious occupations in adulthood and because social competence at work is an important key to success, these results bode relatively poorly for their future career prospects" (p. 120).

Emerging research examining the impact of post-secondary sexual assault on the educational, intellectual, and life trajectories of survivors further demonstrates the adverse effects in these domains (Potter, Howard, Murphy & Moynihan, 2018; Raymond, 2018). One U.S. based study found that 91% of a sample of women who had experienced sexual assault while on campus (n = 89) reported the psychological impacts associated with the assault negatively impacted their educational and career plans and outcomes. For example, 67% of participants indicated that their experience of sexual assault and its aftermath negatively impacted their academic performance in terms of grades and attendance, and 58% experienced a disruption in their previously planned timeline for completing their degree. In addition, participants in this study linked their experience of sexual assault to diminished career outcomes, including "perceived underachievement, workforce performance, and safety limitations that influenced a participant's ability to secure employment" (p. 500).

In her study, Loya (2015) looked specifically at the economic impact of isolated experiences of adult sexual assault. Data collected through in-depth, individual interviews with 27 survivors demonstrated some of ways sexual assault and its subsequent impacts on mental health impact their employment and economic well-being, including time-off, diminished performance, job loss and an inability to work. As Loya (2014, 2015) argues sexual violence can work to create and maintain

women's employment and economic insecurity, particularly for women who are already additionally marginalized. For instance, Loya (2014) identified two pathways through which economic precarity and sexual violence are mutually reinforced in the lives of some Latina and African American women survivors of sexual assault. First of all, the psychological impact of sexual violence effects work performance in ways that can disrupt income and create economic stability that is particularly troubling for women already experiencing economic insecurity. Secondly, this economic precarity heightens the risk of sexual violence and contributes additional barriers to recovery: "[w]omen with financial and social resources can potentially leverage these assets to both avoid sexual assault and recover from it when it occurs, whereas women without such resources lack these options" (p. 1300).

Data from these studies that reveals how experiences of sexual violence cause survivors to change their educational or career goals demonstrates the potential for a deeper analysis of the impact of sexual violence on survivors' sense of possibility within the socio-economic domains of women's lives. To be sure, emerging findings related to the long-term economic and occupational impact of sexual violence on survivors' earning ability and economic trajectories suggest that considering women's narratives about their possible socio-economic futures in the aftermath of sexual violence may make visible the myriad of ways sexual violence continues to perpetuate gender inequality in general (Loya, 2015). Nonetheless, while these studies make clear that sexual violence often carries an economic, educational, and occupational impact in women's futures, largely absent from these studies is an exploration of how women survivors themselves connect their experiences of sexual violence with their hoped for and feared economic, career, and educational possible selves. As this thesis

will demonstrate, exploring women survivors' possibility stories offers one way of deepening this understanding.

Sexual Violence and Models of Healing

In addition to an extensive body of research identifying the mental health and socio-economic impact and effect of sexual violence, there is a substantial body of research that looks to define models of healing and recovery following sexual violence. These provide another important context for conceptualizing possibility in relation to women's experiences of sexual violence. Drawing primarily on qualitative methodologies that seek to give voice to women's own understandings of experiences and impacts of sexual violence, these studies emphasize the need for what has been recognized as a more complex and nuanced analysis of the consequences of sexual violence and the process of healing (Brison, 2002; Draucker et al., 2009; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). One area in which such nuanced accounts are emerging and that hold particular relevance for this thesis is in studies that explore women's strategies and processes for grappling with these consequences in the aftermath of violence as these relate especially to its impact on self-concept or sense of self (Draucker et al., 2009; Goodbey & Hutchinson, 1996; Herman, 1992; Wright & Gabriel, 2018). Indeed, in a qualitative metasynthesis of 51 reports examining the process of healing from sexual violence, Draucker et al. (2009) found that "the experience of sexual violence almost inevitably affected the participants' sense of self" (p. 374).

Variously described as a process of "resurrecting the buried self" (Godbey & Hutchinson, 1996, p. 309), "transforming self" (Wing & Oertle, 1999, p. 582), or "redefining self" (Smith & Kelly, 2001, p. 346), survivors interviewed in these various qualitative studies identify a significant task in the aftermath of sexual violence to be grappling with, making sense of, and actively engaging in the

construction of an altered version of self. While the focus in these studies is never explicitly on understanding how self-concept is revised in relation to possible future selves or identities, in their analysis of women's stories of healing and recovery, some of these studies do connect with and consider how this work of 'remaking the self' involves grappling with ideas of the self in the future, what Herman (1992) describes as "the task of creating a future" (p. 196).

For instance, in a study examining the impact of child sexual abuse on self-concept in a sample of 30 adult survivors of child sexual abuse, Karyer, Seddon, Robinson, and Gwilyn (2015) identified the theme of the "potential/developing self" as one of three views of self that emerged from their interview data. Through individual interviews with adult survivors of child sexual abuse, researchers utilized a biographical interview method to elicit narratives about the "events and experiences that have been important to [the participant] during adulthood" (p. 138), and analyzed the data thematically to identify "the meaning and selves that participants constructed through their narratives" (p. 139). This analysis revealed three views of self: the worthless self, the self as unknown, and the potential/developing self (p. 140). Compared to respondents who identified more with the worthless or unknown self, those who described a potential/developing self were those who had found a way to "turn their experiences into a positive force to help others" (p. 145) or who had supportive connections with others. This finding seems to support findings in possible selves research that make a connection between the accessibility of a possible future and the likelihood of an individual taking steps that align with that future (i.e. Norman & Aron, 2003). In this case, one might hypothesize the presence of supportive others may play a role in encouraging survivors to pursue their hopes or dreams for their futures.

Likewise, in their narrative study focusing on the changes in sense of self of adult women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Saha, Chung, and Thorne (2011) found that after group therapy – that is, after the provision of supportive connections with others – survivors reported overall improved sense of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-confidence, and that these changes also led to "a sense of optimism about the future" (p. 110). This finding is interesting in relation to findings from possible selves research that demonstrates the importance of accessibility – that is, the ease with which a person can see a possible self – to taking steps toward that possible self (Norman & Aron, 2003). In this study, the group work intervention – and the opportunity it provided to see other women in the healing process – perhaps, made the idea of possible selves that were more positive seem more accessible.

Thus, while these studies do not provide extensive analysis of survivors' understanding of possibility within their healing processes, they offer important groundwork in suggesting that grappling with possible future selves is present in some form within these processes and may be an important area of exploration for women in making sense of their experiences of sexual violence.

Possibility in a Rape-Supportive Culture

A final area in sexual violence research that must be considered when approaching the possibility stories at the centre of this thesis is that which explores the socio-cultural context within which sexual violence occurs and through which individual experiences of sexual violence are mediated (i.e. Burstow, 2003; Gavey, 2005, Muldoon, Taylor, & Norma, 2015; Wasco, 2003; Wood & Rennie, 1994). As demonstrated above, possible selves research recognizes that socio-cultural contexts play largely into the sorts of future aspirations and hopes an individual might hold, and any exploration of future orientation and possibility must consider these contexts

(Markus & Nurius, 1986). The imperative of considering how the stories an individual creates about their future are created in dialogue with the socio-cultural context and discourse seems particularly significant given what current sexual violence research demonstrates about the way healing from sexual violence and/or what being a sexual violence survivor "looks" like within public discourse is mediated by a number of limited discursive scripts that exist within a "rape-support culture" (Anderson & Doherty, 2008, p. 3).

Feminist sexual violence researchers have long insisted on the importance of understanding the socio-cultural context and social discourse about sexual violence when understanding the experience of sexual violence survivors (Burstow, 2005; Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Gravey, 2005; Wood & Rennie, 1994). Early research in this area argued that the focus on psychopathology in research on sexual violence individualized and medicalized the problem of sexual violence and healing in ways that overlooked the complex and pervasive ways in which socio-cultural discourses about sexual violence, victimhood, and survivorship that make judgements about blame and responsibility (Wood & Rennie, 1994) – what Anderson & Doherty (2003) refer to as a "rape-supportive culture" (p. 3) – shaped the experiences of women survivors of sexual violence.

In one of the early studies to draw attention to this socio-cultural context and its impact on women's sense of self, Wood and Rennie (1994) found that women's identity as a victim / survivor is connected to their understanding of how their experience aligns with the "acceptable" versions of what constitutes rape within the dominant socio-cultural narrative. As Wood and Rennie (1994) observe, "women who are raped are victimized not only by the act itself, but also by their transformation into victims in the public domain" (p. 126) – a transformation that

Wood and Rennie (1994) argue holds specific implications for women's futures: "although the status of victim may afford some benefits in obtaining services, and gaining sympathy, it carries with it implications for future interaction in a world that has little tolerance for victims" (p. 126).

In their analysis of interview data collected from eight women who had been raped by someone known to them, Wood & Rennie (1994) found that how women formulated their experience as one of rape – that is, whether or not they labelled their experience of rape – was largely mediated by interactions with other people and societal ideas about what constitutes rape in general. Wood and Rennie (1994) found that in their sample women's discursive strategies revealed that because their experiences did not match the so-called "Hollywood" rape – a scenario in which a rape "has to be violent, perpetrated by a stranger (the acceptable villain) and acted upon a woman who is not dressed provocatively and if possible is a virgin (the acceptable victim)" (p. 145) – it was difficult to label their experience as such and to understand themselves in relation to this experience. In contrast to much early literature that often created binary or dichotomous identities through which women were to understand their experience of rape (i.e. "pathology vs. resilience; self vs. other blame; characterological vs. behavioural self-blame, victim vs non-victim; and victim vs. survivor" (p. 128), Wood & Rennie (1994)'s study revealed that in fact "women use discourse in complex ways to claim and reject various identities for themselves and others and to construct multiple versions of control, blame, and responsibility" (p. 128) This complexity, as later scholars have demonstrated, is evidence of the challenges women survivors face while negotiating their experiences within this culture (Gavey, 2005; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014).

Studies have since more deeply explored how the self-concept of survivors of violence is shaped in relation to pervasive, dominant socio-cultural scripts that work to police the selves or identities available to women following sexual violence (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Gavey, 2005; Lamb, 1999). For Anderson and Doherty (2003), "social reasoning about rape" creates conditions in which women who have experienced sexual violence are forced to justify, minimize, or otherwise create "accounts" of their experience in dialogue with "a pattern of derogatory judgements about rape victims [that] has been documented at every level of society" (p. 4). As Anderson and Doherty (2003) observe: "Although most people would recognize in the abstract that rape is a morally unjustifiable act, it seems that rape victims are nevertheless particularly likely to be monitored for their 'innocence' and the degree of that innocence in the incident itself" (p. 5).

In their study, Anderson and Doherty (2003) analyze women's accounts of sexual violence to explore the ways dominant rape myths or "rape-supportive arguments" factor into these accounts and into broader public and institutional discourse and practice. Some of the tenets of a "rape-supportive culture" identified by Anderson and Doherty (2003) include those which question the legitimacy of the charge of rape and/or the victim herself, including strategies that construct women as "manipulative or vindictive" or as "somehow unimportant and not worthy of sympathy," and/or questioning or minimizing women's claims of sexual assault in ways that suggest she is lying, she changed her mind after the fact, or she is exaggerating the impact or significance of the sexual assault. Most significantly, such rape supportive beliefs and strategies work to attack the selves of victims and to suggest that they themselves are to blame, a practice, that Anderson and Doherty (2003) and many others have identified, as "accomplished by insisting that an alleged

victim either provoked the attack or was somehow reckless in his/her behaviour and is thus blameworthy in failing to prevent the attack" (p. 12).

Feminist literature examining the socio-cultural context of sexual assault holds relevance for conceptualizing possibility in that, as numerous other scholars have demonstrated, it bears significant consequences for the selves or identities of survivors who must confront many of these beliefs and attitudes (Filipas & Ullman, 2001; Ullman, 2010). Researchers argue that to fully comprehend the impact of sexual violence on victims it is essential to move beyond understandings that describe this impact "solely within a PTSD framework" (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2006, p. 226), and instead to adopt an socio-cultural approach to understanding the impact of sexual violence, that is an approach that recognizes that the negative mental health sequalae of sexual assault stems from multiple factors, not just characteristics of the victim. Aspects of the assault itself, post-assault disclosures and help-seeking, and socio-cultural norms help shape the way in which trauma affects women's psychological well-being (Campbell et al., 2006, p. 226; see also Burstow 2003; Gavey & Schmidt, 2011).

More recently, an extensive body of literature examining the secondary victimization women encounter following sexual violence demonstrates how the individuals and institutions to which survivors may turn for support and assistance replicate rape-supportive myths in ways that devalue the worth and experiences of these women (Ahrens, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, & Barnes, 2001). In one of these studies (Shaw, Campbell, Cain, & Feeney, 2016), researchers examined the written police records of sexual assault cases (n = 248) to determine the nature of and extent to which rape myths were present in sexual assault investigations. A directed content analysis performed on the sexual assault case records for the

presence of rape myths revealed 15 “subcategories of statements that functioned as rape myths in police records to explain the police response to sexual assault” (p. 605), including references to the victim “not acting like a victim,” the victim being promiscuous, not credible, or uncooperative, or the victim not having enough information. Of the 247 cases analyzed, researchers found that over half (n = 141 cases; 56.85%) had at least one of these statements. In addition, researchers grouped these statements into three categories representing three different general types of statements: circumstantial statements (“statements that denied or justified rape on the basis of the circumstances of the assault”), characterological statements (“statements that denied or justified the rape on the basis of characteristics of the victim”), and investigatory blame statements (“statements that [had] a shared purpose to blame the victim for a less-than-thorough police investigation”) (p. 606). Again, of the 247 cases analyzed, 63 (25.4%) contained at least one circumstantial statement; 42 (16.94%) contained at least one characterological statement; and 102 (41.1%) contained at least one investigatory blame statement (i.e. “statements that suggested that the case proceeded as it did because the victim (a) was not cooperating, (b) did not provide enough information, (c) was not able to be contacted, or (d) was a ‘weak’ victim who would not hold up well during a trial” (p. 608), or in other words, statements in which “victims were blamed for police conducting a less-than-thorough investigation” (p. 609).

Studies that have examined the impact of secondary victimization have shown how exposure to such beliefs and attitudes negatively impact the survivor’s sense of self, and in some cases, diminish the hopes she holds for the future (Campbell, 2008; Campbell & Raja, 1999; Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Sigurvinsdottier & Ullman, 2015; Ullman, 1996). In one study examining secondary

victimization experienced by women who reported sexual assault to the police, Campbell (2005) found that the majority reported distressing and negative impact on their well-being and sense of self following their interactions with police:

> After their contact with law enforcement personnel, survivors often reported feeling bad about themselves (87%) and blaming themselves for the assault (73%). Most also stated they felt depressed (71%), violated (89%), and disappointed (91%) [and] [e]ighty percent stated that they were reluctant to seek further help. (p. 62)

What is more, studies that examine post-traumatic growth in survivors of sexual violence have found that the nature of post-assault responses to be a key factor in mediating posttraumatic growth (Ullman, 2014). In an exploratory study examining among other things how post-assault reactions predict posttraumatic growth in a sample of female adult sexual assault survivors, Ullman (2014) found that negative responses limit post-traumatic growth, while positive post-assault responses foster growth. While this finding may not be surprising, it underlines how the social context in which the rape survivor lives can impact the way she shapes her future.

As such, any exploration of the possibility stories women survivors tell requires a careful consideration of how such narratives – and the hoped for and feared possibilities therein – are mediated by the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of a rape-supportive society. Moreover, making these connections is part of realizing the political and structural importance of understanding the possible selves of survivors of sexual violence. Anderson and Doherty (2003) argue that “rape is both socially produced and socially legitimated, as a mechanism that ultimately maintains patriarchal gender power relations” (p. 7). Understanding how “the social definition of rape and the impact of these practices on maintaining gender power relations”

shapes women's sense of possibility provides valuable new information about the far-reaching impact of such attitudes and practices in which women re-organize their future hopes and goals in ways that allow for their survival within a rape-supportive culture rather than in terms of their genuine hopes and goals.

Defining Possibility

As the above review of literature demonstrates, sexual violence carries a myriad of effects on the lives of adult women. For the most part, sexual violence research focuses on the present well-being of adult women survivors, the nature of their past experiences, and, in the case of a number of studies that examine the meaning-making and recovery process of survivors (i.e. Draucker et al., 2009), the relationship between how survivors think about the past in relation to the present. Nonetheless, even in studies such as these that are concerned specifically with the process of self-transformation in the aftermath of sexual violence, the overarching narratives produced in these studies are predominately about a process of returning to or 'restoring' a past version of self with new found strengths and resources (Draucker et al., 2009, p. 374; Godbey & Hutchinson, 1996) or of an arrival at a newly constructed and preferred present self (i.e. McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; Olsen, 2015; Wright & Gabriel, 2018).

Future orientation and possible selves research reviewed in this chapter demonstrates the relevance of extending these analyses to consider how sexual violence shapes ideas of the self in the future. Nonetheless, despite evidence suggesting the significant impact of sexual violence on self-concept, both possible selves and sexual violence researchers have yet to apply the possible selves concept specifically or future orientation more generally to understanding the experiences of adult women survivors of sexual violence. Studies have focused on specific aspects of

the impact of sexual violence that may shape future perspectives, such as self-blame and loss of control. Other studies have identified and examined some of the broader socio-cultural contexts that may shape future orientation, such as rape-supportive beliefs and secondary victimization. However, no study has explicitly sought to understand the possible selves of adult women survivors of sexual violence or to consider how sexual violence shapes women's sense of possibility.

As this review of the literature demonstrates, the concept of possibility is complex and multi-faceted; it is one that can be theorized and understood through multiple theoretical and disciplinary lenses. In this chapter, I have drawn on research in the sexual violence literature with a focus on delineating how this research engages with the concept of possibility. I have also reviewed literature within the field of future orientation and possible selves studies with an eye to understanding how this research may inform my engagement with and development of the concept of possibility as described by the women interviewed in this thesis. Based on this review of this literature, and the intersections among them, I define possibility as a concept encompassing the future-oriented hopes and fears an individual holds at any given time. These hopes and fears may also be understood as dreams, plans, goals, or opportunities. Crucially, possibility as a concept that encompasses both hopes and fears can be mobilized to describe both positive and negative stories about the future. In this sense, possibility is a concept through which not only the content or nature of the hopes and fears an individual holds are examined but also the manner in which various individual (i.e. agency, motivation) and societal factors (i.e. gender norms, economic mobility) are understood to support or interfere with the realization of these hopes and fears. In this thesis, I utilize the specific concept of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) to refer to instances of hoped for or feared potential

versions of the self in the future (i.e. a hoped for social worker possible self; a feared unemployed possible self). I utilize the term possibility as a more global concept that encompasses not only possible selves but also the more general hopes and fears for the future an individual might share about their families and communities and the systems and structures in which they live. While the literature reviewed in this chapter provides relevant contexts in which my conceptualization of possibility is grounded, to fully understand the nature and function of possibility in the distinct context of sexual violence requires listening deeply to and creating space for women survivors of sexual violence to give voice to the complexities and nuances of possibility within their own lives.

In the next chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology of this study. I provide a rationale for the role of narrative inquiry as a methodology capable of inviting in and engaging with stories of possibility in ways that honour the complexities of the concept. I also consider the theoretical underpinnings of how I approach women's narratives about the relationship between sexual violence and possibility as crucial in helping to make visible the longer-term outcomes of sexual violence on the ongoing systemic inequality women confront in their lives. As will be explored, women's stories of possibility in relation to experiences of sexual violence create space for understanding and reckoning with the unnamed losses (i.e. of dreams, hopes, future selves) that so frequently accompany sexual violence while at the same time creating space for the articulation of a more nuanced understanding of how women use these lost futures to find strength and new possibilities.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Stories are a fundamental way of making sense of the world, and of our experiences and identities (Bruner, 1987; Denborough, 2014; Riessman, 2008; White & Epson, 1990): “we make sense of our lives, plan for the future, and construct ourselves and our identities through stories” (Woodiwiss, 2017, p. 15). Whether we are aware of them or not, we live every day inside the stories we tell ourselves about our lives and experiences. The stories we tell ourselves and others can be powerful agents of change or they can keep us constrained in a narrative that circumscribes our life and experiences (Denborough, 2014; White & Epston, 1990; Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). However, the content, and limiting or expansive nature and function of these stories, is not only ours to determine: rather, our families, our communities, and the systems in which we live shape these stories (Bruner, 1987; White & Epston, 1990). As Bruner (1987) states, our autobiographies “had better be viewed not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a non-existent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience” (pp. 691-692).

For social workers, stories can be an important part of social justice movements and social justice work (Baldwin, 2013; Wells, 2011). For example, stories about past injustices become a vehicle through which to identify new ways of creating more equal and just relationships and systems, as in the case of the stories shared by survivors of Residential Schools in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Freeman, 2010; Gready, 2013). While telling and unpacking stories about the past have long been seen as important vehicles for creating change at the individual, community, and societal level, social justice movements and social workers are increasingly exploring how to use stories to look toward and construct possible futures (brown, 2017; Imarisha & brown, 2015; Sooles, 2020). For these

advocates, stories about imagined futures have the potential to remind us of the importance of striving toward something greater than our present moment, and, as such, can be a source of motivation, inspiration, and healing (brown, 2017; Imarisha & brown, 2015; Sooles, 2020; White & Epson, 1990). Moreover, because stories are always connected to the social and cultural contexts of their telling, the sorts of stories we are able to tell about possible futures can become potent sources of insight about the present moment and its impact on individual and collective imagination (Freeman, 2010; Wells, 2011; Sooles, 2020).

In this chapter, I situate my thesis within the field of narrative research and methods. I begin by outlining the epistemological and theoretical frameworks that shape the overarching narrative this thesis constructs about possibility articulated within the stories sexual violence survivors have told me about their lives, their hopes, and their dreams. I then outline the methodology utilized in this study, including data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations. In doing so, I also explore how social workers and social work theory can be enriched in its work to create more equal and just societies by considering how its epistemological, theoretical, and methodological frameworks offer ways to think about, theorize, and analyze the futures we are trying to build when we practice social work.

Epistemological and Theoretical Framework

In this thesis, I approach women's narratives of sexual violence and the stories they share therein about possibility within a social constructionist epistemology that is informed by postmodern feminist and anti-oppression theory. Social constructionism is an epistemology encompassing a range of perspectives within psychology, sociology, social work and other social sciences (Burr, 2003; Payne, 2005). Broadly speaking, social constructionism "invites us to be critical of the idea that our

observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world" (Burr, 2003, p. 2). In other words, unlike traditional empiricist and positivist ways of knowing that insist on a knowable, objective reality, social constructionists argue that such an objective reality or 'truth' can never be fully and finally known; rather, what we commonly perceive of as reality or as a 'truth' is a reflection of the historical, social, and cultural forces from which it emerges, and, as such, is just one of many versions of that reality or truth (Burr, 2003).

Social Constructionism

Although there is no single definition of social constructionism, social constructionist perspectives share some common features (Burr, 2003; Lafrance, 2009). First of all, social constructionist perspectives question what is commonly "taken-for granted knowledge" (Burr, 2003, p. 2) and instead approach such knowledge through a critical lens that seeks to understand the larger structures within which knowledge is produced and shaped. In this sense, social constructionism questions how we make sense of the world: "all ways of understanding, including basic assumptions such as the division of people into categories 'male' and 'female,' are understood as not simply 'the way things are' but as socially and politically negotiated constructions" (Lafrance, 2009, p. 197).

Secondly, in adopting this critical stance to knowledge, social constructionists investigate how knowledge is a product of its specific cultural and historical context. In this sense, all knowledge claims can and should be understood as "artefacts" of these contexts – a perspective that also serves as a reminder that contemporary knowledge production is also already an "artefact" of its own historical and cultural moment and thus should not cause us to "assume that *our* ways of understanding are

necessarily any better, in terms of being any nearer the truth than other ways" (Burr, 2003, p. 3).

Thirdly, social constructionist perspectives recognize that knowledge is produced and sustained by social interactions between people in their daily lives. In this sense, language and other forms of social interaction offer important sites of understanding and analysis for social constructionists to consider how knowledge is constructed, and how "the language we use, and the taken-for-granted categories we employ about the world, construct our experience in ways which we then reify as 'natural,' 'universal,' and 'the way things have to be'" (Kitzinger, 1992 as quoted in Lafrance, 2009, p. 197).

Finally, in attending to the social processes through which knowledge is produced and shaped, social constructionists are particularly interested in understanding the relationship between knowledge, power, and action (Burr, 2003; Lafrance, 2009). That is, given the multiple, different ways of understanding the world that social constructionism highlights it follows that it is also important to consider the potential effect or actions embedded within these ways of knowing, and how certain forms of knowledge or constructions of reality hold power over others (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980). In this area, social constructionist researchers drawing on a Foucauldian analysis of power/knowledge are often interested in analyzing discourse to better understand how power operates through language (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980).

For instance, Anderson and Doherty (2008) work within a social constructionist epistemology in their study that exposes how dominant framings of rape victims as blameworthy and untrustworthy have been reproduced and sustained through language to create what they describe as a "rape supportive culture," and how

the discursive construction of this culture is a product of a specific historical and cultural time that works to serve the best interests of those with the most power within a patriarchal, capitalist system.

Feminist and Anti-Oppression Theory

In this thesis, my research methodology is further shaped by postmodern feminist theory (Fawcett, Featherstone, Fook & Rossiter, 2000; Weedon, 1987), as well as anti-oppressive social work theory (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009; Baines, 2007). Broadly speaking, feminist and anti-oppression theory reflect a social constructionst epistemology in their focus on looking more closely at how power is produced, sustained, and resisted within dominant patriarchal, capitalist, heteronormative, white supremacist, ableist, and colonial structures, discourses, and language (Fawcett, et al., 2000; Weedon, 1987). Furthermore, these theories examine how individual and collective experiences of power and oppression are mediated within these structures on the basis of gender and other social identities or positionalities (Baines, 2007).

Within the broad and rich body of feminist theory are many perspectives and positions (Weedon, 1987); in this thesis, my approach to researching sexual violence and understanding women's stories about these experiences aligns with poststructuralist and postmodern feminist theory (Brown, 2012; Butler, 1990; Butler & Scott, 1992; Featherstone et al., 2000; Weedon, 1987). Reflecting a social constructionist epistemology, poststructuralist and postmodern feminist theory resists the notion of objective knowledge or a single way of understanding the world (Brown, 2012; Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; Weedon, 1987). In particular, postmodern feminist theoretical approaches take issue with and challenge "the projected universal validity of masculine context-specific knowledge claims" (Fawcett & Feathersone,

2000, p. 7) through engaging critically with the areas of “knowledge production, subjectivity, difference and power” to explore women’s identities, experiences, and perspectives (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000, p. 10).

Informing my approach to researching and analyzing women’s stories of sexual violence through a postmodern feminist and anti-oppressive theoretical framework is an ongoing debate about how to negotiate postmodernism’s rejection of universal truth claims and objectivity without negating the potential for validating the experiences of marginalized groups and mobilizing the individual and collective knowledge contained within these insights toward political ends and transformative social justice work and change (Brown, 2012; Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; Rossiter, 2000; Scott, 1992). As Brown (2012) observes,

> [a]nti-oppressive discourse is ambivalently positioned in modernism, for although it rejects the idea of objective knowledge its commitment to social justice cannot rely on the relativism or lack of position often characterized by postmodernism. Instead, anti-oppressive discourse requires taking a stance which may sometimes involve the modernist ingredient of adopting a unifying vision. (p. 39)

To understand how this debate has evolved within feminist theory it is helpful to consider the influence of feminist standpoint theorists (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Harstock, 1983; 1996; Smith, 1987; 1990). Emerging in the 1970s and 80s, feminist standpoint theory took as its starting point the ‘standpoint’ of those whose experiences and voices had been ignored or minimized within dominant discourse and power structures (Smith, 1987; 1990). Feminist standpoint theorists argued that because knowledge is created within dominant systems and structures, those who do not hold power within these systems are seemingly excluded from knowledge

production and, thus, their experiences are absent (Haraway, 1988; Smith, 1987; 1990). However, although those with less power (i.e. women) may be excluded or silenced within these dominant systems, it is because of this exclusion that they have access to additional knowledge due to their position as what Hill-Collins (1991) described as the "outsider within" (p. 35). While Hill-Collins was speaking specifically of the experiences of Black women, the concept of occupying the position of the 'outsider within' was applied to describe how

> members of oppressed groups must understand the assumptions that constitute the worldviews of dominant groups in order to successfully navigate the world. At the same time, they often have experiences that conflict with dominant views and generate alternative views about how the world works. (Intemann, 2010, p. 788)

These 'alternative views' represent one form of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988) that is made invisible within dominant, hegemonic discourse and knowledge systems; standpoint feminist theory and practice centres this knowledge in order to critique dominant power structures. At the same time, it also makes visible how the taken for granted truths of dominant discourse are themselves 'situated knowledge,' that is, "the limited view provided to us by our social location and context, and [one that] can only become less partial as a result of exchanges with others who are differently located (Haraway, 1988)" (Rossiter, 2000, p. 28).

Despite the potential to bring forth critique of dominant systems provided through women's standpoints, standpoint theory also raised questions for postmodern feminist theorists about the potential it held for reifying the perspectives of the marginalized or oppressed in ways that positioned these perspectives as 'truth' (Hekman, 1997). As one of these critics argued:

> The vision of the oppressed is itself another discourse, not the apprehension of 'true' reality. It is undoubtedly a counter-discourse, a discourse that seeks to break the hold of the hegemonic discourse, but it is not closer to 'reality' than the discourse it exposes. What it may be closer to, however, is a definition of a less repressive society. (Hekman, 1997 as cited in Brown, 2012, p. 40)

That is, for some postmodern feminists, early standpoint perspectives while bringing to light and challenging dominant knowledge and discourse risked doing so in a way that reinforced the modernist notion of universal truths by presenting women's standpoint as a homogenous, final statement about women's experience (Hekman, 1997).[4] Postmodern feminist theory deepens the understanding of the concept of standpoint by emphasizing the importance of critical reflexivity and analysis of 'experience' as always grounded in the social conditions in which it was produced (Brown, 2012, p. 42; Rossiter, 2000; Scott, 1992), and by ensuring that the notion of epistemic advantage reflects an intersectional feminist understanding of experience and knowledge (Intemann, 2010).

For instance, central to more contemporary discussions of standpoint feminist theory is emphasis on clarifying that a standpoint is not simply a perspective that one might hold based on one's social location; rather,

> standpoints are said to be *achieved* through a critical, conscious reflection on the ways in which power structures and resulting social locations influence knowledge production. … In this sense, standpoints do not automatically arise from occupying a particular social location. They are achieved only when

[4] The questions and perspectives encompassed in this debate are complex, and a full exploration of the nuances of this debate go beyond the scope of this thesis. For an overview of some of these different perspectives articles by Hekman (1997); Harstock (1997); Hill Collins (1997); Harding (1997); and Smith (1999) in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 22*(2).

there is sufficient scrutiny and critical awareness of how power structures shape or limit knowledge in a particular context. (Intemman, 2010, p. 785)

In addition, contemporary standpoint theorists emphasize that standpoints do not "involve a universally shared perspective of all members of a particular social group. Individuals may contribute to the achievements of a critical consciousness within an epistemic community in different ways" (Intemann, 2010, pp. 785-6). In this sense, feminist standpoint theory was strengthened through the contribution of intersectional and anti-oppressive theory that revealed how first and second-wave feminism in general privileged the experiences of affluent, white, heterosexual women as an experience representative of all women (Hill-Collins, 1991; Intemann, 2010).

First introduced by Crenshaw (1989) and fostered by the work of Black feminist theory, intersectional feminism critiqued first and second-wave feminism for its focus on the issues, concerns, and experiences of affluent, white women. Intersectional feminism, instead, argued that other social locations in addition to gender, such as race, class, ability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, citizenship and status, and Indigeniety intersect in individual lives and shape individual and collective experience within broader structures and systems that for the most part reflect patriarchal, white, capitalist, heteronormative and colonial norms (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 1991). Making visible "situated knowledge" that was ignored and silenced within hegemonic discourse was still an important way to complicate and challenge dominant ways of organizing social relations and to expose limited worldviews as early feminist standpoint theorists had argued; however, such efforts needed to attend to the complexities of individual subjectivity and multiple social locations, and to itself be recognized as produced within its own

particular social conditions that required rigorous critique and analysis. In this way "the experiences of oppressed individuals, like all individuals, will have shaped and limited their knowledge (albeit in different ways than for privileged individuals" (Intemann, 2010, p. 789). Put another way, "first-voice stories or self-stories, then, are not inherently 'truer' than other stories and thus cannot be privileged as beyond inquiry" (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007, p. xxviii).

While these interventions deepened feminist standpoint theory, it also created new challenges and debates about the ramifications this dissolution of a "woman's standpoint" might have for feminism's political and social justice aims. A central debate in postmodern feminism is that of reconciling what the postmodern rejection of universal and objective truths means for articulating and achieving the concrete transformative goals of feminism and social justice more broadly (Brown, 2012; Houston, 2001). As Fawcett and Featherstone (2000) observe:

> feminists who align with postmodernism are critical of many postmodern writings with regard to knowledge production. While accepting postmodern critiques of universalist theorising and subsequently rejecting, for example, any attempts to develop one theory which explains the position of women worldwide or the original cause of women's oppression, there is a clear concern by postmodern feminists to retain some form of large-scale theorising in order to understand the systematicity as well as the diversity of women's oppression. (p. 13)

One response to this problem proposed within social constructionist theory is a "critical-realist" position. A critical-realist position "allows recognition that 'things exist,' while calling for respect for 'the different and provisional culturally bounded explanations of the nature of things' (Parker, 1992, p. 30)" (Lafrance, 2009, p. 201).

Applying this understanding to her study of women living with depression, Lafrance (2009) observes, “in adopting a critical-realist perspective on women’s depression … I acknowledge the reality of women’s bodies and their pain, but hold that all understandings of these are inseparable from the social and political contexts from which they emerge” (p. 201). Similarly, in her study of women’s stories of trauma, Brown (2012) observes that “accounts of experience can importantly reveal the material conditions of lived experiences which are ‘real.’ The meanings attached to those conditions and the links to specific identities however need to be unpacked alongside the material conditions” (p. 42).

Thus, in centring the stories and experiences of women survivors of sexual violence as stories that have consistently been ignored or misconstrued within dominant discourse, this thesis follows postmodern feminist and anti-oppressive theory in acknowledging and negotiating both the importance of making visible women’s stories of sexual violence *and* ensuring that these stories are unpacked in order to reveal how they are themselves embedded within the social, cultural, and political conditions in which they are produced. In addition, in keeping with a critical-realist position within social constructionism and these theoretical frameworks, this thesis also contends that the knowledge and teaching that emerges through the process of narrative data collection and analysis represent versions of experience that hold powerful insights and concrete tools for guiding social justice work aimed at improving the material conditions of the lives of women survivors of sexual violence in pursuit of their hoped for futures.

Research Design

In keeping with the epistemological and theoretical positions informing this thesis, a research methodology that allowed for a qualitative exploration of women’s

understandings of the impact of sexual violence in shaping possibility in their lives was utilized. Qualitative methods lend themselves more readily for research projects that are interested in exploring complex social issues (Brown, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; Testa, Livingston & VanZile-Tamsen, 2011; Wertz et al., 2011). As such, in this thesis, I have chosen to engage in a qualitative approach to better understand the possible futures of sexual violence survivors. More specifically, I utilize narrative inquiry (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013; Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014; Reissman, 2008; White, 2007, White & Epston, 1990) as a qualitative methodology that aligns with the goals of social constructionist epistemology, and feminist, anti-oppressive theory.

Qualitative Research and Sexual Violence

While the bulk of early research on sexual violence utilizes quantitative methodologies, such approaches often fail to capture the complexities and nuances that characterize many accounts of experiences of sexual violence (Burstow, 2003; Hong,Valdez, & Lilly, 2015; Ussher, 1999). Moreover, quantitative approaches often impose the researcher's framework onto women's experiences of sexual violence in ways that obscure or omit women's own understandings of their experiences (Brown, 2013; Burstow, 2003). As Testa, Livingston, and VanZile-Tamsen (2011) observe, "Violence against women is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, occurring within a social context that is influenced by gender norms, interpersonal relationships, and sexual scripts" (as cited in Hong, Valdez, & Lilly, 2015, p. 1067). As such, qualitative methods are deemed particularly well-suited to capturing the complexities, nuances, and processes expressed within women's narratives of sexual violence (Draucker et al., 2009). As Brown (2013) observes, "[q]ualitative methods are invaluable to feminist research as they position women's stories at the center of the

inquiry, allowing for rich examination of these stories within their larger gendered social context" (p. 8).

Similarly, the field of future orientation and possible selves research is dominated by quantitative approaches to the study of imagined futures and possible selves (Seigner, 2009). In their original study on possible selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) developed and used the *Possible Selves Questionnaire* (PSQ) to measure the possible selves of college students. The PSQ lists 150 statements about possible selves and asks participants to indicate on a Likert scale the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statements and the degree to which they believe it is probable they will achieve the possible self. Other researchers have adopted the PSQ to fit specific domains or contexts, including occupational possible selves (Robinson & Davis, 2001); health-related possible selves (Hooker & Kaus, 1992) and academic possible selves (Garcia et al., 1995).

The *Possible Selves Instrument* (PSI) was also developed by Markus and Nurius (1991) to measure possible selves. The PSI is a questionnaire that includes both open-ended and closed questions. Participants are required respond to an open-ended question asking them to list all the hoped for and feared possible selves they can imagine; after identifying the two most important hoped for and feared possible selves, participants are asked to rate their perceived capability in achieving the possible selves, and the likelihood of realizing the possible selves on a 7-point Likert scale. The PSI has been used in a variety of contexts including to with individuals with Alzheimer's disease (Cotrell & Hooker, 2005) and occupational possible selves (Robinson, Davis & Meara, 2003). Although this instrument utilizes an open-ended question to generate lists of possible selves it does not collect any qualitative or narrative information beyond the list of possible selves. While these instruments allow

for the collection of quantitative data related to content, salience, and perceived likelihood of possible selves, they do not allow for in-depth analysis of the complex conditions informing the stories people hold about their possible selves (Sooles, 2020; Sooles, Triliva & Filippas, 2017). More recently, however, methodologies that incorporate qualitative data collection demonstrate the potential for the qualitative study of possible selves, and, particularly, the potential for written and oral narratives as effective data collection instruments for making visible the narrative nature of possible selves (Fahs & Swank, 2017; King & Raspin, 2004; Sooles, 2020; Sooles, Triliva & Filippas, 2017).

For example, in their study examining the subject of weight gain in women's narratives about the future, Fahs and Swank (2017) utilized semi-structured interviews in which they asked participants to imagine a future self in which they had gained 100 pounds. Interview answers were then analyzed using thematic analysis. As opposed to a quantitative approach, Fahs and Swank (2017) argued that the use of a semi-structured interview to generate and collect women's stories about possible weight gain "served to open up other conversations and dialogue about the meaning of fatness and an imagined fat social status" (p. 4). This use of qualitative approaches to the study of women's possible selves as particularly effective in generating data that allows for analysis and exploration of the broader cultural and social context informing women's individual stories is similarly evident in King and Raspin's (2004) study examining the possible selves of divorced women. In this study, participants responded to an open-ended question asking them to provide a written account of the future they imagined before the divorce, and a written account of the future they imagined for themselves at the time of response. In both, participants were prompted to describe their best possible selves as imagined in each scenario. Content

analysis was then performed on these narrative responses to identify lost and found best possible selves.

Another instrument utilized by researchers interested in gathering qualitative data on possible selves is *Letters from the Future* (LF) (Sooles, 2020; Sooles, Tromp & Mooren, 2015). LF is a creative writing exercise that asks participants to imagine travelling to a specific time in the future and then writing a letter to someone in the present describing that future and the path followed to get there (Sooles, 2020; Sooles, Tromp & Mooren, 2015). Sooles, Triliva and Filippas (2017) utilized LF to study the desired future selves of Greek unemployed young adults. In this study, participants first completed individual LF and then participated in a focus group in which they read their letters aloud and reflected upon them. Data collected through these instruments was analyzed through discourse analysis to examine how "futuristic-hypothetical narratives of the self" can foster desire for alternative futures (p. 318) while keeping in mind the way present-day socio-cultural and economic factors, such as unemployment and politics informed these desired futures. As with other researchers who utilize a qualitative approach to the study of possible selves, Sooles, Triliva and Filippas (2017) argue that such an approach allows for an analysis of the larger socio-cultural contexts at work in the narration of possible selves in ways that is not present in quantitative studies.

Given the distinctive ways in which sexual violence is embedded in and shaped by its socio-cultural contexts, as well as the often complex and nuanced ways sexual violence is integrated within an individual's life story, I follow these researchers in using a qualitative approach in my own study of sexual violence and possible selves. In the following section, I provide a more detailed overview of my own engagement with narrative research methods in this thesis.

Narrative Inquiry

Over the past few decades narrative research and methods has grown exponentially. [5] As such, a comprehensive review of narrative theory and research is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, in the following section I identify and discuss some key concepts and positions that inform my application of narrative methods in this thesis. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the way in which a narrative approach grounded within a constructionist epistemology and postmodern feminist and anti-oppressive theoretical framework offers promising avenues for exploring possibility in women's stories of sexual violence.

Fundamental to narrative inquiry is the understanding that "persons organize and give meaning to their experience through the storying of experience" (White & Epston, 1999, p. 12). As such, narrative researchers look to the stories people tell about their lives as vital data that can provide a window into understanding various

[5] The popularity of the concept and study of narrative has grown considerably in the last few decades, so that the term "narrative" is now used widely and variously (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013; Squire et al., 2014; Stanley, 2017). In addition to an area of interest across academic disciplines, including "literary studies, cultural studies, criminology, philosophy, management, computer game studies, and film theory," as well as sociology (Squire et. al., 2014, p. 1) and, of course, social work (i.e. Baldwin, 2013), 'narrative' is now used widely in popular culture and political discourse (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013). In the context of popular culture, the term and concept of 'narrative' is often used to refer to first-hand accounts or biographical stories that are used as illustrations in support of specific issues or policies. For instance, "journalists claim a good understanding of events by spelling out for their audiences the underlying 'narrative'" (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2013, pp. 2-3). In contrast, in the context of social research, "narrative" refers more specifically to a "body of conceptual and theoretical ideas, … [a set of] methodological precepts, … [and] a range of methods" (Stanley, 2017, p. vii). In this thesis, I approach the term and concept of narrative as it is applied in the context of social research as a methodological approach and "body of conceptual and theoretical ideas" (Stanley, 2017, p. vii) that involves "working with narrative materials of various kinds" (Squire et al., 2014, p. 7). Integral to this approach to narrative is the activity of engaging with narratives with a specific focus on "analysing narrative aspects of stories, not just analysing stories in any way you choose" (Squire, et al., 2014, p.7). Thus, from this perspective, a broad understanding of narrative as "a discursive, emergent, and boundaried event[,] … [and] a multi-purpose communication involving a teller, an occasioned telling, and an audience" (Stanley, 2017, p. ix) provides a useful definition that centres the co-constitutive aspect of narrative, and that keeps in focus the perspective that "narrative is a communicative event, not a thing" (Stanley, 2017, p. x). As Stanley (2017) goes on to explain of narrative within the research context, "telling is an emergent and situational activity. It is engaged in to produce particular effects by both sides of the researcher/subject relationship as well as being mediated by the unfolding occasion itself" (p. x).

facets of human experience, identity, and meaning (McAdams, 2001; White & Epston, 1999). In fact, narrative researchers argue that it is in the telling and sharing of stories that meaning-making occurs:

> The stories people tell about their lives represent their meaning making; how they connect and integrate the chaos of internal and momentary experience and how they select what to tell and how they link bits of their experience are all aspects of how they structure the flow of experience and understand their lives. (Josselson, 2011, p. 224)

In this sense, narrative recognizes and explores the constitutive role of stories. As Randall (2015) observes, "we speak of 'the story of my life,' but our story *is* our life, not some artifice we impose upon it after the fact (though we do that, too). It is *in* that story we live. Through it, not despite it, we experience the world" (p. 4). Narrative researchers emphasize that the story in which we live is not a simple reflection of uncontested reality (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014; McAdams, 2001; White & Epston, 1990; Wells, 2011). Rather, the stories individuals tell and the meanings constituted therein are shaped by and arise within the social and cultural contexts and discourse available at the time of telling (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Esin, Fathi & Squire, 2014; McAdams, 2001; White & Epston, 1990; Wells, 2011), and, as such, are "only ever partial, and … vary … not only according to what we want to say but who we might want to hear, and indeed, the contexts or circumstances of their telling" (Woodiwiss, 2017, p. 15). Fundamental to my narrative engagement with women's possibility stories, then, is a grounding in the understanding that both myself and the women participants in this thesis are continually engaged in what Polkinghorne (1988) describes as "narrative knowing" (p. 111) through which we use story to create meaning and it is to these stories that we

can look to understand how that meaning is implicated in and shaped by the various contexts at work in their (co)construction. In the specific context of this thesis, this means that beginning to understand sexual violence in women's lives and its impact on women's sense of possibility involves looking specifically at the content and structure of the narratives women construct about these experiences, selves, and possible selves.

Thus, another concept central to narrative understandings of human experience is subjectivity or the self.[6] For narrative researchers working within a constructionist and postmodern framework, the notion of a single, unified Self is rejected in favor of an understanding of self as always under construction and revision in dialogue with its social and cultural contexts (Baldwin, Greason & Hill, 2018; Brown & Augusta-Scott;

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[6] Smith & Sparkes (2008) provide an overview of the various approaches and orientations narrative researchers engage with in relation to the notion of self, subjectivity, and identity. Within the field of narrative theory, understandings of the self / subjectivity fall into two general areas: 1) essentialist – or what is sometimes called "person-centred narrative approaches" – that emphasize the "concept of a singular, unified subject who is the agentic storyteller and hearer" (Loots, Coppens & Sermijn, 2013, p. 108), and 2) a constructionist – or what is sometimes referred to as "culturally-oriented approaches" – that emphasize the socio-cultural context of narrative and thus "treat narrative as performance, as narrative-in-context" or "relational" and "dialogical" approaches (Baldwin, Greason, Hill, 2018, p. 2). In the latter approach, the notion of a unified, coherent self is rejected; instead, subjectivity is understood as "diverse, fragmentary, contradictory, and open" (Loots, Coppens & Sermijn, 2013, p. 109). To organize these various orientations, Smith and Sparkes (2008) devise a continuum, "with perspectives that adopt a 'thick individual' *and* 'thin social relational' emphasis on selves and identities at one end, and a 'thin individual' *and* 'thick social relational' focus at the other" (p. 7). More recently, a new approach to engaging with self/subjectivity in the context of narrative research draws on the concept of the rhizome as theorized by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Frank Guattari (1976). According to Deluze and Guattari (1976) the biological structure of the rhizome is "an underground root system, an open decentralized network, which branches out to all sides, unpredictably and horizontally according to principles as: multiple, entryway, multiplicity, connection, a-signifying ruptures and cartography" (as qtd. in Loots, Coopens & Sermijn, 2013, p. 111). Some narrative researchers (Baldwin, Greason & Hill, 2018; Loots, Coppens & Sermijn, 2013; Sermijn, Devileger & Loots, 2008) see the rhizome as a metaphor for selfhood that is "continuously and multifariously constructed and reconstructed in the stories someone tells about her/himself" (Loots, Coppens & Sermijn, 2013, p. 110). In keeping with the epistemological and theoretical frameworks set out earlier in this chapter, my understanding and engagement with the concept of subjectivity and self reflects one that is aligned with a constructionist or 'culturally-oriented' approach: rather than suggesting that individuals have a singular, authentic, and fully-formed Self, I follow narrative researchers working within postmodern perspectives of subjectivity that are continually under construction in relation to the context of its construction (Loots, Coppens & Sermijn, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Riessman, 2008). As Sermijn, Devlieger and Loots (2008) comment, within a postmodern perspective,

> we could view the self as an untamed story, a story that consists of a heterogeneous collection of horizontal and sometimes 'monstrous' story elements that persons tell about themselves and that are not synthesized into one coherent story from which their derive their selfhood. (p. 636)

Applied to my purposes in this thesis, this means that the narratives women share in the interviews they participated in and the versions of self they offer in these narratives are not definitive or final; while certain dominant story lines may prevail, they are one of many possible versions of self and "[w]ith every performance, [they] are reauthoring their lives" (White & Epston, 2007, p. 13).

While recognizing the partial and transitory construction of self within any story, narrative researchers also identify ways to engage with "the way selfhood is narratively constructed" (Sermijn, 2008, p. 636) in the stories people share as one avenue through which to explore meaning-making. Here, the concept of narrative identity (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004; White, 2001) offers a useful way of exploring narrative selfhood within women's stories of sexual violence. For McAdams (2001), in order to understand human experience we cannot look only to personality traits or disposition but must also consider "what kind of identity the person is working on through the construction of stories about the self" (p. 112). In its broadest terms, narrative identity refers to "how individuals employ narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal unity and purpose from diverse experiences across the lifespan" (Singer, 2004, p. 437). Identity in this context, however, is different from the self or self-concept. Rather, identity "refers to a

particular quality or flavoring of people's self-understandings, a way in which the self can be arranged or configured" (p. 102). More specifically,

> narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning. … Through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future. (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233)

While such formulations of identity can be helpful, White (2001) also points to the way these self-understandings are represented in various "identity conclusions" that are often negative (i.e. that someone is hopeless, a failure, unlovable), and as such "are often found to be paralyzing of action in regard to the predicaments of people's lives, and can contribute to a strong sense of one's life being held in suspense, of one's life being frozen in time" (p. 3). As such, it becomes necessary to unpack and challenge these identity conclusions to author more helpful or preferred identities (White, 2001).

As with other narrative researchers, I look to the strategies and features present in the identities women construct about their past, present, and future selves for what they reveal about how women understand sexual violence to have an impact on their self-concept, and how that impact shapes various facets of their relationship to possibility. In doing so, however, I offer these interpretations as one of many potential expressions of narrative identity that women might share that are always contingent upon an ever-shifting construction of self.

In addition to the concept of narrative identity, I specifically draw on facets of narrative theory that offer avenues useful to eliciting and analyzing the narrative

construction of possibility storied in the interviews conducted for this thesis. While much narrative research and theory focuses on the role of reminiscence, memory, and autobiographical reasoning to illuminate the past and present (Pillemer, 2001; Singer & Bluck, 2001; Staudinger, 2001), narrative researchers also point to the role stories can play in future-oriented planning and imagining. In speaking about the potential stories hold for engaging with future-oriented goals and themes, Woodiwiss, Smith and Lockwood (2017) observe that "not only do our stories help us make sense of what has happened and who and where we are; they also help us see or plan what could happen and who or what we could become" (p. 21). For example, within narrative therapy, "unique outcomes" that are oriented toward the future is one such concept that facilitates an exploration of the narrative construction of the future in individual stories (White & Epston, 1990, p. 41). These

> future unique outcomes … can be considered a present act of defiance in the 'face' of the problem and can also lead to an investigation of those historical experiences that have informed persons that things might be different in the future – perhaps what they might have 'glimpsed' that has kept their hopes alive. (p. 61)

Other concepts to be explored in more detail in the data analysis section of this chapter, such as narrative openness and closure (Freeman, 2000; 2011; Pals, 2006); narrative generativity (McAdams, 2001; McAdams, de St. Aubin & Logan, 1993); narrative coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000); narrative agency (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Randall, 2015), and narrative uncertainty (Brown, 2013) similarly offer narrative tools for describing and analyzing the narrative construction of the future evident in the stories women share about their possible selves. Thus, while narrative researchers are not necessarily engaged in measuring various facets of the

nature and function possible selves as in much quantitative possible selves research (i.e. Markus & Nurius, 1986; Hooker & Kaus, 1994; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006; Norman & Aron, 2003), narrative researchers do work from a position that values the potential of narrative processing and analysis to support individuals in recognizing "alternative stories" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 15) that may contain alternative possibilities for the future.

This is not to say, however, that all stories shared about possibility unearthed through narrative processing are positive or hopeful. My engagement with the concept of possibility is motivated by its functionality as a narrative concept that maintains an expansive, multi-connotative space than can encompass multiple stories and versions about the future as told by women survivors, including stories about hoped for *and* feared possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, the possibility stories shared by women survivors are not always hopeful or expansive; they may also be stories that encompass the themes of fear, despair, and denial related to the loss of possibilities or possible selves. Nonetheless, in providing a method for the identification of these 'alternative' stories, narrative holds potential for the imagination, creation and even realization of different – and perhaps more socially just – possibilities, including possible futures, while at the same time revealing new ways of understanding the role of sexual violence in shaping the selves and identities of survivors, not to mention the material realities of their futures.

In this vein, it is also narrative's commitment to recognizing the context in which stories are embedded that is important for elucidating the nuances of women's stories about the future. While narrative inquiry offers many useful tools for exploring the narrative construction of possibility, those researchers working within a constructionist approach emphasize that fundamental to analyzing these strategies is a

commitment to understanding how power and discourse operate within the stories people tell, and the narrative tools at their disposal. As McAdams (2001) observes,

> life stories mirror the culture wherein the story is made and told. Stories live in culture. They are born, they grow, they proliferate, and they eventually die according to the norms, rules, and traditions that prevail in a given society, according to a society's implicit understandings of what counts as a tellable story, a tellable life. (p. 114)

Indeed, as sexual violence researchers have demonstrated the "tellability" (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014a, p. 9) of women's stories of sexual violence is often fraught within a dominant culture that enforces strict 'norms, rules, and traditions' about how sexual violence is storied (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Brown, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). Nonetheless, it is precisely in narrative's commitment to deconstructing the stories individuals tell to better understand how the meanings constructed therein are shaped by prevailing norms and hegemonic discourse, and at the same time identifying instances of narrative subversion and resistance wherein other potentialities are uncovered that makes it useful for exploring the narrative construction of possible lives in women's stories of sexual violence. As Bruner (1986) observes, "narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there is always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story" (p. 143 as cited in Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007, p. xxxiv). Thus, for narrative researchers, articulating and exploring these 'feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story' must involve an analysis of the way narrative is inseparable from and implicated in power, knowledge and language (Brown, 2007; Foucault, 1980; White & Epston, 1990).

In my engagement with women's narratives in this thesis, I work in the tradition of constructionist narrative researchers who draw on a Foucauldian analysis of power/knowledge to expose the operation of dominant or "master" narratives (Bamberg, 2005; Mishler, 1995) and to make visible attempts to articulate "alternative stories" (White & Espston, 1990, p. 15). Here, the concept of "counter-stories" (Harris, Carney & Fine, 2001; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014a; Nelson, 2001; White & Espton, 1990) is particularly useful as a way of theorizing those instances in narrative content and structure that challenge or resist dominant practices and in so doing "open space for persons to reauthor or constitute themselves, each other, and their relationships, according to alternative stories or knowledges (White & Epston, 1990, p. 75). In the specific context of this thesis, I pay particular attention to the way 'counter-stories' are evident in women's attempt to talk about their futures following sexual violence, and how they engage with other narrative concepts and strategies in ways that challenge or resist dominant narratives about sexual violence. Moreover, I suggest that giving voice to and acknowledging the existence of possibility following sexual violence is in itself a counterstory that is often not allowed in a dominant rape-supportive discourse that provides limited and often circumscribed options for the futures women can expect in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Informed by postmodern understandings of subjectivity, power/knowledge and discourse, constructionist narrative methods and analysis go beyond a consideration of the possible selves an individual might hold as detached from their broader contexts; rather, in its efforts to deconstruct the narratives women offer about sexual violence and possibility through a lens that exposes the operation of power and hegemony within these narratives, my engagement with narrative is informed by recognition that it offers a method through which to approach the study of women's

possible selves in the aftermath of sexual violence as political work (Brown, 2013; Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Nelson, 2001; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014a; White & Espton, 1990). In this sense, I follow White & Epston (1990) who observes the following on the political work of narrative research:

> If we accept Foucault's proposal that the techniques of power that 'incite' persons to constitute their lives through 'truth' are developed and perfected at the local level and are then taken up at the broader levels, then, in joining with persons to challenge these practices, we also accept that we are inevitably engaged in a political activity. (We would also acknowledge that, if we do not join with persons to challenge these techniques of power, then we are also engaged in political activity.) This is not a political activity that involves the proposal of an alternative ideology, but one that challenges the techniques that subjugate persons to a dominant ideology. (White & Epston, p. 29)

As applied to the context and subject of this thesis, I engage with narrative in order to examine how the possibility stories women survivors tell perform powerful political work that disrupts dominant narratives that assign and perpetuate limited versions of possibility or possible lives for sexual violence survivors, and that sustain circumscribed frameworks for 'telling' stories of the impact of sexual violence and its aftermath. My purpose in doing so, however, is not simply to make visible the complexities and nuances in women's imagined futures following sexual violence but also to connect these complexities to a broader feminist analysis of the way power and violence operate to maintain gender inequality, and, to position women's narratives as powerful tools that have practical applications in improving the material realities of the lives of survivors of sexual violence, including the possibilities available to them in the future.

Recruitment and Sample

A purposive, convenience sample of eight women were interviewed for this project. This small, purposive sample met the objectives of this study and its proposed methodological approach to data collection and analysis by allowing for the gathering of in-depth, subjective and contextualized narratives of women's experiences over time (Reinharz, 1992). The sample size also reflects findings that individual interviews in narrative studies are often complex, detailed, and lengthy (Reissman, 2008). Given the richness and depth of interview data, the proposed sample size allowed for adequate data for analysis while remaining manageable within the proposed time frame available for the timely completion of a master's thesis.

Participants were women living in a mid-sized city and surrounding rural areas in Atlantic Canada. To be eligible for participation, participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: a) self-identified woman; b) 19 years of age and older; c) experienced some form of sexual violence; d) not involved in any current or pending legal proceedings related to sexual violence; and e) able to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually convenient location.

Participants for the interviews were self-selected by responding to one of the invitations to participate in a face-to-face interview. Invitations to participate were distributed in a number of ways, including announcements in newspapers and newsletters (See Appendix A: Invitation to Participate – Information Letter / Letter to Editor), word-of-mouth (See Appendix B: Invitation to Participate – Email), select social media sites, such as Facebook and Kijiji (See Appendix C: Invitation to Participate – Online Postings), and posters distributed to various public settings (See Appendix D: Invitation to Participate – Poster).

Women made initial contact with me via telephone or email. I then contacted the potential participant to confirm their interest in participating further in the interview. During this initial contact, I provided additional information about the purpose of the project, details about informed consent, ensured the individual met the sample criteria, and answered any questions they asked about participating in the study (See Appendix E: Screening Document – Script for Initial Phone Contact).

Individuals who meet the inclusion and screening criteria were invited to participate in a face-to-face individual interview. The face-to-face interview was conducted at a time and location mutually agreeable to the participant and myself that offered a comfortable, private space. Two of the interviews were conducted at the interviewees' homes; the remaining six interviews were conducted at an office located at a community-based sexual assault centre where I was employed at the time of the interviews.

Women received $20 compensation for their participation. This compensation was provided as a gesture of appreciation for participation, as well as in recognition of potential costs participants might incur, such as transportation and/or dependent care costs. Each participant received the money at the beginning of the interview, and she was informed that if she decided not to complete the interview she would still receive the compensation (See Appendix H: Informed Consent Form). At the end of the interview, participants were provided with a list of local resources (See Appendix G: List of Resources) should they need support following the interview.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to collect data (see Appendix F: Research Instrument – Interview Guide). Semi-structured, open-ended interviews allow for the collection of data related to women's

experiences of sexual violence while at the same time providing the flexibility to explore areas of interest and descriptions identified by the interview participant (Brown 2013; Wells, 2011). Moreover, "in-depth, semi-structured interviews allowed for a life story approach, which provided a narrative structure across time" (Brown, 2013, p. 8). Thus, semi-structured interviews are well-suited to researching sexual violence because they allow for an in-depth, nuanced sharing of subjective experience in a way that allows participants to highlight aspects of their experiences they deem significant (Brown, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr, 2008).

The interviews focused broadly on participants' ideas about how experience(s) of sexual violence have shaped the possibilities participants imagine for themselves and their ideas about their futures. At the beginning of the interview, participants were invited to answer an open-ended question about how sexual violence has been part of their lives. This initial question elicited a narrative of how sexual violence factored into the life stories of the participants while allowing space for participants to share other aspects of their life stories. From there, participants were then invited to share stories about how their experience(s) of sexual violence has shaped their sense of possibility and what they imagined for their futures. While these open-ended interview questions were designed to allow participant-driven responses, I also included follow up questions when appropriate or relevant that focused on specific domains, including self-concept, self-efficacy, hopes and dreams, employment, and relationships.

The interviews lasted between one hour to three hours in length. All interviews were audiotaped, and I personally transcribed the interviews. The process of transcribing the interviews allowed for an in-depth review of the interview data and an opportunity to compare the interview data to my field notes. At the end of the

interview, participants had been asked to indicate if they would like to receive a copy of their transcript for review, and to provide consent for the use of direct quotations. Six of the participants opted to receive a copy of their transcript, which I sent to them once the transcript was prepared along with an invitation to offer any changes or contact me with any questions. None of the participants contacted me to change or alter their transcripts. Interviewees were also offered the opportunity to provide a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. Three of the participants selected their own pseudonym, which has been used throughout the analysis and discussion of this thesis; the other 5 pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher.

Data Analysis

My overall approach to analyzing the interview data combined thematic and structural approaches to narrative analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Reissman, 2008; Wells, 2011). In its broadest terms, thematic narrative analysis is primarily concerned with the content of the narrative; structural approaches, on the other hand, consider how the content is organized (Riessman, 2008). While some narrative researchers focus on either thematic or structural approaches to analysis, I follow Riessman (2008) who argues that a combination of approaches can lead to a deeper understanding of the data, and that a consideration of the structure or "telling" of the data is, in fact, a defining feature of narrative research. In reflecting on her analysis of women's narratives about divorce, Reissman (2008) observes that

> [i]f I had relied only on thematic coding of the stories, and ignored the sequence and narrative structure, I would have missed important differences in meaning of the 'same' event for different participants. Thematic narrative analysis assumes that the same accounts of individuals in a group resemble each other because the accounts are organized around the same theme. By

> combining thematic and structural analysis of divorce stories, I was able to describe broad patterns (thematic similarities across the sample) but also variation in meanings for individuals. (p. 90)

Likewise, as my analysis demonstrates, while thematic analysis allowed for the identification of broad patterns and events, it was in attending to the structural features of the narratives themselves that I identified variations and differences in the meaning individuals ascribed to similar patterns and events. Furthermore, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, attention to the structural elements of women's narratives was important to developing an understanding of the structure of women's possibility stories, and is in keeping with emerging narrative research on imagined futures which similarly emphasizes the importance of a structural analysis to unpacking stories about the future (i.e. Mische, 2009; Sooles, 2020). Finally, in keeping with the epistemological and theoretical frameworks of this thesis, thematic and structural analysis of the narratives also involved discursive analysis of how the content and structure of women's narratives about sexual violence were embedded within and expressions of socio-cultural discourses and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brown, 2013; Wood & Kroger, 2000; McMullen, 2011).

My analysis began by reading the interview transcripts beginning to end while listening to the interview recordings. This review of the interview data provided an overall impression of the material and an opportunity to note initial reflections and potential avenues for deeper exploration. I then re-read the interview transcripts paying attention to emerging concepts and patterns related to content and structure within and across the transcripts. This process of open, inductive coding (Braun & Clark, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Riessman, 2008) yielded a list of categories that I grouped into three broad emerging themes related to my research question. These

included: 1) how women define and describe possibility; 2) how women understand sexual violence to have an impact on possibility in their lives; and 3) what strategies women utilize to address the impact of sexual violence on possibility. To organize the data, I created separate files of codes to record quotations, examples, and other notes demonstrating how each participant did or did not engage with these emerging categories and themes. Throughout this process, I also maintained analytic and reflective memos to track my thought process about potential avenues for exploration and analysis, as well as working definitions and distinctive features of the emerging codes, categories, and themes (Benaquisto, 2008; Charmaz, 2014).

Building on this initial engagement with the thematic content of the interview data, I moved to engaging more systematically with the structure the narratives took with an eye to exploring possible relationships between thematic content and structure, and what these relationships might reveal about the deeper meanings embedded within the narratives (Brown, 2013; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011), including what they revealed about the broader cultural, political, social, and economic contexts within which they were produced. While my process of thematic coding was inductive and intuitive, I recognized that attending to the structural features of the interview data required a more systematic process that would support my particular interest in understanding how women storied the concept of possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence.

A number of models or frameworks for structural narrative analysis have been developed (i.e. Gee, 1986; Labov, 1997; Mishler, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011). While each has its own unique focus – Labov (1997), for instance, focuses on the function of six components that he identified as making

up the structure of a fully developed narrative[7] – collectively, structural narrative analysts attend to such features as the temporal organization and ordering of events in the narrative; the plot structure; language, tropes, metaphor, symbolism, and other literary devices; coherence; form and genre (Wells, 2011). For my purposes, it was important to analyze and capture what these structural features of women's narratives revealed about their sense of possibility. To this end, I drew on the work of Mische (2009) and Sooles (2020) to develop a working analytical guide that could support me in conducting a more systematic analysis of the structural elements of the narratives in terms of their engagement with and storying of possible futures (See Appendix I: Analytical Guide).

Drawing on a combination of psychological, sociological, and cultural theory and research, Mische (2009) developed a framework for engaging with and analyzing what she describes as "the cognitive dimensions of future projections" (i.e. the thoughts that people think about the future). This framework consists of nine "dimensions of projectivity" that Mische (2009) argues are relevant to an analysis and understanding of the content of future cognition, the socio-cultural and relational factors shaping that content, and ultimately the "effects of [these] projected future[s] as … dynamic force[s] undergirding social change" (p. 695). These include reach, breadth, clarity, contingency, expandability, volition, sociality, connectivity, and genre (Mische, 2009).

[7] The model developed by Labov (1972) identifies six structural components that make up a fully developed narrative: orientation, abstract, complicating action, resolution, and coda. Researchers using this model might look at excerpts from their interview data in which interviewees recount a story. Analysis then involves considering how the interviewee's narrative fits with this model (Patterson, 2008; Wells, 2011).

While Mische's framework was not developed with the specific intention of analyzing narrative data *per se* or as a framework for narrative inquiry and analysis,[8] the concepts she identifies map easily onto concepts regularly examined in narrative analysis. Sooles (2020) does just this by devising an analytical framework suitable for "a narrative approach to researching the imagination of personal futures" based on Mische's nine dimensions approach to projectivity (p. 11). In her model, Sooles (2020) combines Mische's nine dimensions into three thematic clusters: 1) balancing clarity and reach; 2) the experience and meaning of future time; and 3) engaging spaces of the possible.[9] Applying this framework to the analysis of narratives about the desired possible selves told by unemployed young people in Greece, Sooles (2020; Sools, Triliva, & Filippas, 2017) demonstrates how Mische's (2009) dimensions approach to projectivity can be effectively adapted and applied to narrative analysis in general, and to the analysis of the narrative construction of possibility and possible futures more specifically.

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[8] Mische (2009) grounds herself and her approach to the study of future projection in the discipline of sociology. She offers her framework as a tool for cultural sociologists whom, she claims, have neglected "the analysis of the future" (p. 695). Nonetheless, given that narrative data is commonly used in cultural sociology, her framework for the study of future projection is applicable to narrative inquiry. Indeed, in delineating the dimensions of projectivity, Mische (2009) draws on examples from research that utilizes qualitative interview data. Moreover, Mische (2009) aligns her work closely with cultural and narrative theorists who are commonly cited in narrative inquiry. As I demonstrate in my analysis, the presence, absence, density, and shape of Mische's (2009) 'dimensions of projectivity' become a tool through which to unpack how the stories women tell about their future following sexual violence are shaped and informed by the various social forces within which these stories are embedded.

[9] Sooles (2020) groups Mische's (2009) dimensions of projectivity in the following ways: Theme 1, balancing clarity and reach of imagined futures includes the dimensions of *clarity* and *detail* to examine the significance of the vividness of future thought (p. 5). Theme 2, the experience and meaning of future includes the dimensions of *contingency*, *connectivity, volition*, *reach,* and *genre*. As Sooles (2020) explains, contingency, connectivity, and volition "are drawn together to produce a nuanced picture of the experience and meaning of future time." These are then "linked to the concepts of chronotope and genre to draw out the sociocultural aspects of how time is experienced and given meaning" (p. 7). Theme 3, engaging spaces of the possible includes the dimensions of *breadth* and *expandability*. In this theme, "the imaginative function of narrative sense-making relevant to generating possibility thinking is central" (p. 9).

For the purposes of my own analysis, I listed all nine of Mische's (2009) dimensions of projectivity as possible features to consider in my analysis of the interview data. Alongside these dimensions, I drew on Sooles (2020) narrative interpretation of these dimensions as well as narrative theory and research more generally to record related or relevant narrative concepts and features – in other words, clues or prompts to help me think about what these dimensions might look like in narrative form. Through a process of constant comparison within and across the interview transcripts, I noted examples, similarities, differences, gaps and other features in relation to the concepts identified in my analytical guide.

While I was conscious of not wanting to bias my analysis by creating a pre-set list of features, I also recognized that utilizing this guide would be helpful in allowing for a more consistent and systematic consideration of those narrative features that may not have been immediately obvious without prior familiarity with these terms and concepts. Nonetheless, to ensure that the guide was not too prescriptive, an important part of my analysis at this stage involved the ongoing use of reflective and analytical memos to chart any features emerging in my data set that were not captured in my framework. I also started to make preliminary observations about the relationships between the structural elements of the narratives and their thematic content, particularly as these related to how dominant discourses about sexual violence, trauma, gender, and other socio-cultural influences intersected in the stories women shared about their possible lives both in terms of the content of these stories and their structures.

In keeping with the epistemological and theoretical framework of this thesis, as my analysis "moved beyond the surface story" (Brown, 2013, p. 10) to consider the discursive and socio-cultural narratives at work in women's possibility stories it was

important to attend to what DeVault (1990) calls the "linguistic incongruence" that may be a factor in women's narratives of personal experience. According to DeVault (1990) and other feminist narrative researchers (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Brown 2013; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014), because language and discourse privileges the experience of dominant cultures and groups and erases or subjugates other ways of knowing and experience it is often found inadequate for women when they narrate their experiences (Brown, 2013, p. 23). As feminist narrative researchers of sexual violence have noted, the dominant stories about violence and survivorship can make it particularly difficult for women to articulate and construct stories of these experiences (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Brown, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2011). For instance, as Brown (2013) observes,

> the dominant discourse of violence against women is injurious not only in terms of its truth claims, but in constraining what can be said by women themselves. Women police themselves according to this dominant discourse. Telling others about oneself is no easy task (Bruner, 2002), and that may be particularly so for women talking about trauma experiences. (pp. 4-5).

In her study of women survivors of sexual violence and living well after rape, McKenzie-Mohr (2014) described the "linguistic incongruence" she heard in the stories women told her as a type of "tight-rope talk" "whereby women storying their lives are discursively required to hold both active and acted upon positions simultaneously" (p. 76). As these researchers caution, identifying 'linguistic incongruence' can be particularly difficult in part because it can in some cases take the form of absences or gaps in the stories women tell. As such, narrative analysis of women's stories "involves listening carefully for moments of resistance, articulated

through a variety of discursive tools" (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014, p. 194) or, as DeVault (2014) puts it, "listening closely for the nuances of women's talk" (p. 27 as cited in McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014b, p. 193). Despite these challenges, it is imperative that feminist researchers "liste[n] beyond and around the story" for instances of "linguistic incongruence" that among other things may signal "strategies of resistance" or "counter-stories" to dominant or master narratives (Brown, 2013; DeVault, 2014; Harris, Carney & Fine, 2001; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014b).

With this in mind, my analysis was additionally guided by a larger attentiveness to suggestions of resistance and counter-storying present in women's stories. In considering both the content and structure of the interview data, I was on the lookout for features such as uncertainty (Brown, 2013); metaphor (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014b); humour (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014b), narrative debris (McKendy, 2006 as cited in McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014b, p. 196), and "tightrope talk" (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2011) – features that feminist narrative researchers have identified as significant strategies for discursive resistance in women's stories of violence. In particular, I considered how these features were used in the service of storying possible futures, and/or how any of the structural choices evident in women's stories that aligned or veered away from the dimensions of projection framework I was using might be signals of linguistic incongruence and discursive resistance. For example, did a lack of breadth or expandability in the range of possible lives women articulated for themselves signal a lack of agency, engagement, or 'healing,' or was it perhaps a form of narrative resistance to dominant rape discourses that tell rape victims that they should 'just get over it' and move on?

In sum, my analytical process involved thematic and structural narrative analysis that drew on approaches developed specifically for the analysis of possibility

and women's storying of sexual violence. While my study sought to deepen understanding about the impact of sexual violence in women's lives from a position that emphasized and recognized that such understandings and impacts are inseparable from a larger socio-cultural context in which they are produced and experienced, my route to doing so was through a consideration of the narrative features present in their accounts (recognizing, of course, that the presence and absence of these features were also indicators of in the socio-cultural context in which the narratives were produced). In this sense, in addition to exploring what women's stories would reveal and teach about sexual violence and possibility, I was also interested in understanding what – if any – were the defining narrative features or characteristics in women's stories about possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Ethical Considerations

A number of ethical considerations are important to account for in this study. For researchers working from a feminist, anti-oppressive perspective, attending to ethical dilemmas posed by the research process are an integral part of any research project's broader efforts to make visible power dynamics and to demonstrate commitment to the goal of social justice and social change (Dominelli, 2003; Potts & Brown, 2012; Rogers, 2012; Wolf, 1996). As Potts and Brown (2012) observe, "the research process is all about power and relationships" (p. 105). Similarly, as Wolf (1996) points out, "the power dimension is threaded throughout the field work and postfield work process" (p. 1). The requirement for feminist, anti-oppressive researchers to "pa[y] attention to power relations" (Potts & Brown, 2012, p. 106) holds additional importance in a study such as this one involving survivors of sexual violence. Because powerlessness and loss of control are common and particularly distressing impacts of sexual violence, ensuring that participation in the research

process does not replicate or exacerbate such conditions is imperative to ethical research practice (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco & Ahrens, 2004; Finkelhor & Brown, 1985). Of course, as feminist and anti-oppressive researchers point out, it is impossible to eradicate power imbalances that exist between the researcher and research participants (Dominelli, 2003; Potts & Brown, 2012; Preissle & Han, 2012; Wolf, 1996). For instance, as Potts and Brown observe, "there is inherent power in naming the issue to be studied and why it is worthy of study" (p. 106). Nonetheless, following other feminist and anti-oppressive researchers in their efforts to mitigate these ethical dilemmas and to minimize power imbalances in the research process (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco & Ahrens, 2004; Potts & Brown, 2012; Preissle & Han, 2012; Wolf, 1996), I draw on a number of strategies, including transparency about the research process, feminist interviewing practices (Camptell et al., 2010), considerations of risks and benefits, and self-reflexivity to ensure careful consideration of an ethical research practice that strives to reflect the values of feminist, anti-oppressive social work.

Transparency about the research project and participants' involvement in the project is one strategy identified in feminist, anti-oppressive research ethics literature (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco & Ahrens, 2004; Potts & Brown, 2012; Wolf, 1996) that I utilized to address and minimize power imbalance inherent in the relationship between myself as MSW student and researcher and the women who offered to participate in this project. To this end, I took efforts to ensure to the best of my ability that participants understood the goals of the research project, the research process, and the terms of their participation. These efforts to ensure understanding and informed consent for participation began during my initial conversations with women when

they contacted me to inquire about participation and was ongoing throughout the project.

During initial contact with potential interviewees, I provided a detailed overview of the project and the terms of participation and invited them to ask questions for clarification (See Appendix E: Screening Document - Script for Initial Contact). When I met with each of the women who agreed to participate in an interview, I began by reviewing information outlined on the informed consent form (See Appendix H: Informed Consent Form), including reviewing the limits to confidentiality, emphasizing that participation was voluntary and making clear that participants could stop the interview at any time. Feminist researchers remind us that obtaining informed consent is not always as straightforward as it may seem. As McCormick (2012) observes,

> providing information to respondents about one's research is a fairly straightforward endeavour. … Comprehension of the research is more problematic. The person may understand what is being put forward to them, but may not understand the implications of granting the request. For example, some may not fully understand how they may be impacted, even if things are explained to them fairly completely ahead of time. Additionally, the researchers themselves, even though they have spent much time thinking through their research questions and issues, may not have a full understanding of how the research process may impact their respondents. (pp. 24-25)

To address these concerns, I invited women to ask questions about any aspect of the project or their involvement before we began the interview, as well as at the end of the interview. Women were also invited to contact me via email should they

have any questions or change their mind about participation in the period following the interview.

Feminist researchers argue that transparency about the research project and process must also extend to a realistic consideration of and communication about the risks and benefits of participation (McCormick, 2012; Preissle & Han, 2012; Wolf, 1996). For researchers, this also involves considering how the research process and design can be shaped in ways that reflect an underlying effort to minimize risk and maximize benefits (Potts & Brown, 2012; Wolf, 1996). In the context of research with sexual violence survivors, taking into consideration the operation of power within the research project and its potential to replicate a sense of loss of control, powerlessness, or exploitation central to sexual violence itself are key ethical concerns (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco & Ahrens, 2004) that must be addressed when considering the risks and benefits of the project.

Given the sensitive and personal nature of the material collected in this thesis concerning women's experiences of sexual violence, and the potential distress that may be caused in recalling these experiences for the purpose of this project, it was important to give detailed consideration to ethical research practices that would minimize risk that went beyond simply being transparent about the research project.

In general, research involving individual recall of traumatic events has been demonstrated to be relatively safe (Becker-Blease, Freyd & Binder, 2006; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). In fact, research examining the motivations and experiences of sexual violence survivors who participate in research studies on sexual violence found that such participation is generally found to be a positive experience that can facilitate "new insights, connections, and consciousness-raising" (Campbell et al., 2010, p. 71), as well as provide a means of contributing to social change by potentially taking part

in research aimed at increasing knowledge related to improving conditions for other survivors of sexual violence (Campbell et al., 2010). Nonetheless, given that it is impossible to completely control for risks and benefits in any study (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2014), being transparent about the risks and benefits of participation and building strategies into the data collection and data presentation processes to protect the emotional, physical, social, and psychological safety of participants was important to empowering participants in making their own decisions about involvement in the project (Campbell et al., 2010).

From the beginning an integral part of transparency about the risks and benefits of participation included being clear from the outset about the purpose of the research interview. During initial contact and when reviewing the informed consent form with women, I made clear that the purpose of the interview was not therapeutic in nature but rather for increased knowledge and as part of the process of my completion of my MSW degree. This was particularly important within a context of diminished access to services for sexual assault survivors who may wait many months for therapeutic support in the community in which I conducted interviews. It was important to ensure that participants were not offering to participate because of the potential benefit of receiving therapeutic support. Although participants ultimately expressed to me that participation had been helpful to them, I could not guarantee this at the outset of the interview or claim that the interview held any therapeutic purposes.

The issue of financial compensation in exchange for participation in research is debated in terms of its potential for risk and benefits. While compensating women for their time and emotional labour is a central concern of feminism in general, it is also important to be cognizant of the potential ways financial renumeration in the

research setting might lead women to participate out of financial need or distress. Ultimately, in this project, participants were provided with a modest $20 compensation. This compensation was provided as a gesture of appreciation for participation, as well as in recognition of potential costs participants might incur, such as transportation and/or dependent care costs. Each participant received the money at the beginning of the interview, and I explained that if she decided not to complete the interview she would still receive the compensation so that no participant felt compelled to finish the interview so that she could receive payment.

Thus, although the interview did not have as its goal a therapeutic support nor was it intended as a means of receiving financial compensation, it was important to support interviewees' participation in ways that worked to mitigate or minimize distress related to participation during the interview. Campbell et al. (2010) identifies three feminist interviewing practices with sexual violence survivors that have been demonstrated to contribute to positive experiences for research participants and to minimize distress: 1) reducing hierarchy; 2) providing information and linking survivors to resources; and 3) addressing emotionality by communicating warmth and respect.

Campbell et al. (2010) identifies using strategies that "emphasize to participants their choice, power, and control during the interview (above and beyond what normally occurs during the consent process)" (p. 72) as important to a feminist interviewing practice that works to reduce hierarchy. To this end, in designing the interview protocol for this study, my choice of an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide was in part informed by a consideration of the ethical imperative to ensure that in telling stories of sexual violence women had control over what aspects and level of detail they wanted to share. At the beginning of the interview and in the

informed consent form, I explained that women were encouraged to share at their own comfort level and were not required to share any details they did not feel comfortable in sharing. The interview questions reflected this sentiment.

A second strategy identified by Campbell et al. (2010) that can assist in reducing hierarchy is "to engage in dialogue with the interviewees by answering their questions and letting them see into [the researchers] world, both personally and professionally" (p. 73). To establish this openness to "mutual disclosure" (p. 73), at the beginning of the interview, I took time to introduce myself and to tell the participant about my background and interest in this work and welcomed the interview participant to ask any questions she wanted to know. In the two situations where participants invited me to their home to conduct the interviews, this type of informal conversation was important to match the more relaxed environment of the interview setting. Throughout the interview process and at the end of the interview, I openly responded to questions posed to me by participants: these questions related to such topics as my relationship status, my education, whether I'd seen certain television programs or movies, as well as general conversations about the issue of violence against women. Again, while such efforts do not erase the power imbalance or my "researcher" identity they can help to give participants a better sense of the individual asking them questions that may help to minimize power hierarchies.

Throughout the interview my ability to practice Campbell et al.'s (2010) remaining strategies of providing information, communicating warmth and respect, and linking survivors to resources were strengthened by my previous experience in conducting research interviews with women about their experiences of sexual violence, volunteering on a sexual assault crisis line and working at a community-based sexual assault centre for over five years, which included the completion of one

of my MSW practicum placements in the centre's sexual assault counselling program. Collectively, these experiences had provided me with training about common myths and misconceptions about sexual violence, common impacts of sexual violence, and strategies for identifying and addressing triggers and other signs of distress a survivor might demonstrate when discussing her experiences that I drew on in my all of my contact with participants, including during the interview.

For example, during initial contact with potential interview participants, in addition to providing an overview of the research project and determining if the potential participant met the inclusion criteria, I also asked participants to consider whether they had struggled with suicidal ideation and/or attempts and/or any other crisis in the past 6 months that would make it difficult for them to participate in an interview about their experience of sexual violence. Although none of the potential participants I spoke with affirmatively identified these challenges, I was prepared to discuss why the individual would not be permitted to take part in the study under these conditions, and to provide the individual with a list of resources and referrals if suitable (See Appendix E: Screening Document and Appendix G: List of Resources).

During the interview, efforts to provide information and communicate warmth and respect took a number of different forms that included normalizing participants' experiences and reactions; noticing signs of emotional distress; checking in with participants throughout the interview to see if they needed a break or wished to continue at a later time; and ensuring that we conducted the interviews in spaces that not only ensured privacy and confidentiality but were also inviting and comfortable. Finally, recognizing, acknowledging and normalizing that participants may feel the need for additional support following the interview, participants were provided with a

list of local resources (i.e. Sexual Assault Support Line) which I reviewed with participants (see Appendix G: List of Resources).

To emphasize that the power, control, and choice of participants to engage in the research project extended beyond the immediate context of the interview to include ongoing control about the stories they shared, I explained how my research would involve the use of direct quotations from the interviews and ensured participants provided informed consent for me to do so (See Appendix H: Informed Consent Form). At the end of the interview, I again asked participants to confirm consent for the use of direct quotations in case anything had come up in the interview that they would not want quoted directly in the research findings. Recognizing that it may be difficult for participants to recall everything they had shared in the interview immediately after its completion, I also offered participants the opportunity to receive a copy of the interview transcript and to review and offer feedback on the transcript. Of the eight interview participants, six requested copies of the transcript, which I delivered to the participant via their preferred way of receiving it; however, none of the participants requested any changes to the interview transcripts.

Due to the time constraints of the project and its timely completion as part of my MSW program, it was important for me to be realistic and clear with participants about any limitations or deadlines related to their ongoing input or feedback in the project. To this end, I discussed with participants that after a specific date it would not be possible to request additional changes or to withdraw from the study. Nonetheless, had any participant contacted me, I would have done my best to meet their requests to be removed from the study. To reinforce their contribution to the development of knowledge related to sexual violence I offered to send a summary of the research

project to those participants who had indicated to me that they would like to receive one.

Wolf (1996) argues that attention to power dynamics in the research relationship extend into the post-fieldwork period of data representation and writing, and that researchers should identify strategies that consider this ongoing power dynamic. As Preissle & Han (2012) observe, “feminists have a particular stake in the ethics of representation because of what many of us believe to have been misrepresentation of women and our experiences” (p. 526). The potential for the qualitative approach to research design used in this thesis to represent the nuances and complexities of women’s experiences of sexual violence has been discussed earlier in this chapter. In particular, the extensive use of direct quotations in data analysis and presentation of the research findings is one strategy utilized in an effort to centre the stories women shared with me in their own words. Nonetheless, as I also outline elsewhere in this thesis, the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of this thesis are such that data analysis and presentation is understood to be co-created and deeply informed by the researcher’s positionality, motivations, and interpretive biases and interests (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013; Stanley, 2017; Woodiwiss, Smith, & Lockwood, 2017). Again, transparency about this aspect of the research process is important, and in this case involved ongoing self-reflection and self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher through ongoing reflective journaling during the analysis and writing process, as well as clearly outlining the researcher’s positionality in the thesis itself.

Throughout all stages of the research process it was important to ensure privacy and confidentiality. To protect participant privacy and confidentiality during data collection, the individual face-to-face interview took place at a time and place

mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher; I worked with the participant to ensure that the location was one in which the participant would not be heard by anyone other than the researcher. Participants' names and contact information were recorded on a list (hard copy only) with corresponding pseudonyms. This list was stored separately from all other data in a locked filing cabinet. Measures to ensure data security (i.e. storing data in a locked filing cabinet, encrypting electronic files, and storing electronic materials on a secure server) were put in pace to protect all data collected for this project (recordings, transcribed interviews, research notes and related electronic files).

In obtaining informed consent, I also explained the efforts that would be taken to safeguard participant confidentiality in the dissemination of research findings and results. As such, identifying information has been removed from research findings presented in this thesis, including names of the interviewee or any person identified in the interview, the names of specific locations identified in the interview, or any details of the situations described in the interview that might identify a participant. Participants are referred to by their pseudonyms in the reporting of the study's findings.

Finally, to ensure my study met all institutional ethical requirements a detailed research ethics proposal was submitted to and granted approval by Dalhousie University's Research Ethics Board (#2016-3964).

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

The possibility stories[10] of women survivors of sexual violence are both retrospective and future-oriented. While the primary aim of this thesis is to understand how women survivors story their relationship to possibility from the present looking into the future, the possibility stories women shared at the time of the interview about what they imagine for themselves in the upcoming months and years were inseparable from and deeply inflected with a much longer story about possibility. This longer story about possibility was one that had begun in childhood and adolescence and included the many challenges women had endured and success they had achieved up to the present moment. Thus, the possibility stories that women told me about their hopes and dreams for the future at the time of the interview – while a key part of the analysis presented in this chapter – are also only one part of women's lifelong stories about their relationship to possibility, and the significance of sexual violence in shaping that relationship. In this chapter, I draw on both structural and thematic narrative methods of analysis informed by the frameworks set out by Mische (2009) and Sooles (2020) as outlined in Chapter Three of this thesis to explore and reveal the complexity of the possibility stories of women survivors of sexual violence. With reference to the narrative elements and structures within which these stories are contained, the dominant themes that emerge from these stories, and the relationship between theme and structure, I chart an overarching possibility story structure

[10] In this chapter, I use the phrase "possibility stories" to refer to the narrative accounts women construct about their relationship to the concept of possibility and to the concrete possibilities they imagine, pursue, or achieve in various domains of their lives. As outlined in earlier chapters in this thesis in more detail, the concept of possibility is utilized in this thesis to encompass any future-oriented hopes, dreams, goals, plans, fears, or ideas women describe or story about their lives. At times, I refer to the concept of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) when women describe specific instances of hoped for and feared potential versions of self (i.e. a hoped for social work possible self, a feared unemployed possible self).

articulated by the women interviewed, as well as identify the variations and commonalities that exist within this overarching structure based on the individual and distinct possibility stories shared by the women. (See Table 1: Overview of the Possibility Story Structure)

To begin, I provide an overview of the overarching possibility story structure as articulated by the eight women interviewed for this project. Divided into three broad time periods in women's lives, the possibility story structure emerged as a framework within which women organized and documented the impact of sexual violence not only on their ideas about possibility in the future from where they sat at the time of the interview but also across the lifespan. After providing an overview of the overarching possibility story structure, I move into a detailed analysis of that structure by identifying corresponding possibility story types and sub-types within each time period. In doing so, I demonstrate how understanding the possibility story structure and themes as articulated by the women reveal important insights into the ways dominant systems influence women's relationship to possibility, the ways through which survivors navigate these systems, and consequently the ways it is essential to change these systems so to foster possibility-rich narratives for all survivors.

Overview of the Possibility Story Structure

The possibility stories as articulated by the eight women interviewed encompass all stages of women's lives from childhood to the present. In addition, these possibility stories extend beyond the present to include women's imagined futures. As such, the overarching possibility story structure consists of three parts that correspond to three time periods in women's lives. The first part of the possibility story structure covers the period from early childhood to early adulthood – a period

that for all the women interviewed includes at least one experience of sexual violence. The second part extends from early adulthood and post-initial experience of sexual violence to the present at the time of the interview. Although the length of this period varied for the women interviewed, women commonly organized this second part of their overall possibility story into three stages that reflect their shifting relationship to possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence: 1) post-initial sexual violence to "rock bottom;" 2) "rock bottom" to getting support; and 3) getting support to the present. The third part of the overarching possibility story structure focuses on the future as it is imagined and conceptualized from the present moment of the interview. The overarching possibility story structure divided into these three periods provides a chronological framework within which women provide retrospective and prospective accounts of the impacts of sexual violence on the relationship to possibility they have had in the past and imagine for themselves in the future. In doing so, the women interviewed author possibility story types and sub-types that correspond to and reflect the time periods in the overarching possibility story.

Women's accounts begin with a retrospective account of the early contexts and ideas of possibility surrounding them in childhood and adolescence. In these accounts, women articulate three types of foundational possibility stories: 1) stories in which possibility is limited; 2) stories in which possibility is constrained by family expectations, and 3) stories in which possibility is nurtured and embraced. For all the women interviewed, these foundational possibility stories include their initial experience of sexual violence that have occurred for all women by the age of 18. As such, sexual violence itself is identified as one of the early contexts and influences shaping these foundational possibility stories.

In the second period of the overarching possibility story, women develop retrospective accounts of their relationship to possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence. Stretching over the period from early adulthood by which time all the women have had at least one experience of sexual violence to the present moment of the interview, the possibility stories women tell follow a common trajectory that can be divided into three stages. For each sub-period, women tell a corresponding possibility story. In the first stage, women construct stories of diminishing possibility in which they confront the impacts of sexual violence in the absence of support. In the second stage, women share stories of possibility turning points: the point in their life where they both understand themselves to have hit a crisis point -- what one participant refers to as "rock bottom" -- *and* to have made an instrumental connection to some form of support. The third stage of women's retrospective accounts of their relationship to possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence involves stories of repairing possibility – a process that women identify as beginning after accessing support and one in which they have been continuously involved in up to the present moment of the interview.

Finally, women author future-oriented possibility stories. These future-oriented possibility stories concern the period of the future as women imagine it from the time of the interview and take three story sub-types: 1) stories of endless possibility; 2) stories of pragmatic possibility; and 3) stories of limited possibility. Collectively, these future-oriented possibility stories give voice to and reveal women's hopes, dreams, fears, and ideas about themselves in the future, and, in doing so, reveal the varying ways in which sexual violence and its impact on women's relationship to possibility as articulated in their retrospective accounts from childhood to the present shape these future-oriented narratives.

Table 1

Overview of the Possibility Story Structure

Time Period in Women's Lives	Possibility Story Type	Possibility Story Sub-Types
Early childhood to and early adulthood, including initial experience of sexual violence	Foundational Possibility Stories	• Limited • Constrained • Nurtured and Embraced
Early adulthood (post-initial experience of sexual violence) to the present	Retrospective Possibility Stories of the Aftermath of Sexual Violence	
Post-initial experience of sexual violence to "rock bottom"		• Diminishing Possibilities
"Rock bottom" to getting help		• Possibility Turning Points
Getting help to the present		• Repairing Possibilities
The future	Future-Oriented Possibility Stories	• Endless • Pragmatic • Limited

Foundational Possibility Stories and the Introduction of Sexual Violence

In describing the impact of sexual violence on their relationship to possibility, each of the women started off by returning to and reflecting on the early messages she had received about possibility during her childhood and adolescence from family, community, and society in general. For example, Lucine began her account of the impact of sexual violence on her sense of possibility by insisting that "I first need to tell you that my family is a family of overachievers" – an opening sentence that frames what Lucine goes on to identify as one of the most profound impacts of her experiences of sexual violence: the way it has interfered with her ability to uphold the "overachiever" family identity and the particular formulation of possibility inherent within this identity. For Marnie, who states that "my childhood right up until the time I was 17 was trauma," an early context of very limited possibility becomes important for recognizing that now at age 53 she is able to say with conviction that "my life is full of possibilities." For Sarah, the pervasive culture in which she experiences herself and other women being sexualized and objectified as she walks the halls of her high school and works as a waitress at her first job at age 15, leads her to explain how early on she resigned herself to the reality that sooner rather than later all women receive what she calls the "wake up call" that their lives and the possibilities they hold therein will be limited and shaped in a context of ongoing male violence against women. At the time of the interview, Sarah identifies as agoraphobic and is convinced that the only way to avoid additional violence is to not leave the house which speaks to the ongoing impact of these early lessons. For each of the women interviewed, providing an account of her early contexts of possibility was necessary in laying the foundation from which to develop the story of the specific ways that sexual violence intersected with messages and ideas about possibility they were taught or experienced early on.

In this section, I begin an analysis of the possibility story structure by looking closely at the stories women offered in describing the early contexts and foundations of possibility in their lives, what happened to these stories when sexual violence entered into them, and what this reveals about how sexual violence functions in women's foundational possibility stories. While attending to the unique details of each woman's experience, I identify three sub-types of the foundational possibility story authored by the women interviewed: 1) limited; 2) constrained; and 3) nurtured and embraced. In describing the general characteristics of each of these foundational possibility stories as these emerge from the individual accounts offered by each of the eight women interviewed, I also include an overview of women's accounts of their experience of sexual violence and their descriptions of the immediate impact of these experiences on their early ideas about possibility (See Table 2: Sexual Violence Histories and Length of Time to Access Support). In doing so, I also begin to explore the role sexual violence plays in re-affirming, re-shaping, and further complicating the messages and values about possibility developed in each of these early narratives.

Table 2

Sexual Violence Histories and Length of Time to Access to Support

Name and Age	Age of First Experience of Sexual Violence	Age of Most Recent Experience of Sexual Violence	Form(s) of Sexual Violence	Time Between First Experience of Sexual Violence and Receiving Support
Marnie (53)	First memory at 4 ½ years but believes first incident at age 2	17	Incest by father; ongoing child sexual abuse up to age 17 by father; sexual abuse by step-father, male babysitters, and neighbour	17 years
Jocelyn (49)	4	15	ongoing child sexual abuse by step-father up to age 15	26 years
Claire (19)	Early childhood (exact age unspecified)	Teenager (exact age unspecified)	child sexual abuse by father; multiple incidents of stranger and acquaintance sexual assault; sexual coercion; survival sex work	Approx. 15-18 years
Lucine (30)	18	20	ongoing intimate partner sexual violence over 2-year period	Approx. 5-7 years
Missy (20)	18	18	Acquaintance sexual assault by boyfriend (multiple incidents)	Less than 6 months
Shauna (19)	15 or 16 (Grade 10)	15 or 16	Single incident sexual assault	2 years
Destiny Star (40)	18	Unclear	Acquaintance sexual assault; survival sex work including incidents of sexual assault	At least 10 years
Sarah (30)	15	Early to mid-20s	Attempted sexual assault by acquaintance; multiple incidents of sexual harassment; acquaintance sexual assault; ongoing intimate partner sexual violence over 5-year period	12 years

Foundational Possibility Story Sub-Types

Stories of limited possibility.

Three of the eight women interviewed began their overall possibility story by describing a significantly limited sense of possibility in their early contexts and environments. For Marine, Jocelyn, and Claire, each of whom had experienced sexual abuse beginning in early childhood and throughout adolescence, their relationship to possibility was shaped by and through the abusive contexts in which they were living from the beginning of their lives. From the age of 2 onward through childhood and adolescence, sexual abuse was a continual feature of Marnie's life during which she was victimized by multiple male perpetrators, including her father, stepfather, babysitters, and a neighbour. Referring to her childhood environment as one marked not only by the abuse she personally experienced but also the violence experienced by her mother and other adults in her life, Marine explains, "there was a huge amount of friggin' trauma, right? … There was a huge amount of violence and addiction issues, and that kind of stuff." Marnie's mother's experiences of sexual assault and other forms of intimate partner and family violence left her ill-equipped to protect let alone guide and support Marnie in recognizing possible futures other than ones defined by violence. As Marnie reflected, "there were no tools in her toolkit, so how could she give me tools of mine?"

Jocelyn, too, is sexually abused throughout her childhood and adolescence. Beginning when she is four years old, Jocelyn's stepfather continues to sexually abuse her until she moves out of the house at age 15. Describing her early environment as one which she saw herself as someone "the total opposite of somebody that would have been growing up in a loving, nurturing, supportive home," Jocelyn's earliest

ideas about the possible selves she might achieve are inseparable from the abuse she experiences.

A few months away from her 20th birthday at the time of the interview, Claire is in some ways still intertwined in an early environment that like Marnie and Jocelyn has been marked by childhood sexual abuse, family violence, and addiction. Claire's account of her foundational possibility story begins with the following description of her childhood:

> I was abused a lot as a child. Um, I didn't have a stable environment to grow up in. Um, the closest thing being that when we had first, when my mom had first charged my dad with domestic violence and things like that, we, once we got out of the women's shelter we lived with my grandparents for a few years and that was probably the most stable living environment that I had my whole life until I was in high school.

In addition to the childhood sexual abuse she experiences from her father, Claire, by the age of 19, has been subject to numerous other forms of sexual violence, including being sexually assaulted by numerous peers.

These early environments, as described by these three women, were ones that offered little sense of possibility for a future different than those modeled in the environments that surrounded them. While other influences, such as TV, books, friends, and other peoples' lives may have countered these early environments, the dominant story Marnie shares of her childhood sense of possibility is one in which there exists few if any outside influences or alternative models of possibility. As Marnie describes her childhood environment, she makes a connection between the childhood sexual abuse she experienced and the early lessons she was learning about her own right and ability to create a future filled with possibility:

> as a younger person … my experience shaped my perception of myself, so I didn't see my possibilities as being huge and bountiful when I was younger. Um, in fact, I struggled with feeling competent, and I struggled with feeling smart and I struggled with feeling [laughs] you know?

Like Marnie, Jocelyn's description of the impact of sexual abuse on her early sense of self and the intense pressure she feels to keep the abuse a secret makes it difficult to imagine doing anything other than managing what she describes as the "shadow over me":

> You know, I was disgusted with myself, blamed myself. Yeah it was just like a shadow over me, and yeah, I would say the biggest thing would be, you know, I was living with all that shame, so the disgust, right, having to hide the secret. If people knew they wouldn't like who I was because I was, I don't know, this damaged person, or this, um, yeah, I don't know if I could explain it any better than that, but … people wouldn't like me if they knew.

Jocelyn elaborates on how in the way that it robs her of self-confidence, preoccupies her with hiding what is happening, and fills her with shame, sexual abuse clouds her ability to take steps toward new possibilities: "people, you know, they get self-confidence by successes and being successful in the different things they would do. Well, I didn't have the confidence to step out and do those things, right? I'd just stay in the background."

Both Marnie and Jocelyn emphasize the limitations of their early sense of possibility by pointing out that it was not simply that they did not know how to pursue the hopes and dreams they held for the future. Rather, that there was an almost complete absence of even the most typical of hoped for possible selves in future. Marnie explains,

> despite the fact that I was a pretty smart little girl, I couldn't have imagined, you know, I couldn't have imagined continuing on with education. I couldn't imagine even having a job. Like I couldn't. I just felt so -- I don't even know the word -- just so unable to cope, you know? Unable to cope with everything, you know? ... I didn't grow up thinking, "Ok, I'm going to graduate high school and go onto university, and maybe I'm going to meet the man of my dreams, and we're going to have a family." Like, so those possibilities were not there for me. Like, they were not there for me. That was not in my realm of possibility. I could not see that at all.

Jocelyn too acknowledges that going to university, getting a job, and getting married are "not in my realm of possibility," and that these "would have been a bigger dream than I would have had." Entirely preoccupied with keeping the abuse she is experiencing a secret – a secret she keeps for almost 30 years – Jocelyn's early understandings of the possibility is of a future in which she will continue to be "going through the motions" in the same ways she is as a young girl:

> I didn't have a whole lot of feelings. You know, … I went to school, high school, because that's something that you're supposed to do. I always did what you were supposed to do or kind of what was expected of me. But beyond that what do you do? You know? Unless you have dreams or hopes or, you know, for, you know, some plan, right? I didn't.

Like a younger version of Marnie and Jocelyn who have similarly described themselves in their late teens and early twenties as grappling with the very limited sense of possibility they held for themselves in the future, Claire, at age 19, describes a sense of lacking possibilities in the future: "Um, I don't really think much about the future. I don't, and I think I don't know maybe the lack of possibility, like, maybe. I

don't know. Honestly, like, right now I just sort of keep it with where I am now." Claire reveals how it is difficult for her to imagine a future in which sexual violence does not exist given the early lessons she has learned: these experiences were "really hard on my self-esteem 'cause it made it feel more as though you know, if this just keeps happening my whole life this is obviously what I deserve." In the same way that Marnie and Jocelyn talk about how sexual abuse deepened the messages and signs they received as young women of there being few possibilities, Claire goes to even greater extremes to describe how her early experiences of sexual violence have until very recently led her to believe that she would not be alive to realize any future hopes or dreams:

> I know that sounds really dark, but I genuinely didn't know for a long time if I was … where I was going to be by the end of each day. I kind of went by life kind of hoping that something would happen. … Like, that I would end up overdosing or being shot or stabbed or run over – anything that would make it so when they look in the papers they're not going to see another youth killed themselves. You know, something that could blame it on something else, so it would be an accident.

Stories of constrained possibility.

In the foundational possibility stories they offer, Lucine, Sarah, and Missy emphasize how realizing the possibilities open to them is an expectation placed upon them from a young age within the family, community, and societal environments in which they grow up. In contrast to the women for whom there exists little concern from those around them about the possibilities they might achieve, Lucine, Sarah, and Missy describe early environments in which there is significant pressure placed upon

them to achieve specific versions of academic, career, and relationship success that are normalized within their upper-middle class familial and social contexts.

As noted at the beginning of this section, Lucine places great emphasis throughout her interview on describing the "overachieving" environment in which she grows up and the expectations on her to similarly "overachieve." For example, by insisting that "I first need to tell you that my family is a family of overachievers" before describing her experience of sexual violence, Lucine sets up her early environment and its particular formulation of possibility as an essential lens through which her subsequent experiences of sexual violence must be filtered. Lucine's description of her parents and siblings – all of whom are accomplished professionals with multiple university degrees and in successful, stable relationships – indicate that her childhood environment is one markedly different from those of Jocelyn, Marnie, and Claire in terms of the models of possibility offered to her, and the financial means and security to accomplish them. It is also one in which as Lucine describes it "there was a *lot* of pressure on me to do well," and one in which Lucine internalizes an identity as peace-keeper even if it means subsuming her own desires:

> My role in the family growing up because everyone else was very, very angry– not angry, but they were very quick to be angry. I learned to recognize people's moods very quickly. I was called the mouse growing up by my grandmother, <<la petite souris>>, 'cause I never felt like I was really at home 'cause I was always creeping and trying not to upset anyone.

Thus, while the expectations that Lucine succeed in high school, go to university, and get a job are deeply engrained for her as tasks she will accomplish (in contrast to Marnie, for instance, for whom these were "not in my realm of possibility," as well as being much more unlikely given her family's socio-economic

position) her lack of control over these possibilities as choices she might consciously make for herself echoes the sense of passivity or inaccessibility Marnie and Jocelyn describe experiencing in thinking about the future as something they can take control of and author on their own terms as young women.

In describing this early environment, Lucine frames the paths set out for her future rather than being ones she herself has authored or feels particularly excited about are ones she reasons it will be best for her to follow in order to maintain peace and obedience within her family. Here she sounds similar to Jocelyn in relating to the future as something in which she is simply "going through the motions" more concerned with not upsetting anyone than achieving certain goals: "I really, I'd gone my whole life just following what my parents wanted and that was like you go to school, you go to university. I had no real end game in mind …" She describes this in a bit more detail:

> Yeah. I didn't have the concept of it [the future]. I was just following along with what other people wanted, or what I assumed was normal or expected. I didn't know what I wanted out of life. … I can even remember talking to my mom, like, there's not really a me. It's just what I can do for other people. Very early on. Not realizing that that's not true. I was just repressing who I was because I was scared.

Much like Lucine, Sarah's early environment is one marked by pressure to succeed and to realize markers of achievement defined by her family and culture. Early in the interview, Sarah sets up her sexual violence story by first describing the expectations placed on her as a young Filipino-Canadian girl: "But, um, because I mean, you know, I was born in '87, grew up in the '90s, my parents, everyone in my family has gone to university. It was never even like a—you're going to university.

You're going to do this." While Sarah acknowledges taking a more active role in choosing the possible selves she might pursue, she is clear that there is a specific path she is to follow:

> Like, growing up I remember being a kid and deciding which play-dough container am I going to sacrifice, and I decided yellow, because I didn't really like yellow play-dough, because I had to make a piggy-bank, because I had to start saving for university. Like it was always just like, I'm going to get a job, I'm going to be a vet or a doctor or a geneticist. Like those were the things I wanted to do.

Importantly, as Sarah's description of the foundational possibility stories she was absorbing indicate, the expectations placed upon her to achieve certain versions of academic and professional success were ones that made no room for or acknowledgement of the distinct barriers she might face as an Asian woman in Canadian society: "And I remember initially never even really considering that I was a woman going into the world. It was just like, I'm a Canadian. I have all these opportunities. I can do whatever I want to grow up and be."

While this perspective may on the one hand be suggestive of an expansive or empowering foundational possibility story, Sarah quickly finds that it is greatly at odds with the pervasive sexism and racism she encounters as a young teenager attempting to enact these forms of achievement and success.

> I mean, growing up in a small town … obviously I'm of Asian descent, my parents are actually from the Philippines. I don't know what was wrong with all the boys where I grew up? But, um, Asian, was just like, there was a lot of racial issues there. Like, that's mainly where a lot of my, um, like, depression and anxiety when I was first diagnosed it was because of the racial bullying.

> Like when I was younger, cause we moved there when I was in grade 6, um, it was just you know "slanty eyes" and "chink" and all that good stuff, and then, it's like when the boys hit puberty, they figured out about sex, all of a sudden it was like "[Sarah] is a whore, like, she's a chink whore, she's a jap whore," and I'm like, you know, "I'm not even, I'm completely Canadian. I was born here."

As she struggles to meet family expectations in this environment, the belief that Sarah "can do whatever I want to grow up and be" takes the form of an additional burden she must carry on top of the daily acts of sexism and racism she is subjected to as she walks the schools of her high school and works at her part-time job.

Although less vocal about the pressures to achieve success put upon her by her family, Missy describes how her early environment is one in which pursuing education, career, and marriage are normalized and unquestioned future pathways in the context in which she grows up. Missy's early ideas about going to university to become a pharmacist, like Sarah's hopes of being a vet or geneticist, are complicated as she navigates her high school environment. After being the subject of persistent rumours and bullying following a relationship with a high school boyfriend,[11] Missy finds herself isolated and unable to concentrate on her schoolwork. Learning early on that it is not safe for her to speak out, Missy describes how this early environment silences her: "I think that because of everything that happened, I was too scared to, like, ask questions because I didn't want people like judging me more or talking about me or whatever. So I was too scared to ask questions." Nonetheless, still focused on getting to university, Missy changes her courses in order to ensure she gets the grades

[11] Missy's experience of bullying is not explicitly described as an experience of sexual violence.

she needs – even if it means giving up on her dream of being a pharmacist. For these women, messages about doing whatever is necessary to fulfill normalized paths of success were deeply internalized and enacted as they moved through childhood and adolescence.

Indeed, while on the surface the early environments described by Lucine, Sarah, and Missy appear as contexts conducive to realizing a variety of possible selves, all three emphasize the challenge of recognizing their agency in authoring these possible selves and negotiating the burden of the outward pressures placed upon them to live up to family and culturally-inflected ideas about possibility. As Lucine and Missy go on to describe their initial experiences of sexual violence at age 18 and Sarah her initial experience at age 15, they ground their descriptions of the impact of these experiences in terms of how they interfere with their ability to fulfill the possibilities expected of them. In this sense, these contexts are positioned by the women as necessary for fully conveying the profound and lasting impact of sexual violence.

Despite having what she describes as "no real end game in mind," Lucine describes herself as working diligently to meet the expectations of her family throughout adolescence and succeeds in being accepted to university on a full scholarship. It is at this same time, however, when Lucine begins a relationship with a man who over a two-year period becomes increasingly controlling, emotionally and financially abusive, and repeatedly sexually coercive and violent. Describing this period in her life, Lucine articulates the distinct and profound ways her attempts to navigate and survive in this abusive relationship intersect with the tremendous guilt, anxiety, and ongoing pressure she feels to continue to meet others' expectations of her to be "successful" in university and in her family life. As will be explored in more

detail in the following section, Lucine doggedly continues to go to university despite the abuse she is experiencing in attempt to "follow along with what other people wanted" – a commitment or effort that is further complicated by the demands put upon her by her abusive partner and his own ideas about what shape Lucine's future should take.

The importance Lucine herself has placed on "first" sharing her foundational possibility story and its early impact on her sense of self is it seems for Lucine essential to fully communicating the impact of sexual violence on her sense of possibility as it stands at the time of interview; as will be explored in more detail in the next section, not only has sexual violence robbed Lucine of the possible selves she might have eventually been able to identify for herself but also it has led to her failure to achieve the possibilities set out for and hoped for her by her family. Lucine reflects that one of the biggest impacts she continues to struggle with is the way her experience of violence and its impact on her ability to achieve the measures of success her family has wanted for her:

> My parents were completely ripped apart by it, and I had *a lot* of guilt about that. I still do, sometimes. I've worked on that, 'cause they wouldn't want me to be like this and they've said as much, but it's still I still kind of remember making my mom cry and it's not a good feeling.

Like Lucine, Sarah's efforts to meet the expectations placed upon her to "do whatever I want to grow up and be" are deeply complicated when she experiences sexual violence. Sarah's exposure to sexual violence begins when she receives what she describes as a "wake up call" that the possibilities she or her family might wish for her will always be mediated or limited by a patriarchal system that objectifies and sexualizes her. For Sarah, this "wake up call" initially occurs as she walks the halls of

her high school: “But, um, and so I mean throughout all of high school – running the gauntlet, walking to class, wondering how many times my ass would be grabbed. That kind of thing, you know? And that’s when you, you know, it was just sort of like that’s something you dealt with as you grew up.” It is reaffirmed for her as a 15-year old girl at her after-school job as a waitress where she is continually subjected to unwanted sexual attention, and a few years later when the son of a family friend attempts to rape her. Despite these experiences, like Lucine, Sarah enters university on a full scholarship; however, also like Lucine, her education is complicated by continued experiences of sexual assault and sexual coercion within a deeply emotionally abusive multi-year relationship. Sarah does complete her degree, and by the time of the interview, she had ended the relationship many years earlier. Nonetheless, the pressure she described in continuing to meet the expectations placed on her by others meant that she had until only a few months prior to the interview not received any professional support for the extensive history of sexual violence she carries. The ongoing impact of the sexual violence both Lucine and Sarah experienced and attempted to manage while keeping up appearances and meeting family-authored educational and professional goals have caught up to them: at the time of the interview both Lucine and Sarah are unemployed, receiving long-term disability, and uncertain if they will ever work again.

Like Lucine and Sarah, Missy’s efforts to fulfill her early goals and expectations pay off and she is accepted into university; however, it is at this time in the summer before she is about to start university that she is sexually assaulted multiple times by an acquaintance she meets through a university orientation event. As such, she, like Lucine and Sarah, enters university facing significant challenges about how to continue to meet her goals of receiving a university education while

being in the same classes as the man who has assaulted her. Missy describes herself at this time in language similar to the way she described herself in high school as wanting to make herself as small and unnoticeable as possible: “I felt like I couldn’t really talk to anybody.”

I will explore in the next section how Missy’s experience unfolds in the aftermath of sexual violence differs from all the other participants because she is afforded informal and formal supports shortly thereafter. While her sense of possibility continues to be impacted, unlike Lucine and Sarah, Missy has at the time of the interview been able to take up where she left off prior to the assault with some minor adjustments. Nonetheless, Missy’s story of her early context, like Lucine and Sarah, is one that may appear rich in possibility and opportunity given the presence of supportive if strict family, socio-economic security, and early academic success. Nonetheless, as each woman begins to provide a more detailed account of the impact of their experiences of sexual violence, it becomes clear how in the context of early environments in which the women experienced limited agency in determining their possible futures, sexual violence affirms that lack of agency and becomes yet another outside force dictating and limiting the possibilities available to them.

Stories of nurturing and embracing possibility.

The foundational possibility stories authored by Destiny Star and Shauna share elements of limited possibility and the influence of others’ expectations that characterize the other two foundational possibility story sub-types. However, unlike the other six women, Destiny Star and Shauna to varying degrees identify and describe themselves as having clear ideas for the future in which there is opportunity and potential for realizing many possibilities.

Much like Marnie, Jocelyn, and Claire, Destiny Star and Shauna describe early environments in which there exists few, if any, models of possibility other than those in their immediate family and community. Both Destiny Star and Shauna grow up in environments marked by poverty, addiction, and intergenerational trauma where there exists only sporadic concern about their educational or professional futures. In setting up her possibility story, Destiny Star begins by describing the small and insular community in which she grew up:

> I came from a place called [name of hometown]. There's a [name of place in the community] up there. So you have 250 backwoods hillbillies, all pretty much related or so close that, you know, … Dad had been an alcoholic for the first 10 years of my life. He did sober up and got everything worked out before he passed away, so that's awesome, but my brother's nine years younger than me. We had completely different childhoods.

Although Destiny Star doesn't offer a detailed picture of her childhood environment, a story she shares when describing her experience of working with a psychologist for the first time later in her life, and the insight it provides into her early family environment and its potential impact on her reveals the likely challenging early environment in which Destiny Star grew up:

> My first psychologist, she was great. She said I grew up with a warped sense of normal, which at first was very insulting, but then when she explained normal as defined psychologically, it's like 68% are the status quo respond this way generally to these things, or keep their house this way, and so she said you grew up below that line, so I'm not common. You're abnormal, sure [laughs].

In spite of the limited possibilities she sees around her, Destiny Star speaks about how as a teenager she develops a hoped-for possible self of being a social worker and works diligently to get accepted to university. Destiny Star's description of the reaction she receives upon sharing the news of her university acceptance from the high school guidance counsellor who tells her that she is "too stupid" to succeed underlines the barriers surrounding her as a young woman seeking to create a life for herself different than what she sees around her.

Like Destiny Star, Shauna describes seeing little in the way of models of possibility that appeal to her as a girl growing up in her community. She describes her community in the language of possibility as follows:

> Yes, like what possibilities can you possibly have when you're sitting on your ass in [name of community] on welfare with no job? These are your possibilities: overweight, kids [laughs], you know? Like there's not really a lot to come out of that. I'm not trying to insult anyone or anything. It just like my own personal opinion about the cycle and my family, and my community.

In particular, Shauna describes being impacted by what she saw as the lost and limited possibilities in her mom's life after her mom became pregnant at a young age:

> She missed out on a lot. Like she didn't go to school after high school, like, how – I just can't even imagine—she had scholarships, and, like, my aunt too had like art scholarships 'cause they're like amazing artists, and they just didn't pursue it, and it just breaks my heart because they just continued the cycle of just staying in [name of community] being on welfare, not pursuing anything, doing drugs. Just like ratty.

Unlike Destiny Star who much like Marnie, Jocelyn, and Claire mentioned few if any people close to them during their childhood and adolescence that

demonstrated any investment or care in supporting them in dreaming about a future, Shauna describes how her mother instilled in her a sense of possibility as a young girl:

> My mom would just always tell me like you can be whatever you want to be as long as you're happy. And I remember her even taking me to the library, so we could look on the computer at all these different universities and programs and stuff and colleges. She would always just, like, boost my confidence when it came to that kind of stuff. I don't know if it was just her thinking, "Oh what an imagination," kind of thing. But it was real to me. That's how I thought. I can't wait to just grow up and get out of here and do all these things for myself.

Shauna's description of the encouragement and tangible support she receives from her mom is tellingly different from the descriptions offered by Lucine and Sarah's whose parents' expectations that they pursue post-secondary education are rooted in a type of expectation of outward achievement and success rather than "being happy." This seems to have a big impact on Shauna who describes herself as a young woman prior to being sexually assaulted as rich with possibility:

> Um, before all of this you know happened I was always thinking about university and going away to school and moving away from home and just doing all these things that no one else in my family really did, like actually pursuing post-secondary and having my own apartment and things like that, like my own vehicle. … I had a huge sense of possibility because well I don't know what it was. I think it was just how I was, just how I strove to be and I remember being really organized and structured, like kind of like how I am now that I've got my life back on track.

Although the environments described by Destiny Star and Shauna contain few positive messages about possibility (with the exception of Shauna's mother) and as such are similar to the environments of all the other women, Destiny Star and Shauna do not disclose experiences of childhood sexual abuse or ongoing intimate partner sexual violence throughout their childhood or adolescence. Nonetheless, when both women are sexually assaulted in their late-teens by casual acquaintances, its impact on their foundational stories of possibility as an opportunity to be seized upon and realized is dramatically altered and interrupted.

Despite all the barriers she has faced growing up, Destiny Star, at the age of 18, does move away from her small community to the city in which she is planning to go to university to fulfill her dream of becoming a social worker. When she is sexually assaulted by a date shortly after beginning university, however, her ability to continue her education and pursue her social worker hoped for possible self is fundamentally altered. Unable to access the support she needs from her family, friends, or the university, Destiny Star drops out of university, becomes heavily involved in drugs and alcohol, and eventually engages in survival sex work during which she endures multiple additional incidents of sexual and physical violence. While Destiny Star has at the time I interview her evidently worked hard for a number of years to process and heal from these experiences – a process that has led her to reconnect with that early sense of hope and possibility – the realities of poverty, addiction, employment insecurity, and disability connected to the impacts of this violence are ones that mean that the possibilities she now imagines for herself are significantly different than the life she had imagined for herself before experiencing sexual violence.

Out of all the women I spoke with, it is Shauna's account that most vividly and dramatically demonstrates the power of sexual violence to alter possibility. As described in her foundational possibility story, prior to being sexually assaulted, Shauna remembers herself as someone with "a huge sense of possibility" who was eagerly looking forward to going to university and being the first in her family to attain certain achievements. At the age of 16, however, when she is out with friends, a community member first injects her with drugs and then proceeds to rape her, leaving her lying outside overnight. Shauna's description of waking up the morning after the assault reveals how her sense of self and sense of possibility has been profoundly and instantaneously changed:

> I literally woke up the next day with my pants and panties down around my ankles, and when I had to pull them up and realized where I was and walk home from that spot. I felt just so empty, like, I can't even explain—I don't even think empty is the right word. I just felt numb. Dead on the inside. And feeling or not having the capacity to feel any other emotion beside just numbness prevented me from being able to think or pursue any of my goals. Or even communicate what had happened to anybody. I just felt so numb. I couldn't tell my mom. I couldn't—when I went to school the next day it was just—I was just there. I was just floating. My existence was there physically, but not any other, not spiritually, emotionally.

Like three of the other women I interviewed, sexual violence leads Shauna – who feels that she cannot disclose her assault to anyone – to using drugs and alcohol as a way of coping. Over the next two years as Shauna becomes more heavily consumed by her addiction, the possibilities she once imagined diminish: her sense of

self is so profoundly altered that possibilities she once hoped for are pushed underground.

Despite what they describe as the limited possibilities surrounding them, both Destiny Star and Shauna describe themselves as young girls intent on realizing different possibilities than those they see around them. In comparison to Marnie, Jocelyn, and Claire, their stories help to reveal the role of sexual violence as a contributing factor to shaping the scope and breadth of possibility available to young girls and women: Destiny and Shauna are able to hold onto possibility – until their experiences of sexual violence. To be sure, while the stories shared by the other six women demonstrate the impact of sexual violence over time, it is perhaps in the stories shared by Destiny Star and Shauna where the power of sexual violence to profoundly and instantaneously shift the sense of possibility women hold for themselves are most dramatically articulated.

Conclusion

In the above section, I have looked more closely at the early contexts of possibility that women introduced and the specific manifestations of these contexts in their early lives as foundational stories within which their history and present orientation toward possibility can be read. Although their individual circumstances are unique, the foundational possibility women described their younger selves as operating within and the way that sexual violence features in these frameworks fell into three categories: 1) sense of possibility as very limited and shaped by experiences of sexual violence; 2) possibility as familial and social expectation that must be met despite sexual violence; 3) clear sense of possibility strongly limited and reshaped by experiences of sexual violence. As becomes clear, women's ideas about possibility are shaped early on and are deeply informed by their surroundings and by sexual

violence. They are also deeply felt expectations that women carry with them over time and can and do play into the impact of sexual violence.

Significantly, the reality and ongoing threat of sexual abuse and violence intersects with and emerges in the foundational narratives of possibility in all the women interviewed. By the time they are 18, all the women interviewed had experienced at least one incident of sexual abuse or assault. For three of the women who experienced childhood sexual abuse starting as young as age two, they did not have a chance to develop a foundational sense of possibility in the absence of sexual violence, and thus struggled to have any sense of possibility. For the other five women, their early understandings about the possibilities their lives hold are fundamentally altered in the aftermath of sexual violence as they enter adulthood. For all the women interviewed, being a victim/survivor of sexual violence was by the time they entered adulthood no longer merely a feared possible self but rather a reality that could and was shaping the possibilities in their lives as they entered adulthood.

Retrospective Possibility Stories in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence

Having established the ideas and influences that shaped their relationship to possibility early on and described the way that sexual violence (as either ongoing or as a single incident) was woven into these early ideas and influences, women's possibility stories then move into a retrospective account of their life stories during the time period that extends from early adulthood and post-initial experience of sexual violence to the present. In this section, I examine the structural and thematic elements of women's possibility story since early adulthood and their initial experience of sexual violence to the present, and in so doing consider what these narratives reveal about how women understand their relationship to possibility to be mediated by their experience of sexual violence and their identities as survivors. More specifically, I

identify parts or stages common to the structure of these accounts that suggest a process through which women move through this period and what factors shape their relationship to possibility during this time: 1) post-initial experience of sexual violence to "rock bottom"; 2) "rock bottom" to getting support; and 3) getting support to the present.

As will be explored in the following section, women's stories of their movement through these three sub-periods hinges on the point at which having hit "rock bottom," as Sarah describes it, they were able to access or finally provided with formal or informal support in relation to their experience of sexual victimization. Prior to this "possibility turning point," as I will refer to it, women first construct narratives of diminishing possibility in which they describe the ways in which their hoped-for possible selves in the domains of self-concept, education, career, and relationships became increasingly limited and fixed, and their relationship to the future increasingly passive and restricted. As women's narratives of this period demonstrate, the cumulative effect of sexual violence in the absence of any support are such that each woman eventually finds herself at a crisis point or "rock bottom" and no longer able to cope on her own: while this moment is one that the women commonly describe as the point at which their lives appear devoid of possibility, it is also when they take the courageous step of reaching out for support despite previously negative experiences. On the other side of this "possibility turning point," women's narratives shift to describe the slow and multi-faceted process of repairing and reshaping their relationship to possibility toward one that is more expansive, malleable, and agentic. As will be explained in the final section of this chapter, these retrospective accounts of women's relationship with possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence build on and intersect with their foundational possibility stories in

ways that then cumulatively shape and inform the final part of their possibility stories from the present into the future.

Diminishing Possibility: Storying the Impacts of Sexual Violence in the Language of Possibility

In providing a retrospective account of their lives since their initial experience of sexual violence to the present, all the women interviewed articulated the profound impacts sexual violence had on their sense of self, education, employment, and relationships. Without exception, this was a period in which the sense of possibility women spoke about in their foundational possibility stories was greatly diminished often with long-standing consequences that have extended into their present lives and will likely – according to the future-oriented stories they tell – extend into the future. In this section, I will explore in more detail the time period between their initial experience of sexual violence and before receiving a supportive response to their disclosure of sexual violence – a period in which all of the women struggled most profoundly (and almost entirely alone) with the impacts of and, in some cases, ongoing experiences of sexual violence. While the length of this period and exactly what that period looked like differed for each woman it was similarly characterized by each of the women I interviewed (with the exception of Missy) as a period of significant loss and diminished possibility. During this period, women had little, if any, support, and struggled largely on their own to manage the impacts of sexual violence – in some cases without having been able to acknowledge or name their experience even to themselves. For six of the women, this period included additional experiences of sexual violence and harm; for all the women in the absence of any positive supports it became necessary to employ various means of survival – alcohol and drugs, dissociation and numbing, excessive shopping, workaholism, self-harm,

survival sex work, and self-isolation – that had additional detrimental effects on women's lives, and their relationship with possibility.

To help document the profound effect of this period on each of the women and her relationship with possibility, I will 1) first provide an overview of the impact on the sense of possibility women describe for themselves during this period in the domains of self-concept, education, employment and economic security, and relationships. I will then 2) offer a deeper thematic analysis of what women's narratives of this period reveal about what factors work to diminish possibility across these domains.

Naming the Losses and Changes

Self-concept.

All the women provided vivid – and remarkably similar – descriptions of a sense of self that was deeply wounded in the period following sexual violence. As Jocelyn describes it, "I seen myself as a disgusting, and a shameful person, and, you know, just not somebody that people would want to get to know." Like Jocelyn, other women echo this sense of themselves as "disgusting," using words such as "gross" (Shauna), "dirty" (Shauna, Destiny Star), and "damaged" (Sarah). Seeing themselves in these ways, some of the women describe a sense of self that is non-existent or that has been erased. As Shauna describes, for instance, "I was a gross, empty shell of a person" whose sense of self is "diminished, destroyed, shattered." Lucine uses strikingly similar language describing herself as "a hollowed-out shell where there was nothing inside." For Destiny Star, the impact of sexual violence on sense of self erases her personhood completely: "you feel like a thing, not a person."

Contributing to these negative descriptions of self are beliefs that it is these flaws in themselves that have led them to be victimized, and that they are thus

responsible for this victimization. For example, Missy points to her lack of self-confidence as the reason for her sexual victimization: "I never had really good confidence in myself and so I think that's part of the reason I allowed it to happen in the first place." Similarly, Destiny Star attributes her involvement in survival sex work to her lack of self-esteem: "I had no self-esteem, and I was sort of easy prey for predatory type people, and my first boyfriend turned out to be a pimp." She gives voice to how in the period following sexual violence – and in the absence of supportive others – women turn upon themselves in order to make sense of the sexual violence they experience: "I sort of always felt bad. Well, if I hadn't had been so stupid, or if I hadn't done this, or I hadn't have lost weight or da-dee-da. There's so many things I did wrong to make this happen, so it's my fault."

Carrying concepts of themselves as damaged, dirty, and blameworthy, the women also describe how in the absence of any other models of self or the support of others to help challenge these diminished versions of self, this period is one in which they begin to revise their identities in ways that align with the messages sexual violence sends about their value and role. Reflecting on the multiple experiences of sexual victimization she has experienced throughout her life, Claire, for example, reasons that "it made it feel more as though, you know, if this just keeps happening my whole life this is obviously what I deserve." For Marnie and Sarah, versions of self other than those associated with sexual violence are erased. Multiple, ongoing experiences of sexual harm lead them to "se[e] my only value in relation to who I was sexually" (Marnie) and to believe that "there was always going to be someone who sexualized my role and that was just something that I had to accept, and it sucked. But it was always going to be present" (Sarah). Shauna, who prior to experiencing sexual violence describes "lik[ing] [her]self," finds her sense of self radically transformed

after being sexually assaulted. Here, she provides an explanation of how sexual violence impacted her self-concept:

> It was weird like how things just changed. Um, I was never the most confident girl, but I did like myself, and I liked looking in the mirror, and I liked going to school every day, you know? I liked that. I liked waking up. I liked spending time with my family. And after that happened I just didn't, it just stopped. It just changed. Just like that. [snaps fingers] Just like that. And I didn't like myself. I didn't see myself as a good, positive person that was caring and loving, like who I wanted to be. I saw myself as just this gross, empty shell of a person that nobody wanted to talk to and no one wanted to be with and no one wanted to be around, and, I think now thinking back on it and saying it out loud, it was probably myself I didn't want to be with or around anyone because of how I felt. But, like, my sense of self— I don't even know how to explain— just diminished. Destroyed. Shattered.

For Jocelyn, the impact of sexual violence is such that "I had to almost pretend … that I was someone else."

Objectified as "things" not "people," to borrow Destiny Star's words, who are valued only for who they are sexually, the sense of self available to the women during this period shows it to be a time of profound loss of agency, hope, and ability to author, create, or engage with positive or growth-oriented ideas of the self in the future. Not only this, as women go on to explain, the impact of sexual violence on their self-concept extends outward during this period of time colouring their experiences of education, employment, economic security, and relationships in ways that reinforce the negative identities sexual violence has created, and that hold profound impacts for their future goals and possibilities.

Education.

In describing the sense of possibility they held during the period of time following sexual violence and before being able to secure effective support and help, all of the women spoke about how their experiences of sexual violence (which were in some cases ongoing during this period) and its attendant consequences on self-concept extended into and shaped their educational pursuits, goals, and possibilities. For all the women, this period was one in which sexual violence and its impact negatively impacted their education. These impacts included:

- dropping out of high school (Marnie) or university (Destiny Star);
- getting into trouble and being expelled from high school (Claire);
- failing to pursue educational (and thus professional) goals (i.e. applying to university) (Jocelyn, Shauna);
- changing their course of study or degree to something "easier" (Missy, Shauna, Jocelyn);
- taking longer than planned to complete their course of study – often with the added challenge of acquiring additional debt (Lucine, Sarah);
- experiencing intense struggle in concentration, completing assignments, and absorbing information (Lucine, Sarah, Claire, Shauna, Missy) often overextending themselves to the point of illness (Lucine, Sarah); and
- seeing a significant decrease in grades and performance (Sarah, Shauna, Missy, Lucine, Claire, Jocelyn, Marnie).

Underlying these very tangible impacts on women's educational pursuits are poignant descriptions of how their experiences of sexual violence made them doubt their own intelligence and competency despite evidence that they were in fact

successful students. Reflecting on the many friends she has now who are both survivors of sexual abuse and successful professional women, Marnie remembered how her younger self carried a belief that her experiences of sexual abuse and violence meant she was lacking in intelligence and discounted her from pursing higher education or professional roles:

> I have really close friends who, you know, have had similar experiences and, um, they're women that are professional and we support each other. Like it's really interesting because, you know, my *view* over the years has changed significantly, right? … My view on sexual abuse. … Like the face of sexual abuse, right? And, and, you know, like, I have, ah, friends that are social workers, counsellors, who've experienced incest, right? … That younger girl wouldn't have even *seen* that, you know? First of all, that she would have friends that were professionals, … you know? … that younger girl wouldn't have known that she was even remotely intelligent. … Like that younger girl saw herself as incredibly worthless and having no value.

Jocelyn shares a story that similarly demonstrates her belief that her experience of sexual abuse somehow precludes her from pursuing her educational and professional dreams. Jocelyn shares a painful memory of herself in high school attending a university fair; although she has dreams of being a social worker and performs extremely well as a student, she admits, "I really didn't think I was good enough to go to school." Jocelyn's description of herself at the university fair reveals the pernicious ways the impact of sexual abuse on her self-concept bleed over into the educational and professional possibilities she feels able to pursue:

> Even, you know, I'm thinking around that time, high school, I'm thinking about opportunities and confidence, when it came time to go to university or

> post-secondary, I remember the universities come out to our school, and going by [name of a university] and they had – I thought I'd really like to be a social worker – but I wouldn't have enough confidence to ask about the social work program, right? Um, and who would want to talk to me anyways? Or, so I would go by all of these booths, but I would not inquire about any of them or—because I didn't have the self-confidence to do that, and I really didn't think I was good enough to go to school, and I—just the whole process about how to do that. I was on my own, and, you know, living on my own from a very young age I didn't have that support.

Like Jocelyn, a number of the women interviewed acknowledged that they were extremely high achievers in school. Marnie describes herself as a "really smart little girl," Shauna describes how "she won all the awards," Sarah describes "being a gifted student, like all the way growing up through school" with thoughts of being "a vet or a doctor or a geneticist," and Lucine enters university on a full scholarship. The descriptions and stories they offer of how their academic achievement and ability is compromised as they grapple with the ongoing impacts of sexual violence on their own are troubling: Shauna describes how she went from being a straight A student to getting "below 10. Like I got a 7 in Chemistry"; Sarah jokes, "63 is my new 90;" and Lucine, who normally had a 4.0 GPA works desperately to hold onto her scholarship despite "falling asleep in class," and eventually having to accept getting a bachelors rather than an honours degree and doing so in 1.5 years longer than she expected.

For other women like Destiny Star and Claire, educational administrators and institutions contribute to their diminished and precarious sense of self in relation to their educational and professional possibilities. Claire talks about how her experiences of sexual abuse made it difficult for her to trust male teachers, and her outbursts in

class rather than being understood in the context of her history of abuse, lead her to being moved into a modified education program and then eventually being "kicked out of high school." At the time of the interview, and at only age 19, Claire's sense of her educational future is closed off:

> I mean it kind of feels like this door is closing. I always thought I'd go back to high school and finish it, and obviously I don't think I can actually go to high school anymore. I'd have to do the adult alternative measures thing, and go through there, and ah, I mean, I don't know it kind of means I can't really rely on other people.

For Destiny Star, who despite the many cards stacked against her manages to get accepted into university for social work, is still forced to overcome diminishing and critical comments about her ability and intelligence from the very people who are meant to support her. When she is sexually assaulted during her first couple of weeks, she receives little support and eventually drops out:

> So anyways, and so I went back [to university after the assault] and I was going to try to have a couple of professors who were really great, but [name of university]'s so big, some of them didn't even know you were in their classes, like, so, and after that you kind of feel worthless anyways, so that would make me feel more worthless, like, I noticed that—and so—and then I held self-esteem issues going into it, and it's just like, then all the people and like what if I see him again, and I, and then I just decided to quit that.

Her sense of self at this moment as "worthless" – a sense of self that her high school guidance counsellor has clearly contributed too by early on telling her she "was too stupid to go [to university]" – is a telling example of the ways educational administrators and institutions that fail to recognize the reality and impact of sexual

abuse can further undermine women's educational efforts in the aftermath of sexual violence.

As will be explained in the next section, the loss of possibilities associated with education that occur during this period are not isolated to this immediate period in the time after experiencing sexual violence: they, indeed, hold long-term ramifications for the professional and economic security of the women I spoke with. Troublingly, despite the obvious intelligence and achievements of the women I spoke with, at the time of the interview only three of the eight women (Marnie, Jocelyn, Shauna) were employed, and only two (Marnie, Jocelyn) of these were working in fields that aligned with their original hopes for themselves; one of the eight women (Missy) was still in university, though completing a program other than what she had originally hoped for herself; the remaining four women (Claire, Lucine, Sarah, Destiny Star) – despite in some cases managing to have received high school, undergraduate, and graduate degrees among them – were unemployed and on social assistance or long-term disability.

Employment and economic security.

When the women described their employment experiences during this period their stories demonstrate how in the absence of support for understanding their experience of sexual violence and its impact on their sense of self, the possibilities they imagined and pursued in terms of employment, professional goals, and economic security were extremely circumscribed and fundamentally shaped by the ongoing impacts of their experiences of sexual violence.

For some of the women I talked to employment was impossible in the period between them experiencing sexual violence and receiving support. Marnie, Destiny Star, Sarah, and Lucine all relied on social / income assistance to support themselves

for some point during this period while three of the women continued to do so at the time of the interview (Sarah, Lucine, Destiny Star). For Marnie, Destiny Star, Shauna, and Claire drug use and addiction complicated their ability to seek and hold employment. Reflecting on herself at age 21 and already a mother of three young daughters on income assistance, Marnie comments on how at the time she "didn't know that [she] would ever not be there at that point." For Destiny Star and Claire, economic security and sustaining their drug addiction becomes tied to further sexual harm and exploitation. Destiny Star explains how following her initial experience of sexual violence, and living in a new and unfamiliar city, she quickly becomes coerced into sex work in exchange for drugs; similarly, Claire finds herself experiencing sexual exploitation in exchange for drugs and as a means of meeting her basic needs. Claire provides a poignant explanation of how sexual violence and abuse is tied into her economic precarity in ways that make it extremely difficult to think of other alternatives and possibilities:

> There was times when I'd wake up and there was people on me or I'd be practically falling over and there's someone undressing me, and I just wished that I would say no and it just feels so disgusting after because I know what's going on but I had this fear that if I said something that they would freak out at me. That they would decide that I owed them money for all the drugs and liquor I'd had of theirs, or they'd kick me out and where was I going to go? … I was so worried that I would just, I'd have nowhere to go, or that I'd be owing these people all this money. I kind of felt like they were they expected that this was how I was paying them. I don't know if that really makes sense but I was just on so much drugs at the time, like I could not, I couldn't afford to pay them, and I couldn't um I couldn't be wandering around in the middle

> of the night, especially because these instances they were in the middle of winter. I would quite literally die if they kicked me out.

Sarah talks about her experience in various roles when she is a young woman working as a waitress and a receptionist in which her place of employment itself becomes the site of additional sexual harm and harassment. Describing her job working at a restaurant as a 15-year old girl, Sarah tells a story about her initial experience of being sexualized and objectified in the work place and its ongoing impact on her views of self, safety, and possible employment selves:

> Um, but, like, I remember my first job. I was a waitress at a Chinese buffet in [name of city], and, um, yeah, I, you know, you never think about it, but I remember we had this, the regular customers. This guy would always drop fries on the floor in front of me. And I was kind of like, "Why did you do that? And he was like, "I want to see your ass when you bend down to pick it up." And I was like, "what?" … Yeah, I was, I started working there when I was 15 I guess? So I always made sure to squat when I picked it up because it was like, "I'm so uncomfortable with you." Like, I guess that was one of my—I guess my first memories of being like, "Oh, my role here is sexualized. … I can't just be here doing a job. I'm a girl. I'm somehow being a waitress is become a sexual thing. … It was honestly, like, kind of a moment where it was like realizing that, that it didn't matter what position I had -- whether I was a waitress, or an executive of some company, or an artist or whatever – that there was always going to be someone who sexualized my role and that was just something that I had to accept, and it sucked. But that was always going to be present. … French fry on the floor. There's my future.

A few years later when working as an administrative assistant at a car dealership, she similarly endures sexist and misogynistic comments from her boss. Understandably, by the age of 15, Sarah holds the view that "it [sexism and sexual harassment] never leaves you no matter what job you're in. It is always there."

For other women who do work during this period, employment is fraught with challenges as their work environments are often ones in which they are regularly triggered, and, with a relative lack of understanding about how the impacts of sexual violence are impacting them, they are unable to seek adequate accommodations within their workplace and/or their workplaces fail to offer the accommodations necessary to them. In her account, Lucine explains how the ongoing impacts of the sexual violence spilled over into her professional roles. After working tirelessly to receive a graduate degree in a field of her choice, Lucine is successful in getting a job in her field. However, upon finding herself in an environment that is unorganized, unpredictable, and unaccepting of some of the coping mechanisms she uses to manage her anxiety and PTSD, Lucine loses her job after only one month. Lucine's account of this experience when heard in the context of the struggle she has endured to get to this point, and her whispered statement, "I got fired within a month" betrays an underlying shame she continues to carry. To be sure, Lucine's account reveals a deeply problematic institutional response to meeting her needs during this time, and the lack of agency Lucine felt in being able or equipped to challenge this response:

> Interviewer: You were fired from the job in [name of job location]?
>
> Lucine: Laid off but they gave me extra money, so I'm assuming that it was to cover me—I could have probably argued it was with my anxiety issues that it was a humanitarian, like it was, you know, I can't (Interviewer: A human rights kind of thing), a human rights thing. I probably could have, but I'm also

not dumb and know that if I keep my mouth shut then I won't have a red mark completely for the province.

While the loss of this job becomes the catalyst for Lucine in seeking help and moving into a process of healing – it is also one that continues at the time of the interview to shape her views of her future-oriented employment possible selves: "Even now, it's like, 'Ugh, how I'm ever going to get a job like this. Am I actually going to work?'"

Out of all the women I spoke with, Jocelyn is perhaps the most outwardly successful in maintaining employment and economic security during this period despite still not having disclosed her history of sexual abuse. Following the completion of an accounting program, she is hired to work for a large company and is successful there, getting promoted and receiving positive feedback. Although Jocelyn acknowledges that this experience is important for her in recognizing some of her own abilities, she is quick to comment that her work as an accountant is an extension and reflection of her earlier ways of coping and surviving as a young girl where she just did what she was told rather than identifying and going after the employment possibilities she held for herself: "I was really good with numbers, so I went and took accounting, which was good, but my dream was to be a social worker, right?" Negating the agency that she possesses at this time for her own strength and success, Jocelyn comments, "it was kind of done for me," and notes that despite evidence of her success "I was still living a lie and fooling everybody."[12]

[12] Shauna (20) and Missy (20) are both enrolled in school at the time of the interview and thus have had little experience in the work world. The period after they experience sexual violence and before seeking support thus occurs for them while they are still in high-school (Shauna) and university (Missy). For these reasons, I have not included discussion of their economic or economic possibility stories here.

Relationships.

In reflecting on their lives since their initial experience of sexual violence to the present, the women also identified impacts to their possible selves in the domain of relationships. For almost all the women, this is a period in which familial and intimate relationships are challenging, and in some cases, sites of additional sexual harm and other forms of violence.

Reflecting on the intimate relationships they experienced during this period, Marnie, Jocelyn, and Shauna all reflect on how their "distorted perception of [them]sel[ves]" (Marnie) shaped their relationships. Marnie reflects on how she did "not really undertan[d] the concept of love … and intimacy. I had *no* idea about intimacy at all. Um, so, certainly as far as possibilities, um, no possibility at that point to have a healthy relationship with a man." Likewise, Jocelyn talks about how a lack of self-worth shaped the relationships she had with men: "there were certain parts of our relationship that weren't good at that time, but I didn't feel that I deserved more than that," and she often found herself in relationships with "needy men, and men that have had addictions." Shauna talked about how her experience with relationships during this time as follows:

> And it's really hard to talk about. Well not talk but to be able to think about all of the ways it impacts your life because you don't really notice it when it happens to you. You don't really see all of the things that change, like, after, until like something like this happens and you really, really think about all of the things it really impacts, like, the way I dressed. Um, the way I craved attention, guy's attention.

For Destiny Star and Claire, both of whom experience what appears to be various forms of sexual exploitation and trafficking during this period, intimate

relationships are marked by abuse, harm, and fear. Describing her life during this period, Claire describes how "she always thought she was going to be jumped" and how she feels "that men are always about to kill you." Once she is able to free herself from the man she refers to as her pimp, Destiny Star finds herself so disgusted and troubled by her relationships with men she "swears off men for seven years" as a means of protecting herself from further harm.

In addition to the challenges they experience in their intimate relationships, this period for the women I spoke with is also one of profound isolation from family and friends in which they attempt to keep the abuse and violence they have experienced a secret. For example, Shauna talks about how as she gets deeper into drugs and alcohol use following the sexual assault she becomes distanced from friends and family: "I think, really what I was doing when I think back, I was building up this wall so no one else could hurt me like that, and when I was building up this wall becoming more and more defensive, I was pushing away all of my loved ones." Lucine, likewise, talks about her abusive partner "took advantage of the gap between me and my folks," and Sarah, who like Lucine, experiences sexual harm within the context of an abusive relationship, is cut off from her family and friends by her abusive partner. For Destiny Star who becomes a mother during this time, the struggles she endures in coping with her experiences of sexual violence on her own impact her relationships with her children when they are removed from her care and placed in child protection for a period of time.

The examples and stories women shared about their lives in the period following their initial experience of sexual violence before they access support provide a record of the impact of sexual violence on the overall sense of possibility and the specific possible selves women imagine for themselves in the domains of self-

concept, education, employment, and relationships. Collectively, this record is one that shows this to be a period in which women saw the possibilities in their future as increasingly limited, and their agency in changing the trajectory of these futures as diminishing. For women whose early environments were characterized by limited possibility, this period was a continuation and deepening of the early lessons they had been taught about their value and agency; for those whose early environments were characterized by outward pressures and expectations to achieve family-authored versions of achievement and success, this was a period in which women experienced a double burden of the impacts of sexual violence combined with the pressure to continue to enact these earlier versions of success. For women, whose lived in environments that nurtured and embraced possibility and were focused on seizing new opportunities, this was a period in which these early beliefs and values were vastly altered and buried. In the process of documenting the impact of sexual violence on their sense of possibility and their potential in the domains of education, career, and relationships, women also described factors that took away from or compromised their ability to engage in possibility-rich stories. The following section looks more closely at those factors.

Naming the Factors Contributing to Diminished Possibility

Included in women's descriptions of what the diminished possibilities for the future they held in the aftermath of sexual violence looked like are insights into the factors and conditions that contributed and colluded to support the negative impact of sexual violence on women's relationship to possibility. More specifically, this section identifies and describes three factors that emerged from women's possibility stories in the period following sexual violence before accessing support as those that contributed to conditions that compromised women's sense of possibility in the

domains of self-concept, education, employment, and relationships: 1) the impossibility of naming sexual violence; 2) secrecy, shame, guilt, and fear of further violence; and 3) survival and coping as the only possibility. Collectively, these three factors intersect in each woman's life in different ways to create a situation in which challenging stories of limited and diminished future possibilities becomes exceedingly difficult.

The impossibility of naming sexual violence.

For all the women interviewed, naming their experience of sexual violence for themselves and to others was fraught with many challenges. As a result, the women – for varying lengths of time – carried the knowledge of, confusion about, and ongoing impacts of sexual violence all alone. As the women make clear sitting from where they are at the time of the interview, being unable to name sexual violence and/or facing indifference or worse when disclosing to others has a cascading effect that spills into how women see themselves and their educational, employment, and relationship possible selves. In talking about their post-sexual violence experiences, almost all of the women describe the negative responses they receive from trusted others when they attempt to disclose the violence they have experienced to someone close to them shortly after it happens. For these women, these early negative responses are interpreted as messages telling them that it is not safe or appropriate to talk about sexual violence and/or that their disclosures of sexual violence do not merit any support or action on the part of those who might help them. In other cases – particularly for the women who are experiencing ongoing childhood sexual abuse – the indifference on the part of other adults around them – send the message that there is no point in reaching out for help because no one will listen. As women struggle to make sense of the disbelief, indifference, and minimizing they are met with when

naming or disclosing their experiences of victimization the confusion, shame, self-doubt, and hopelessness this generates in them distracts them from and erodes their agency and ability to pursue their hoped-for possible selves.

For example, when she is sexually assaulted for the first time during her first week of university, Destiny Star returns home and tells her mom about the sexual assault shortly after it happens; her mom's religious background is such that she views what has happened to Destiny Star as a "sin" that Destiny Star has actively participated in. This is the first lesson Destiny Star receives that talking about sexual violence will likely lead to more harm. Still hoping to receive support and continue with her university education, Destiny Star returns to university and attempts to reach out for support from the institution. Although Destiny Star acknowledges that there was some understanding from a few professors, the lack of tangible supports offered to her combined with the fear of seeing the perpetrator again are not adequate to keep her from dropping out of school.

Like Destiny Star, Sarah discloses her first experience of attempted sexual assault almost immediately after it happens. Sarah describes this disclosure she made to a close friend:

> I remember walking down the street. Um, calling my friend 'cause I was supposed to go to her house after, or I was supposed to call her when I was done. … And with that friend I did end up telling her that like, you know, he kind of attacked me [laughs] at his house. He, like, wanted me to pay up in a physical way, and she clearly was like, 'What? Like, like really?' But even then there was even a bit of a level of disbelief. Like, no! He's such a nice guy, he would never do that. And I was like, "That's what I thought."

It is here where Sarah first learns that talking about sexual violence can be dangerous and unsafe: "It was almost like that signal of, 'Oh, I shouldn't tell anyone else.'" She explains a bit more about how this initial signal of disbelief from a friend keeps her silent:

> And there was never a question of me reporting it to the police. I never told my parents. I just always came up with excuses when they wanted to hang out with his family, like, "Oh, I'm going to so and so's house or something." But yeah. No. It was like initial complete signal of her tone of disbelief of it made me like, "No one will believe me. It was just a terrible situation. I survived. I'm not going to tell anybody. I'm not going to do anything about it. I'm just going to avoid him, and never go near him again." Because it was like, you know, in a small town you don't want to get that reputation of the girl who tries to smut up shining [name of attacker's] image because no one will believe you.

Reflecting on the impact of this negative response to this disclosure, Sarah underlines the long-term consequences of this response by contrasting it with the supportive response she receives almost 10 years later when she once again discloses this incident to another friend. Sarah muses on how if she had received that type of response in Grade 10 things may have been different:

> She was like, "What?" But, it was a bit different where it was more, like, initial what? And then my god, and then there was almost the recognition like, "I'm defriending on Facebook; I'm never talking to him again." … And that was, that was probably 10 years after the situation, but then I'm like, "*There*, that's the response I wish I could've gotten 10 years ago because maybe then I would have felt stronger about it …"

The indifference that many survivors of sexual violence experience from others about their victimization and the difficulties this creates for naming these experiences is powerfully illustrated by Marnie who describes a period of time during her childhood when surrounded by adults who are actively abusing her or who turn a blind eye to the abuse she stops talking altogether:

> I just did not talk. And so for me, um, one of the things that I really lost was my voice. … Um, I stopped talking. (Interviewer: Literally, stopped talking?) I stopped talking, and then when I did start talking again, I never, um, I still struggled with expressing how I felt, and looking at how I was impacted on by a situation. … I tended to look at what other people needed more than what I needed.

She explains: "… I think that I really didn't feel like I was going to be listened to, so what was the point in speaking? … What was the point? There was no point." Marnie's language here is a powerful commentary on the losses experienced by young sexual abuse victims when not provided any support. The actual and symbolic meanings attached to Marnie's account of 'losing her voice' reveals the isolation she experiences in an environment in which she has been taught that her value and the suffering she is experiencing as a result of the sexual abuse she experiences is so inconsequential to those around her that not only is speaking about the sexual abuse pointless but speaking about anything at all is pointless. As Marnie describes, "I felt invisible."

For Shauna who waits two years before telling anyone, and Jocelyn who waits for thirty years before disclosing her experiences to anyone else, their silence – like Marnie's silence – is perhaps the clearest symbol of the profound impact and insurmountable pressure sexual abuse and assault creates on victims to remain hidden

and silent. In describing her decision to not tell anyone, Shauna explains how the impact of the assault was so profound it was impossible to talk about: “Feeling or not having the capacity to feel any other emotion beside just numbness prevented me from being able to think or pursue any of my goals. Or even communicate what had happened to anybody. I just felt so numb. I couldn’t tell my mom. I couldn’t.” Jocelyn, likewise, states, “the biggest thing was just keeping the secret.”

As the above accounts demonstrate, talking about sexual violence to others is often unsafe and can even lead to further harm. In their descriptions of the challenges they faced in naming sexual violence not only to others but to themselves, Sarah, Lucine, and Missy reveal how dominant narratives about what does and does not constitute sexual violence further contribute to the challenges the women experience in naming their experiences and thus seeking the support that they need.

For a few of the women naming sexual violence for themselves during this period is not possible, and they relay stories of the significant uncertainty and minimization they struggled with about their experiences. The pervasiveness of this uncertainty and tendency to minimize is evident in that even at the time of the interview Missy, Sarah, and Lucine continue to express uncertainty as to whether their experiences constitute sexual violence. For Lucine, confusion in how to label her experience is evident in the following passage:

> And I was like, “I don’t really feel cool with this.” But I still kind of went along with it because that’s what he wanted. Like, as we sit here, I was sexually harass -- it was sexual abuse but not rape or anything like that. But it was abuse because it wasn’t -- like there’s, the kind of awkwardness about consent with some people early on and I recognize that, it’s not cut and dry,

> but to be so consistent over the course of a year and to feel that terror. I haven't dated since. That's probably the big one.

Like Lucine, Missy also expresses an initial confusion about how to label what is very clearly an experience of sexual coercion:

> Like, the first time, um, he came over, I didn't want to do anything, and I told him that I was on my period because I was and so I didn't want to do anything, and he told me that if I didn't do it he was going to take my tampon out and do it anyway. So, to me that was *so* disgusting and so degrading, and it was like, "Well, if he's going to do it anyway, then I guess I'll just do it because I don't want him touching that." Like, I don't know. I was like, "I don't want that happening." So I guess the next best option in the situation was kind of just to suck it up, I guess, and just do it, which I thought was like, technically I said yes, so it's—but I didn't say yes because I wanted to; I said yes because he made me feel like I had to, and he, like, so, yeah. So that's—and it was like a similar situation kind of, like, every time, um, so, yeah.

For Missy, her confusion rests in her sense that this experience does not conform to dominant scripts of sexual violence and instead falls into what she terms "the grey area," an area where sexual assault looks different than what she has "always pictured" as what it means to be sexually assaulted: 1) "I guess, basically just like either somebody's passed out and you have sex with them anyway," or 2) "when somebody is like screaming, screaming, screaming, like, to stop and you don't." For Missy, these are "the extremes that I pictured." She then goes on to explain what she sees as what was missing from her understanding of sexual assault that could have helped her label her own experience: "I didn't realize that making somebody feel

scared in order to have sex, like, I didn't realize that that kind of stuff was also considered sexual assault. Yeah, I just didn't realize that that was how it was."[13]

In her discussion about her struggle to label her experiences of sexual violence as such, Sarah describes a similar predicament in which she felt that her own experiences did not align with what she calls "a violent rape," something that Sarah defines as "knife to my throat. You're going to let me rape you. Or even, while being raped just being punched or beaten." Instead, she classifies her experiences as what she labels "subversive sexual violence," forms of sexual violence that are 'less than' "violent rape." Referencing one experience in which her then boyfriend sexually assaults her when she is intoxicated, Sarah provides an illustration of the challenges she finds in knowing how to name her experience:

> there's different levels of rape. Like I could say that I have been raped before. … By a previous boyfriend. … But it wasn't *violent,* per se. … But, yeah. Like I don't know if I would call that sexual violence? I guess if I stretch it was a sexual assault in that it wasn't necessarily my wish to do it at the time, but again you kinda just … That's life, that's how it goes.

For Destiny Star, her experiences of being forced to trade sex for drugs does not conform to what she describes as "an outright rape": "And then the pimping thing I never even thought of as sexual violence. Like, I knew the physical violence component was there because if you get beat you understand. Like, you know, that's violent." She explains that "I never even realized it was sexual violence … I guess I thought it was normal, you know?" As I will explore later in this chapter, it is only

[13] Missy's experience is distinct in a number of ways from the other participants. For instance, although she is initially confused about how to label the experience, she speaks to a supportive friend within a short period of time following the experience who assists Missy in naming what has happened to her as sexual violence. Missy's experience is discussed in more detail in the section *Missy's Story: Protecting Possibility in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence*.

years later when Destiny Star takes a volunteer training at a community-based sexual assault centre that she comes to name her experiences as sexual violence.

In describing the ways in which sexual violence contributed to or was connected to the diminishment of their sense of self and their education, career, and relationship goals, women pointed to the difficulties they faced in safely naming and disclosing their experiences of sexual violence as one factor preventing women from holding onto or cultivating possibility-rich narratives during this period. Unable to name their experiences of sexual violence, and/or to be met with support when they did attempt to do so, the women interviewed collectively described the intense shame, guilt, and fear that accompanied the work of keeping sexual violence and its impacts a secret. While shame, guilt, and fear are widely cited impacts of sexual violence, women's stories of diminishing possibility here reveal them to be factors that likewise prevent and interrupt women's pursuit of possible selves.

Secrecy, shame, guilt, and fear of further violence.

As their accounts make clear, keeping sexual violence a secret and managing the accompanying shame, guilt, and fear on one's own is a tremendous amount of work that distracts from other pursuits. In her storying of this time period, Jocelyn's description of what she calls the "double-o-seven identity" she takes on demonstrates the effort she has to put in to performing normality while simultaneously struggling with ongoing sexual abuse and its impacts. While the "double o-seven identity" serves its purpose in keeping her struggles a secret, Jocelyn reflects on the exacting toll it was simultaneously taking on her and, in particular, her ability to focus on other aspects of her life. As she notes, "the biggest thing was just keeping the secret, right? Hiding the shame. Um, so, um, people, you know, they get self-confidence by successes and being successful in the different things they would do. Well, I didn't

have the confidence to step out and do those things, right? I just stay in the background. I did what I had to do."

At the root of this was the fear that if people really saw her and knew what was happening in her life they "would have seen me as I saw myself." She describes her self-perception at the time and the pressure she felt to keep the abuse she was experiencing a secret as follows:

> You know, I was disgusted with myself. Um, blamed myself. Yeah it was just like a shadow over me, and yeah, I would say the biggest thing would be, you know, I was living with all that shame, so the disgust, right, having to hide the secret. If people knew they wouldn't like who I was because I was, I don't know, this damaged person, or this, yeah, I don't know if I could explain it any better than that, but … people wouldn't like me if they knew.

In Jocelyn's case as a young girl and adolescent, the work she had to put into ensuring that the sexual abuse she was experiencing and the many negative things she believed about herself as a result of that abuse remained secret made it impossible to go after any of the possibilities or hopes she might have held; instead, as she said, "I just stayed in the background." Jocelyn's description of her orientation to her future and future possibilities at this stage in her life as "going through the motions" underlines the lack of agency she feels about that future. Still wrapped up in and performing her "double identity" "doing what you were supposed to do or kind of what was expected of me" was the main preoccupation and measure of Jocelyn's decision-making and action. Not surprisingly, the effort she goes to so to keep not only the sexual abuse she is experiencing a secret but also the extreme shame and guilt she lives with precludes her from pursuing any of her other dreams or hopes as a young woman.

Like Jocelyn, the stories that the other women shared are filled with references to how in a period in which they are lacking in any other support and certain they must keep the violence for which they blame themselves a secret they limit and circumscribe their lives to avoid any exposure. Shauna describes how the overwhelming shame she experiences and her desire to keep things a secret makes it impossible to focus on anything else:

> I didn't want to talk to anybody. I didn't want people to look at me because I felt so ugly and dirty. Like I would shower for hours scrubbing my body just to get the feeling of him touch me off, and it never worked. And it was just, like it was really hard and, um, so yeah that really made it so I didn't really want to – I was no longer thinking about courses I should be taking in grade 11 or 12 to pursue university. I was no longer thinking about university at all. I was not thinking about saving money from my job for a used vehicle. I wasn't thinking about eating food; I wasn't thinking about taking care of my body, like things like as little as that even that let alone all my huge long-term goals and all the possibilities that I had always wanted for myself. Like they just completed escaped my mind. And the only thing that I thought about was just how numb and dead I felt, like all the time. Just couldn't leave my mind.

Marnie, likewise, references how the intense shame she experiences colours all aspects of her life as a young girl and woman: "When I was younger it was like shame, shame, shame, shaaaame, shame, about every, you know, every part of my being. Shame, shame, right? You know?"

In describing her first months of university following the sexual assault she experiences by another student, Missy reflects on how the fear of being "found out" and the subsequent shame that might create stops her from being involved in many

aspects of university life, such as playing sports, going to study hall, and making new friends:

> I did feel like because he played sports, like he played rugby, and I felt like everybody who played rugby knew who I was and that he told them lies, so I felt like I couldn't really talk to anybody. Like, I would see someone who played rugby or I'd see somebody who was in the same residence as him or whatever, and I didn't want to associate with them because I didn't know if he had said something to them about me. If he had, whatever, so I just—that made it hard definitely for making friends because I wasn't talking to anybody.

In addition to managing the shame, guilt, and secrecy associated with their experiences of sexual violence, for some this period is also one in which their energy must be directed toward managing the threat and fear of future violence – a threat and fear that overrides other concerns related to school, work, money, or relationships.

For example, Claire describes a period of time as a teenager in which she is surrounded by the constant threat and reality of ongoing sexual violence while precariously housed and struggling to manage her drug addiction. She describes how, she "ended up in this trap house for a while that was mostly just men where we would party all night and I would wake up and I'd have to clean the house and cook for them and any given time during the day or night they could do whatever they wanted to me." For Claire, the fear associated with this situation was such that simply managing the potential violence and its impact on her ability to meet her basic needs makes functioning in high school or other areas of life nearly impossible.

Like Claire, Sarah's multiple and ongoing experiences of sexual harm and violence keep her in a state of hypervigilance in which she describes that to this day

"I'm almost, like, waiting; I'm on guard for something." Despite having changed her life drastically during this period in order to separate herself from her abusive partner, Sarah reflects on the persistent fear she lived with: "Yeah, I had to go to pretty drastic extremes to cut him out of my life. And I still live in fear *every day* that he'll find me again. Even though now it's like, how is he going to find me?" At the time of the interview, the hypervigilance that Sarah struggled with has grown rather than diminished and is now at such an extreme that her only way to feel safe from the potential of further violence is to never leave her home.

For a number of women that I spoke with the fear and threat of future violence is not only one they carry for themselves but also for the other women who may be victimized by a perpetrator who has managed to escape any consequences for his actions. In Missy's case, the concern and fear she carries is that the man who assaulted her will do the same to other women:

> a lot of the time I feel, I do feel terrible because I think *a lot* about where he is and what he's doing and if he's doing that to other people, if he's done worse things to other people. Um, and part of me is like, well, you know, I want to call his school and tell them, but what are they going to do? They can't do anything. They can't take my word for it. They can't—there's nothing they can do about it, and there's nothing I can do about it anymore. Like, there's nothing I can do to get him to do to not get him to do that to anybody, but sometimes I just feel so bad that it has probably happened a bunch of times since—that was in 2014, so it's probably happened so many times since then, and it will probably keep happening until he somehow gets caught, and then I feel bad for having the feeling that I almost want him to keep doing it until he gets caught. Not because I want other people to feel like that and not because I

want them to get hurt. Just because I want him to get caught. I don't want that to happen to other people, but if that's the only way he's going to get stopped is if he gets caught and so … I mean he has to do it again to get caught, so I'm just hoping that he does.

Sarah, likewise, expresses the guilt and fear she carries for others who may have been harmed by one of the men who sexually assaulted her: "sometimes I think, like, I sure hope he's never done this to anybody else. Like, I have those feelings of guilt, of maybe if I'd told somebody about his behaviour. I hope that no other girl has suffered for it."

Surviving and coping as the only possibility.

Emerging from women's narratives of this period is a third factor – the demands of coping in the absence of meaningful support – that along with struggles to name sexual violence and managing secrecy, shame, guilt, and threats of future violence combine to create a context that makes it extremely difficult for women to pursue previously held ideas about the future. For Marnie, Claire, Destiny Star, and Shauna using drugs and alcohol become a way of coping during this period: it is a way to "get through the day" (Destiny Star), to "mak[e] you feel numb" (Claire), "to tune out. Check out" (Marnie), and "to escape my numbness" (Shauna). As they describe this period, they make clear that thinking about other possibilities is nearly impossible in the depth of their struggle to manage the effects of sexual violence, and that using drugs and alcohol offer their own possibility: that of an escape, albeit temporary, from the pain they are experiencing and the ability to make it through another day.

Shauna describes how alcohol and drugs warped her earlier sense of possibility as an opportunity to be seized:

> I was very, just self-involved and only worried purely about myself and what I can do to get through my day without having to look or talk at anyone else and just be able to feel ok. … And that really takes away from any positive feeling of hope or any positive dreams or imaginations or thoughts. Like it, I was just so focused on getting through my day so I could go back to bed. … And I just couldn't and if I did have any hopes or anything it was probably about "Yay, can't wait to get my next fix," you know. Like that kind of shit, like that hope. That's why I say it wasn't honest. It wasn't pure. It wasn't right. My morals were like reversed.

For Marnie, drugs and alcohol offer the possibility of "check[ing] out" – something that she recognizes now as what stopped her from taking her own life:

> You know, I think that, um, I think that for me as an adolescent, finding alcohol was absolutely probably the absolute best thing that I could have done. Because I firmly believe that I probably would have killed myself. You know? Like I was just in such a state of like crisis and stress, I mean … And you know, it was a way for me to just tune out. Check out. Like I could totally check out. And that's what I did, you know? I checked out. I checked out.

In their narratives, survival and coping – while not involving the use of drugs and alcohol – is an equally all-consuming task for Jocelyn, Sarah, and Lucine that interferes with their ability to articulate and pursue hoped for possible selves. For these women, surviving takes the form of an elaborate effort to perform normality and to persist as if the sexual violence and abuse they are experiencing is not happening. For Jocelyn, as discussed earlier, this involves adopting her "double identity" and "going through the motions of life." Rather than pursuing her own interests or dreams, Jocelyn describes herself in this period of acutely attuned to what others expect of her:

> I would be hanging out with friends and they're having fun, so I would pretend I was having fun. … They're laughing; I would laugh because they're laughing. I used to always, you know, think that there must be more to life than this. I remember having that thought *a lot,* but as far as taking it beyond that and dreaming or the possibilities of where maybe I could do this, didn't happen. Right? I was just going through the motions of life.

Lucine also describes the immense energy she directed toward keeping everyone around her happy, and not letting on about the pain and violence she was experiencing in her abusive relationship: "All that existed was trying to get onto the next day and not, try to balance between pleasing myself, pleasing him, and pleasing my parents." In describing what hoping or dreaming of the future was like at this time, she replies that it was "not even a thing." In Lucine's efforts to not disrupt the status quo her description mirrors Jocelyn's in the way she is focused on achieving things because of their ability to demonstrate that everything is ok and thus keep the reality of what she is struggling with a secret rather than an attempt to achieve certain educational goals out of her own intrinsic desire to do so. As she describes her third year of university – the year in which her abusive relationship has ended but before which she has any support – the immense physical and psychological toll this performance of normality has on Lucine is evident:

> I survived third year. I wasn't sleeping. I was getting two to three hours of sleep per night. I wasn't getting any help for what I'd been going through, because, you know, *I'm fine,* you know, everyone has a bad break-up. I was role-playing a lot on-line, which I still do as a hobby. But it was almost obsessive because I was using it as a way of dealing with my trauma and feeling good about myself because everyone liked me on there. … I was

> falling asleep in class. I was also though keep in mind, like in my third year, I was working 15 hours a week at the call centre, I was doing 30 hours credit at university, and I was role-playing a lot online. … I somehow managed to get like a 3.6, I think. I kept myself, I had to keep a 3.5 to keep my scholarship, and I did it.

In describing the dual impact of sexual violence and coping with the effects of that violence on their abilities and desire to articulate and pursue possible academic, career, or relationship selves, women's stories emphasize how these possible selves are buried under the weight and demands of day-to-day survival.

Conclusion: "When You're an Object … You Don't See Possibilities"

In the period following their initial experience of sexual violence to the present, the lack of opportunity to name and share their experience of sexual violence – in some cases even to themselves – is identified by the women as a fundamental factor that in turn forces them to manage the impact and ongoing experiences of violence on their own. Managing secrecy, shame, guilt, and the fear of further violence became the focal point of their lives in ways that overwhelmed their ability to pursue other possibilities or goals in the domains of school, work, or relationships. In attempt to cope with these pressures in the absence of healthy supports, women often faced the additional burden of managing the economic, health, relational, and social impacts created by the coping and survival strategies available to them at the time – strategies that further limited and diminished the possibilities they once had held. As Destiny Star poignantly remarks of her experience during this time as a survivor enduring ongoing violence and lacking meaningful support within a rape-supportive culture, "when you're an object … you don't see possibilities." As women's stories of diminishing possibility that characterize this period reveal, while

sexual violence itself is a disruptor in women's lives, the various factors created by and sustained within a societal context that denies women access to support in any form further exacerbates this disruption.

"Everything in my Life Kind of Fell Apart:" Possibility Turning Points

As demonstrated in the previous section, the first part of women's retrospective accounts of their relationship to possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence focuses on and provides a record of the factors through which this relationship is systematically diminished and compromised in the domains of self-concept, education, employment, and relationships. This section focuses on the second part articulated in these retrospective accounts in which women undergo a transformation or shift in their relationship to possibility. As will be explored in this section, these transformative moments or "possibility turning points" include two components. Variously described by the women as "rock bottom" (Sarah)," "my breakdown" (Lucine, Jocelyn), "my nervous break" (Destiny Star), "my collapse" (Lucine), and "the moment I couldn't function anymore" (Jocelyn), the first component of these possibility turning points is one that marks the point at which women see their relationship to and ideas about the future as most damaged and limited, and the point at which the ongoing and cumulative effect of sexual violence and its impact are such that each woman eventually finds herself no longer able to cope on her own. The second component of this possibility turning point includes women's descriptions of how from this place of seemingly no possibility she initially shifts her orientation toward repairing, restoring, or rebuilding her relationship to possibility: for all the women interviewed, this shift in orientation is comes when they find positive external support. Positioned as the second stage in women's retrospective accounts of their post-sexual violence possibility stories, this section

looks more closely at women's descriptions of their "possibility turning points" as those that provide an overview of those factors that rather than further diminish possibility serve to begin women on a process of revisiting, repairing, and re-imagining their foundational and post-sexual violence possibility stories.

Becoming a mother.

For three of the eight women interviewed, a key turning point in their possibility story coincides with when they find out they are pregnant and/or become mothers. Having spent a number of years involved in drugs and survival sex work following the sexual assault she experiences in her late teens, Destiny Star becomes pregnant in her early 20s, and makes her first attempt to get sober. She explains, "I wound up getting pregnant, so I had to stop using because I just couldn't conceive – like I said, 'It's ok if I want to ruin my own life, that's my call, that's on me, but I have no right to ruin someone else's life, right? Especially not a baby.'" For Destiny Star, it is at this point, however, where her own history of neglect and violence, coupled by the poverty and other forms of socio-economic precarity she has experienced intersect with her efforts stay sober and care for her baby with little outside support, and she experiences a "nervous break" that leads to her children to being placed into guardianship:

> When you're just white knuckling it just trying to stay clean every day, and, you know, you have no program, you have no spiritual component, you have none of that, you're just trying to exist, and being undiagnosed bi-polar just seemed if my *only* goal during the day was to make sure the baby, cause my kids are 11 ½ months apart, was to make sure the babies were happy, and if the babies were happy then that was ok, but, I didn't even have basic living skills at this point, and I imploded and had a nervous break and my kids went into guardianship with my parents for 9 months, and cause, like, I didn't

> know, like, you know, if you're running crack six days a week and sleeping one personal hygiene is not right up there at the top of your list, you know, that, or anything that interferes with your get high time. We never cleaned the crack shack, I don't think ever, like, you know?

Despite the challenges that this moment poses for Destiny Star, she also identifies it as a turning point and the moment in which things start to change. Most significantly, it is at the moment of this "nervous break" that Destiny Star is finally offered the support she should have received many years earlier: "So, like, all these things I had to be taught, and so I had a really good sort of support team come around me and teach me all these different things and help me with my appearance. I was really blessed that way."

Like Destiny Star, Marnie's children are a catalyst for change. Finding herself as a single young mom of three children living on income assistance and struggling with alcoholism, she reflects on her own resolve to create different possibilities for her children than the ones she had experienced as a child:

> I didn't want my children to have the same life that I had. I wanted to protect them, and take care of them, and, you know, be a vigilant mama, you know? Be a vigilant mama, and, ah, so, I started looking at, at myself and what I needed to do to make that happen because I knew that I was drinking that I would not be keeping them safe and, ah, I didn't want to not keep them safe. Like, I really wanted to be able to keep them safe.

With this desire to keep her children safe as her driving force, Marnie describes how she begins the difficult work of getting sober at age 23 with the hopes of creating a different life for her children and of addressing the sexual abuse and violence she has experienced throughout her life. Despite the setbacks Marnie

describes in this process, it is when she is connected with support through AA and a counsellor "when things stated changing for me … because I think, you know, change, when you're caught up in addiction, change isn't possible." At the time of the interview, Marnie had not used alcohol for 20 years.

Like Destiny Star and Marnie, Jocelyn identifies the turning point in her possibility story in relation to her role as a mother: for Jocelyn, it is when her daughter turns three – the same age that Jocelyn was when she began to be sexually abused – that she experiences what she describes as "the biggest changing point in my life" – a moment in which "I … couldn't function anymore." At age 33, Jocelyn has yet to tell anyone about the ongoing child sexual abuse she experienced from the age of 3 to 15; while she has managed to get a degree and succeed in her job and as a mother, it is at this point that she is no longer able to continue functioning in the way she has. Thinking of her earlier description of performing a "double 0-7 identity," Jocelyn describes this as a moment where this performance is no longer tenable:

> So I think I was kind of fooling everybody up until then. And then at one point I just could not function anymore. … I couldn't leave my house. … I wasn't functioning *at all*. I was having a hard time looking after my kids. … The intrusive thoughts. I just couldn't push it out of my mind anymore, which I'd been doing my whole life.

For Jocelyn, this turning point initially appears to be one devoid of possibility:

> There was none [possibility]. Yeah. That's when I would have been the lowest of – at the lowest. Like I would have been – even when this was happening to me, it wasn't really happening to me, right? But at that point, there was no denying what had happened to me. So if I could have died at that point, I would have. You know? I would – that's what I wished for at that time, right?

Nonetheless, as with the other women, it is with this breakdown at this point that Jocelyn begins to open up to a different way of living and the possibility of seeking support for her experience.

Drugs and alcohol.

For both Claire and Shauna, the turning point in their possibility stories coincide with moments in which their addiction to drugs and alcohol reach a breaking point and they enter in-patient recovery centre. In the telling of her story, Shauna focuses in on a single day more than two years after the sexual assault she experienced occurred. Having become increasingly involved in using drugs, on this particular day Shauna comes home to her mother and confides in her about her drug use:

> And that day I just remember being really, really, really high and I haven't, like I hadn't eaten anything, I never slept. Um, the reason I went to my mom was so that I could ask her for one of her nerve pills, so I could sleep because I just needed to. My nerves were just shot. Like I waj just wired. Just wired. And I remember coming home off the bus and I went up to her and I said like, "Hey can I have a couple of your nerve pills?" And she looked at me really funny, like, "Why would you even ask that. Like you think that's ok?" I was like, "Listen, I'm really, I'm really high on drugs right now. I need to sleep. And then when I wake up I need to eat because it's been days." And she looked at me. I don't know. There was a second where she was like, "Is she serious? Is she joking" kind of thing. And like just a weird look, and she saw that I was serious, like when she made eye contact with me and she said, "Oh honey," and she like grabbed me in her arms, and she's like, "We're going to go talk to [name of neighbour]." And [name of neighbour] is someone who

> works for child and family services. He lives just up the street from us, so [sighs], we went to go talk to him, and he's the one who referred me to [recovery centre], and it just all happened so quickly.

With the help of another community member, Shauna's mother gets Shauna into an in-patient treatment drug treatment facility where over the course of her stay there Shauna is able to disclose the sexual assault she has experienced in a safe and supportive environment while also addressing her drug addiction. For Shauna, this is a turning point in her orientation to the future: "Like the first time in years I actually felt hopeful. I think. Like if there was any sliver, anything that's what it was."

In her narrative, Claire shares that it is after she is kicked out of high school that she enters a drug treatment centre, which although has not led her to completely stop using drugs altogether has led to some changes in her life, namely, as she puts it, "I'm not expecting to die." For Claire, her description of what "rock bottom" looked like for her is offered in a description of what she is *not* experiencing right now:

> And now, I'm not, you know, expecting that I'm going to be walking home and someone's going to jump me, and I'm not going to expect and I'm going to wake up and my underwear is on the other side of the room, and I'm not going to expect that I'm going to overdose on a bunch of drugs, or wake up somewhere that I was obviously left to die.

In her own words, Claire while agreeing that her life is different in terms of its orientation toward the future does not pinpoint a single incident or moment in which this change started: "I'm not quite sure exactly where the turning point was, like I feel like it was more a gradual thing, like, I, there wasn't just a day where I felt stronger or less scared, but turning back around to the point I was even last year I realize I'm not, I'm not the same person."

Overwork and perfectionism.

The turning point articulated in Sarah's and Lucine's stories occurs when like Shauna and Claire the coping strategies they have been using to perform normality – in this case, overachieving, perfectionism, and workaholism – stop working and begin to take unignorable impacts on their physical and mental health. Like Sarah, Lucine's turning point in her possibility story does not occur as one might expect when the abusive and sexually coercive relationship she lives in ends: while this is an extremely difficult period for Lucine, her desire to continue to perform normality keeps her pursuing a punishing schedule of work and school despite being in intense suffering. While Lucine describes an initial breakdown in the final year of her undergraduate degree, she remarkably continues for the next two years and moves to a new city and completes a graduate degree while at the same time dealing with significant and serious physical and emotional health issues, and still receiving no direct support related to the sexual violence she has lived with.

The final straw for Lucine comes when she is fired shortly after starting her first job following the completion of her Masters' degree, and she experiences what she describes as a "collapse." The extent to which Lucine is suffering at this point is evident in her description of her father's reaction to witnessing her having an anxiety attack:

> It got to the point where my – like my parents actually got to see a full out anxiety attack that I had and dad nearly dragged me up to the hospital. He was so worried. Like they'd never seen me like that before when that was pretty – I hadn't realized it looked so dramatic to other people. … That it could be so bad.

Despite the obvious pain and suffering that Lucine endures at this moment, it is also at this point when, as she explains, "I started really focusing on unpacking everything that happened to me" with the support of a counsellor and other helping professionals.

Much like Lucine, Sarah endures immense, extended suffering and attempts to maintain normalcy in her life for many years before she too eventually experiences what she calls "my breakdown." Having lived with multiple experiences of violence, and left a sexually coercive and physically abusive relationship, Sarah continues to pursue her educational and employment goals with a dogged dedication and without any professional support for the experiences she has endured. As evident from her description of the "breakdown" she experiences while at her job at a call centre, Sarah's turning point begins when there are simply no other ways available for her to cope:

> I was working … in the call centre. I was self-harming in the floor. I was cutting my arm with my nails and pulling off bits of flesh, and my mangers were feeling so helpless because I had like the floor coach was sitting beside me, and like my manager was wired into my call because they were just waiting for anything in my calls to be like, "She's hysterical, she's emotional, we can pull her off the floor." But I wouldn't. All my calls were perfect. Even though … my floor coach, was just like 'I'm sitting there looking at you. You're bleeding, but your call is perfect, so I don't have." And I was refusing to leave the floor. Um, but then after my break I had, um, I had a panic attack in the bathroom and I liked collapsed and I went up to him and I said, "I think I need to go home, I think I need to go to the hospital now." And he's like, "Yes, yes you do."

While it is at this point that Sarah starts to see a counsellor, additional events continue to unravel in her life in ways that leave Sarah at the point of the interview for this thesis "pretty much at rock bottom now," as she puts it. Unlike the other women for whom these rock bottom turning points have despite the difficulties they create transformed and opened up into opportunities for support and the potential to explore new relationships with possibility, Sarah's status at the time of the interview reveals the precarious position she sits in where it seems that although connected to formal supports she is also confronting a world of diminishing rather than expanding possibilities.

Possibility Turning Point: The Role of Supportive Others

As the above analysis demonstrates, common to all the narratives of this period is a turning point at which women describe a time when it became untenable for them to continue as they had. This moment – what I have called a 'possibility turning point' – is simultaneously a moment where women hit a proverbial rock bottom, but also, in the cases of the women interviewed, find a connection with some sort of external support. For all the women I spoke with a second component of their "possibility turning point" included accounts of their connection with supportive others, and the role of these supports in starting the process of moving out of "rock bottom" and into more possibility-rich narratives. In women's narratives these supports were both formal and informal including counsellors, friends, teachers, and other survivors. Amongst the other things that these supportive others offered was an opening up to new possibilities about self.

Supportive others took different forms and came into women's lives in different ways, including friends (Jocelyn, Marnie, Missy, Claire); teachers and professors (Jocelyn, Lucine); participating in a crisis line volunteer training for a

community-based sexual assault centre (Destiny Star); professional counselling with a counsellor or social worker (Destiny Star, Jocelyn, Marnie) or psychologist (Sarah); support group / group therapy (Jocelyn, Marnie, Shauna); in-patient drug and alcohol treatment (Claire, Shauna); employment / social services (Lucine; Sarah) and occupational therapists (Lucine; Sarah). In many cases, supportive others played an important role in helping women not only name their experiences as sexual violence but also begin to accept that they were "allowed" to do so. For example, in her interview, Destiny Star talks about how participating in a crisis line training at a community-based sexual assault centre expanded her understanding of what constitutes sexual violence, and allowed her to re-name some of her experiences as such: "The reason I thought I could volunteer here was because you know I had been raped, so I had that component, like, but I never really thought about being pimped out as being sexual violence." For Missy, it was a conversation with a friend that helped her name what was happening in her relationship:

> after everything happened, I was talking to my friend, and I was explaining the situations to her, and, um, she was the one who was, like, "Well, um, like, that's not ok." [laughing]. Like, she's the one that kind of, like, brought it to my attention that it was not ok, and so that's when I started—like I ended up telling my mom, and then I went—I did come here [sexual assault centre], and I was talking to people.

For most of the women connecting with a supportive counsellor was, in Jocelyn's words, "life-changing." Jocelyn describes how it is when she started working with counsellor that she experienced a shift in her relationship to possibility: "So that's where things turned around for me. Yeah. From being hopeless … to, you know, actually starting to feel, enjoy life, and then thinking about possibilities, right?"

In addition to affirming women's experiences of sexual violence and offering support, encouragement, and compassion, counsellors in women's possibility stories played a key role in providing education and guidance in coping with the long-term impacts of sexual violence that had for many years contributed to women's sense of diminishing possibility. By providing information, education, and strategies on everything from learning how to clean the house, in Destiny Star's case, to goal-setting and budgeting, in Shauna's case, to managing trauma triggers, in the case of Jocelyn and Missy, counsellors emerged as characters in women's possibility stories who play a key role in equipping women with the tools necessary to begin to repair and re-imagine their relationship to possibility.

In addition to individual counselling, participating in group therapy was for the women who were able to access it was a powerful part of healing because of the opportunity it provided for the women to connect with and see their experiences reflected in other women who they admired and respected. As Jocelyn notes, group therapy was instrumental in "dropp[ing] that last little bit of shame." Shauna describes the powerful effect group therapy had in allowing her space to share her story of sexual assault:

> Because I felt like my situation wasn't as extreme or as ok to share as the other girls, and to know that I wasn't the only one to go through it, and everyone's situation is different. Like it doesn't matter if, like, who it is and, like you know, you're a victim, and that's what happened and to be able to know like, I wasn't going to be judged by these girls. It kind of was like permission.

Marnie likewise describes the powerful healing that occurs for her when she meets other survivors:

> And so, like those things happening because prior to that I really felt like I was the only one. So, I think finding other people… It's so interesting. I think we find each other. Like, I think we find each other. I think when you've experienced sexual abuse, you find other people who've experienced it, right? And you just—like your souls respond to each other, you know what I mean? … Yeah. Well, it's like a knowing. Well, one of the things that I felt, I don't know if everyone feels this, but I felt invisible. But meeting other survivors and stuff, it's like, "Oh my god, somebody sees me. Somebody sees me." You know?

In describing these possibility turning points, women also identified other people who offered support that made a difference in their lives: while these people were not necessarily formal supports or ones who the women intentionally reached out to in order to talk about their experiences of sexual violence, they were nonetheless those who showed compassion and seemed sensitive to the struggles the women were experiencing even if they were not able to provide direct support. In many cases these people were teachers and professors that came into the women's lives at various points. Lucine, for example, describes in detail a professor she had who offered her hope in some of her darkest moments: "[He] was absolutely vital in reminding me that there was good people in the world. That not all men were awful. Like, I didn't really think that, but it was a fear. But just to see someone who sincerely was kind to other people, it meant so much." For Lucine, this professor's acceptance of some of the strategies she used to cope with her anxiety also made a big difference:

> he never really got on my case about 'cause as – I didn't realize this but as a way of dealing with my anxiety throughout my school years, I drew. I doodled or outright drawing. Um, and it soothes me because I can still listen and I'm

still learning, but if I don't do anything with my hands, if I'm forced just to sit still, I go crazy. I can't focus.

Marnie, likewise, offers a memory of her grade 9 teacher who bought Marnie flowers when she graduated, and as Marnie describes it "probably she recognized that I was in incredible pain and so she nurtured me." For Claire, these people are a group of friends who help protect her from further violence when she is homeless. The support she has received from others helps Claire stay on her path toward healing: "Like at this point it feels kind of like that if I get myself thrown into jail or I overdose all this effort that people I care about have put into me to like drag me out of this hole that I dug myself in that it would be basically spitting in their face."

For some of the women the supports they access while beginning to provide some help remain tenuous at the time of the interview: Sarah's resistance to working with a male counsellor must be quashed as there are no other psychiatrists available; Destiny Starr and Lucine continue to face challenges in accessing the financial support they need; and Missy remains preoccupied that the university has not done enough to protect other women from the man who sexually assaulted her.

At the time of the interview, the length of time since this moment of "hitting rock bottom," to use Sarah's words, and receiving support differed: for Marnie and Jocelyn, their possibility turning point had long since passed and they had benefitted from many years of positive support; for Shauna, Destiny Star, Lucine, Missy, and Claire, their possibility turning points were much more recent and still very much closely connected to their present lives; Sarah, on the other hand, described herself at the time of the interview "at rock bottom." As I will explore in the descriptions of what happens to women's relationship to possibility following this possibility turning point, the ability to connect with supportive others allows women to begin a process

of revisiting and repairing their foundational and diminishing post-sexual violence possibility stories. Nonetheless, the manner in which women's stories of possibility turning points juxtapose those moments in which they have "hit rock bottom" with moments in which they are finally offered support are a striking and telling structural feature in the organization of the overarching possibility story structure: that it is only when women survivors are on the verge of suicide, overdose, severe psychological suffering, poverty, or educational failure that the institutions they reach out to for support offer that support reveals the profound suffering and indifference that survivors face in the aftermath of sexual violence and the many opportunities that are missed to prevent such suffering.

Reading this systemic indifference through the lens of how women understand it to impact their relationship to possibility shows these accounts to be making an incisive critique about how a rape-supportive culture works to further victimize women survivors of sexual violence through taking away their futures. As the next section makes clear, while these possibility turning points mark a positive shift in women's possibility stories they also serve as a structural point of tension and resistance that foreground the cumulative effect of that absence of support. While we begin to chart the path through which women explore new possibilities for themselves, we also see how the challenges and impacts of spending so long without support mean that for many of these women these challenges and impacts are not easily left behind.

Missy's Story: Protecting Possibility in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence

While the possibility stories developed and told by all the participants followed the possibility story structure outlined in this chapter, Missy's experience and resulting possibility story of the period after sexual violence to the present is an

exception. As demonstrated by women's retrospective accounts of their relationship to possibility in the aftermath of sexual violence from early adulthood to the present, the ability to access external sexual violence-related support that enabled women to name their experience of sexual violence and to challenge previously and in some cases long-held negative beliefs about blame, shame, and self-worth was a turning point in their possibility stories that facilitated a shift away from a story of diminishing possibility and toward a story of repairing possibility, and which shaped the type of future-oriented possibility stories women told at the time of the interview. With the exception of Missy, all of the women spent at minimum two years following their experience of sexual violence without receiving support; many spent many more years without access to support. As these women's stories of diminishing possibility demonstrate, the period of time in which they had no support related to their experience of sexual violence was one in which their ability to pursue educational, professional, and relationship goals was greatly diminished. This was also a period in which none of the women – again, with the exception of Missy – received any sort of validation from external systems, such as the justice system, educational institutions, or other formal supports that the violence they had experienced was not their fault.

Unlike all the other women interviewed, Missy's experience of disclosing sexual violence, accessing support, and receiving external and institutional validation of her experience was positive and efficient. Although Missy herself expressed confusion about whether her experience of sexual coercion over the course of a few dates with an acquaintance constituted sexual violence, a conversation she had with a friend shortly after this experience helped her put a name to the uncertainty and confusion she felt: "I was talking to my friend, and I was explaining the situations to her, and, she was the one who was, like, 'Well, like that's not ok.' Like she's the one

that kind of, like, brought it to my attention that it was not ok." Shortly after this conversation, Missy tells her mom who like Missy's friend believes Missy and offers support. In addition to these informal supports, Missy was able to see a counsellor at a local community-based sexual assault centre, and she receives this professional support within a few weeks of her experience of sexual violence. Finally, she also comes to learn that the man who had sexually assaulted her had previously sexually assaulted 3 other people, and she is able to meet with these other victims, something that helps her process the experience:

> Yeah, so that was kind of neat being able to – not neat, but it was nice to be able to talk to people who had not only the same experience but the same experience with the same person, so it just kind of validates you and makes you feel, like, less crazy, I guess, which is nice.

In addition to the supportive responses Missy receives, her experience also differs from the other women in the way she is encouraged and supported by others to report her experience of sexual violence to both to the police and to the university where both she and the perpetrator were students. Out of all the participants, Missy is the only participant who chooses to report her experience to the police. While Missy's report to the police does not ultimately lead to any charges being laid against the accused, she explains how ultimately her experience with the police is not a negative one. Crucially, the police officer that Missy works with again validates Missy's experience even while informing Missy that they will not be pursuing the case:

> It [reporting to the police] wasn't as bad as I thought, but I think it's because she [the police officer] told me like, "Just because we can't do anything about it, doesn't mean that it was ok, and it doesn't mean that it was right of him to do," which did make me feel better, than if she had just said, "Sorry, there's

> nothing we can do about it." She did acknowledge, like, she told me that it was wrong, and that he shouldn't have done that, and, just because we can't do anything about it doesn't mean, doesn't mean that he should have done it and all that, so that made me feel better.

In the interview, Missy does not speak in detail about her dealings with the university except to say that after her first semester the man who has assaulted her is "kicked out" of the university. The significance of the difference of Missy's experience on multiple fronts including being able to receive multiple positive and supportive response to disclosure shortly after her experience of sexual violence, being able to access professional, therapeutic support, and being able to receive some form of validation for her experience from outside institutions is reflected in the different type of possibility story Missy constructs in her retrospective account of this time period, and in her future-oriented possibility story.

In contrast to the other women who author stories of diminishing possibility that continue over a long period of time and have profound and lasting impacts on their lives, Missy's account of this period transitions quickly from one of diminishing possibility to repairing possibility. To be sure, like the other participants, Missy's experience is not without impacts. For example, prior to the perpetrator being removed from the university, Missy describes how being on the same campus and in the same class as him limits her university experience:

> So school started and that was really hard because I knew I was going to have to see him all the time. … I wasn't talking to *anybody.* He lived in the like the lower residence, and it's a pretty big residence. Plus, when you add that on top of the women's and the men's rugby team, I just – there are a lot of people that I wouldn't talk to. Just because I wouldn't, like, not to be rude, it was just that

> I didn't know if he had said anything. I didn't know who he was friends with. I didn't know who he had said anything to. I didn't know *if* he had said anything and what he would have said. So I just tried to distance myself from anyone who had any sort of connection with him. I didn't hang out on campus a lot unless I was in the study hall. So, I couldn't really make friends that way. … And then, like, it would – so that affected school because I couldn't – I find if you know people then you can talk to them, about your school, about your subject. You can study together, but I couldn't do that because I didn't talk to any of the people. So I would go to class to study hall to class to study hall to class to study hall, and even still in my first yar I was worried that in study hall he would be there, so I wasn't really studying because every time the door opened I would look up and panic.

In addition, when Missy finds herself in the same psychology class as the perpetrator, she struggles to concentrate, and even goes so far as to switch her major so that she will not have to be in the same classes with him.

Missy gives voice to the same sort of impact of violence that the other women articulated in describing how in the absence of support and in the aftermath of sexual violence they experienced the possibilities they had imagined for themselves to be diminishing. She makes clear that had she not being able to receive support quickly following sexual violence and had the man who had assaulted her not been removed from the school, she too would have likely continued to experience compounding negative impacts. Missy herself underlines the crucial role that the support she received, especially that her perpetrator was removed from school, played in restoring her sense of possibility:

> So I was lucky I only had to deal with him for one year and one class, one semester, and I already know how difficult that was, so I'm sure if he had stayed it would have been even more difficult, and I would have probably wouldn't have been able to pay attention in class and wouldn't have done well. Cause I already know about the one class I had with him. I couldn't pay attention, and I wouldn't of have been – gone anywhere because I would have been scared to run into him, and I just honestly probably wouldn't have been able to stay at that school at all because if I was constantly running into him, it would have been too much.

Nonetheless, because Missy receives the support she does, and she is able to see her experience validated in the community surrounding her she describes her relationship to possibility as relatively unchanged from before her experience. Following the perpetrator's removal from university, Missy switches back to her original major so to continue toward her goal of becoming a teacher and a school counsellor. She also builds a relationship with a new boyfriend that while still requiring some work as a result of the sexual assault she has experienced is one that is positive and open. Missy continues to be supported by both her parents and her brother, and she has developed strategies to manage some of the trauma symptoms, such as triggers and flashbacks, she experiences from time to time. Moreover, as will be explored in the next section, sexual violence does not appear to limit the future-oriented possibility stories that Missy constructs about the upcoming years.

In documenting the ways in which Missy's experience and resulting possibility story of the period from early adulthood to the present in the aftermath of sexual violence diverges from those of the other women, the point is certainly not to minimize Missy's experience nor to suggest that she, like the other participants, does

not experience significant impacts and struggles as result of sexual violence. Nonetheless, there is a significant difference regarding access to positive support and the positive effect this can have if provided in the immediate aftermath of sexual violence. Her story demonstrates how the factors that contribute to a sense of diminishing possibility identified by the other women survivors can be minimized or eliminated thereby preventing the long-lasting negative impact they are shown to cause in the educational, professional, and relationship possible selves of women who do not receive this support.

Repairing Possibility: Exploring New Versions and Meanings of Possibility

For all the women interviewed, the trajectory of their descriptions of the impact of sexual violence on their sense of possibility shifted following the possibility turning points described by each. Whereas women told stories of diminishing possibilities leading up to this turning point, their narratives of the period after this turning point shifted in most (though not all) cases toward more exploratory and expansive stories of their relationship to possibility. This section identifies and explores the third stage of women's retrospective accounts of their relationship to possibility since sexual violence to the present: a stage in which women articulate their experience of re-examining and repairing their relationship to possibility as limited, diminished, and in some cases non-existent. As a structural and thematic analysis of this part of women's possibility stories demonstrate, the work of re-examining and repairing possibility involves 4 elements: 1) revising understandings of self in relationship to sexual violence; 2) testing out new possibilities; 3) claiming new possibility identities, and 4) confronting new realities and grieving lost possible selves.

“Maybe I was wrong:” Revising understandings of self in relationship to sexual violence.

In describing the shift away from diminishing possibility, women commonly identified an initial step in this process to be the questioning of previously held beliefs about self in relationship to their experiences of sexual violence. Whereas women had for many years held themselves responsible for the sexual violence they had experienced, the opportunity to revisit these experiences in supportive contexts allowed them to begin to reassign blame. For women like Jocelyn and Marnie being able to let go of the self-blame they carried was integral to their ability to begin to open up to possibility-rich narratives. Jocelyn describes this important moment in the following description of her initial experiences of talking about the childhood sexual abuse she had experienced to a counsellor after 30 years of silence:

> So, once I started talking about it, I started realizing that, you know, it wasn’t me to blame, and, you know, started placing things in more perspective and who I was as a person instead of what—I *wasn’t* what happened to me. … Basically who I was as a person. I wasn’t owning what happened to me anymore. I was able to place the blame where it rightfully belonged, and I think when I was able to do that it kind of let myself be free from that. I was able to start living.

For Marnie, this process of revising long-held beliefs about her self-worth and responsibility for the violence she experienced occurred in the context of group therapy, where she found that her understanding and views on sexual abuse and survivors (and thus herself) began to change and with it her openness to new possibilities for herself:

> I had this idea about sexual abuse, and my idea was that people that sexually abused were people with like addiction problems, and that kind of stuff … just thought that people that sexually abused were male alcoholics, violent, you know. Based on my own experience, right? Because there was a huge amount of violence, and addiction issues, and that kind of stuff, so based on my own experience that's kind of the idea, you know, that was in my head about who abusers were, right?

However, when she attends the incest survivors group, she finds that,

> there were women from a variety of different backgrounds, and one of the women that was in the group, her father was a physician and he had sexually abused her, and so it kind of made me, you know—there was shift in how I kind of viewed that stuff, right?

As she notes, this shift in her understanding of sexual abusers and survivors caused her to question the beliefs about herself she has previously held. She notes,

> And so going to this, it was like, "Oh, ok. I look at her, and I don't see this flashing sign that says, 'Fuck up,' and so maybe other people don't see it on me?" … You know, that was kind of my first inkling. Like, "Oh, maybe other people don't see me that way," right?

Like Marnie, Shauna's participation in group therapy while at an in-patient recovery centre and the opportunity it provides for her to disclose her experience of sexual assault for the first time is a transformative experience that causes Shauna to re-evaluate her previous beliefs about her self. She explains how the experience opens her up to the idea of forgiving herself which then in turn leads her to become more engaged in her therapy:

> I was just so upset with myself that I let this consume me for this long, and I was upset with myself that I was stuck in the past for so long, and then I was like, "Wait. Why am I so upset with myself? I'm human. I make mistakes. I'm ready to learn and move forward.

Being able to disclose her experience of sexual assault in a supportive environment then leads her to begin to practice some of the other skills she is being offered in the drug treatment centre she attends. Although Shauna has been doubtful about the program up to this point, following this disclosure she begins to "take things seriously." She describes this as

> actually paying attention at groups and meetings, starting to use the tools that we were given, and, ah, I started to take things seriously. It was only a couple of weeks, but in those couple of weeks I realized like a lot [laughs] about myself.

Both Claire and Destiny Star offer similarly powerful narratives about how during this time they begin to question previously held beliefs about themselves, namely by starting to acknowledge their own personhood. For Claire, accessing support for her drug and alcohol addiction and sexual abuse allowed her to "feel more like a person." She explains, "I don't know if that makes sense. I didn't even really feel like I was living, let alone being a person." Similarly, a key turning point in Destiny Star's relationship to sense of self and possibility occurs when she recognizes herself as a person with her own rights. Here, Destiny Star explains the realization she has about her own personhood when she happens to see a commercial on television about the Persons' Case:[14]

[14] Canadian Heritage Minutes are a series of short films of less than one minute that feature significant moments in Canadian history. Canadian Heritage Minutes aired during commercial breaks on

> Like, I don't know if you ever saw, there's a Canadian Heritage commercial, right? That one with that Nellie McClung or whatever. 'Get your picture taken get with a lady who's not nice. Or that other lady who discovered, she became Governor General or something, but she still wasn't a person, right? Those two and it was like oh my goodness, like they're kind of eureka moments, like because I said, you know, I might not be Governor General but you know I'm not a person in my own mind not because society says I'm not a person anymore, but you know, and so those commercials, I mean it's kind of the silly little things, but you know… Yeah, so that commercial was when I sort of first realized that.

With this "eureka moment", Destiny Star experiences a shift in understanding about the process and possibility of healing as something that she is worthy and deserving of. She notes that once she realized that she was a 'person' "you really get more involved in your own therapy because you want to get better." She explains: "Like, you know, first I was doing everything for the kids, and everything was external and so a lot wasn't taking root internally, and that's where the healing needed to happen, was internally, right?"

Previously held self-narratives as blameworthy, shameful, and unworthy of personhood are questioned in supportive and affirming environments which also become catalysts for questioning beliefs that future possibilities will be diminished or absent. Moments such as those when Jocelyn "places the blame where it belongs;" Marnie's "first inkling" that she may not be the "fuck up" she has imagined herself to

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television. The episode that Destiny Star refers to here focuses on Nellie McClung's activism related to women's right to vote. The video features an interaction between Nellie McClung and then Premier of Manitoba, R. P. Roblin who stated "nice women don't want the vote."

be; Claire's moment of "feeling more like a person," and Destiny Star's "eureka moment" in which she claims her own personhood collectively signal a point in these women's narratives when what Jocelyn refers to as "just a little bit of a glimmer" emerges in terms of what their futures might hold. As such, as they are equipped with the tools necessary to re-evaluate and engage critically with the stories they have previously been told about sexual violence survivors and the limited and diminished possible futures available to them, they begin to revise what they imagine they might be capable of.

Testing out new possible identities.

In describing the shift in their relationship to possibility, women's stories of repairing possibility also contain accounts of their initial attempts to test out new possible identities. Having begun to question the accuracy of previously held understandings of self in the presence of supportive others, women then describe how this questioning prompts them to begin to tentatively question the accuracy of the limited possibilities they have come to believe exist for them.

As indicated in women's descriptions, this is a period in which women begin to collect evidence that challenges their previously held versions of self as limited in possibility. For both Jocelyn and Marnie, the success that they have when they return to school and take on new jobs as adults challenges their long-held belief that as sexual abuse survivors they are "stupid" and thus unqualified to pursue professional careers. Jocelyn points to the moment in which she learned she has received the highest GPA in her undergraduate university class and is encouraged by her professors to continue in school as new evidence that challenged her sense of self as "stupid." "So I'd start to think, 'Well, ok. Well, *maybe,* I'm not *that* stupid. Because these people are believing in me. These people are pushing me. You know, so that

would have been a big, would have played a big role in a shift for me too." Like Jocelyn, the straight A's that Marnie receives when she returns to school offer concrete proof that challenges the limited versions of her own intelligence and competence she has previously imagined: she remembers thinking, "maybe I'm not so stupid after all."

This preliminary evidence of her competence and intelligence is further affirmed for Marnie when she begins working with adults with mental health challenges:

> I remember starting there thinking, "Oh my god if they know who I am, they'll fire me," you know? Like feeling like I was just this big imposter, right? But in reality, they got to know who I was and everybody liked me, you know? So, for me, like, for me this shift was kind of gradual, like I would have to say things to myself, like, "OK, Marine look at the evidence. Look at the evidence. You can't be that bad of a person because if you were then you'd be saying that all these people are wrong. Maybe you're wrong. Maybe you're wrong." So it was just like those experiences kind of helped me like see things differently, right?

Shauna, likewise, articulates a process through which having previously been unable to think about her hopes for the future she started to actively engage in new ideas about her future and her relationship to realizing that future using the skills she is learning at the drug treatment facility:

> I started to be able to see myself doing things that I wanted to do. Like I started to think about university again, and I started to write down my goals, short-term, long-term, everything in between, like, I started to strive to see myself in these scenarios that I dreamt about or day-dreamt about, you know?

That women are still in the "testing out" phase of the shift from limited to expanding possibilities is evident in the tentative language they use in these passages. Their use of "maybe" ("maybe you're wrong; maybe I'm not so stupid") reveals the cautious and fragile steps the women were taking into or toward a revised sense of possibility – still unsure if it is theirs to claim for themselves. In addition, the importance they put on supportive others at this point to facilitate this process of self-exploration that takes place in which for the first time they encounter ideas of self other than those that were authored in relationship to the sexual violence they had experienced indicates the importance at this point of gathering evidence from trusted others to bolster these emerging possible identities.

"Wanting more": Claiming new possible identities

The shift toward more possibility-rich narratives is gradual and not always linear: as Marnie's admission that even many years later she continues to have to "look at the evidence" to quiet old doubts and questions about what she is capable of indicates, the work of repairing one's relationship to possibility is for the women interviewed an ongoing and complex process. Nonetheless, as they described the process of this shift from diminishing to repairing possibility, some of the women demonstrated how given the time to gather evidence and "test out" new possible identities in the company of supportive others gradually led them to revise their sense of agency toward their future and the possibilities therein. While not present in all the women's narratives, for Jocelyn, Marnie, Shauna, and Destiny Star – all of whom have had more time since accessing support – another significant step in their descriptions of the transition into living within possibility-rich narratives as these are sparked and supported by supportive others occurs when women move from 'testing'

new possible identities to actively describing efforts to define these identities for themselves and initiate the action necessary to achieving them.

For Jocelyn, the shift from "testing out" possible identities to claiming those identities begins with what she describes as "the thought of *wanting more*." No longer content with "going through the motions," Jocelyn points to her decision to further her education as another "turning point" because as she explains whereas "before I wouldn't have thought that I could do anything more" now "I thought, I want to do more. I want to go back to school" to be able to do what "my counsellor … had done for me I wanted to do for other people." Here, Jocelyn makes a poignant observation at how this counsellor / social worker possible self "was almost the same dream" she held as a young woman – a dream that had felt at the time impossible. She reflects: "When I was 18, I wanted to help people, but I would have thought in no way could I help anybody, right?"

Jocelyn's agentic orientation toward future possible selves has changed dramatically: not only does she go back to school to get her BA but realizing upon its completion that "I *still wanted more,*" and "I wanted to help more, like in a bigger capacity," she also gets a graduate degree which allows her to do the helping work she had dreamed about as a young girl. At the time of the interview, Jocelyn has both an undergraduate and Masters' degree and is employed in two different positions in the helping professions, including working as a counsellor with women who have experienced sexual violence.

Again, central to her transformed sense of possibility, Jocelyn attributes her revision in self-concept:

> And I think the biggest thing was, right, realizing who I was as a person instead of a nobody, nobody, you know, basically well I had mentioned like

> damaged goods, really, um, to realizing that "Ok, I have some self-worth. I'm a good person." And I think it was disowning what happened to me was a big change in my life.

For Marnie, taking on a more active relationship with possibility, and her ability claim her story for herself comes when she speaks about her experiences of poverty and sexual abuse at an anti-poverty convention. Compared to "the little girl who lost her voice," and who felt that there was no point in telling her story because no one would listen, taking up this invitation to speak publicly about her story emerges as another turning point in Marnie's narrative in which she claims space for herself, and positions herself as someone worthy of attention. This act of courage is affirmed for Marnie when, as she describes it,

> one of the organizers -- came up to me after and said to me, "Marnie, you're not a survivor, you're a thriver. You are a thriver." And so that…… Well, it was um, you know, it was kind of a really nice thing for her to say, I thought. You know? But it was like, "Oh, well maybe I am, you know? Maybe I am.

As a "thriver," Marnie claims many identities that she had thought were not possible for her: intelligent, caring, compassionate, risk-taker, likeable, successful, tenacious, courageous or in her more tempered words, "I'm not all bad." At this point, Marnie is able to claim these parts of herself as things that she likes about herself: "I like that I'm willing to take risks," "I like that I'm not motivated by financial things as I am by people and places," "I like that despite the fact that … maybe things don't always work out, I'm still willing to try." Again, Marnie in the context of the interview comments on how this ability to like things about herself – and these particular aspects of her identity in particular – were not imaginable to her younger self:

> That's something that I really like about myself and that's not something that I would have known. My younger self would not have known that. My younger self was really afraid. So I like that about myself. I like that I can trust that everything is going to work out, and it does. You know. It does. It does."

Shauna describes how she moves from "testing out" these possible identities through imagining them playing out to actually taking the steps necessary to realize them. She explains this shift from testing out to claiming possibility in the following powerful passage:

> Yeah, it's amazing, actually. Like I saw myself graduating the program. I saw myself graduating high schools. I was accepted to 4 different universities [getting teary, crying]. Like I moved back home, like I did all these things. I went. I graduated from [recovery centre]. Like that was the biggest thing in my life. Like I never, never completed anything. When I was younger I was in kung-fu and basketball and soccer and sports, but like I always dropped out, I was in the yearbook and I just dropped out. I just never, ever finished anything except books probably. But, like, to be able to go there completely turn myself around while raising my grades like fuckin' 110%, like, and dealing with all the things I had to deal with, it just, it made me feel so, so good and so complete and so, like, whole, and like love myself, like I was just so happy and proud and like my mom was proud and like staff was proud, the girls were proud, even the guys I wasn't allowed to talk to were proud too [laughs].

Interestingly, like both Jocelyn and Marnie, Shauna's shift into claiming new possibilities leads her full circle to reconnecting with and realizing versions of her earlier childhood self and achievements. In this case, Shauna describes how she once again receives awards for her scholastic achievements as she had as a young girl:

“Like I went home, I graduated high school. I got the Turn Around award. It was so amazing. And I still have it to. It’s hanging up on my wall.”

Destiny Star, likewise, describes a shift in her relationship to possibility from “testing out” new possibilities – in her case, the identity of being a person rather than an object – to claiming new identities that transforms her relationship with possibility into one with more agency. Reflecting on her life in the years since she was able to access support, Destiny Star describes how despite not being able to achieve her once hoped for social worker possible self, she has creatively adapted to her situation so to still be able to do the type of work she once imagined she would do as a social worker. Destiny Star’s interview is filled with numerous examples in which over the years she has supported young women who are homeless and living on the street; participated in community organizing issues; and challenged the culture male violence she sees around her. At one point in the interview, Destiny Star good-naturedly comments on how the work she has done to support her community amounts to more than her social worker does:

> I said [to my social worker], ‘Well, I wish I could just shut down at 4:30 some days and just go home. It would be lovely.’ [laughing]. Cause she’s wonderful, but I said, like, you know, mine doesn’t shut down at 4:30 … Cause sometimes it does frustrate me. Not that I have any knock on educated people, but I don’t like when educated people, like, treat me like I’m stupid or not worthy enough because I don’t have initials after my name. I want to make myself a business card and capitalize the word “human” and put periods in between and then come up with a characteristic for each letter and write those underneath [laughing]. Just because, I have initials after my name, now shut up and listen.

Confronting New Realities and Grieving Lost Possible Selves

The retrospective accounts Lucine and Sarah provide offer another important version of the story of repairing relationship with possibility that includes grieving of lost possible selves and a reckoning with new, circumscribed realities. Whereas the other women emphasize or characterize this process of questioning as one that opens up into more positive and possibility-rich self-narratives, for Lucine and Sarah it marks the beginning of a process of confronting difficult realities about the future and the possibilities open to them in the future.

Lucine, for example, speaks about how a significant component of the work she has done since her "mental collapse" following getting fired from her job involved coming to terms with the way the physical and psychological toll of her experiences of abuse might mean having to permanently alter her hoped for librarian possible self. She described how as she started to work with a counsellor the extent of the concrete impacts sexual violence has on her life become clear:

> I started seeing a counsellor through mental health, and I started going to first, like employment services help and they're like you're not ready to go back to work yet. Why don't you go on social assistance? So, I've been on social assistance since 2014.

For Sarah, who describes herself at "rock bottom" at the time of the interview and thus has not fully moved into or through this third stage common to the other women's retrospective accounts, being connected to supportive others seems to have done little in terms of opening up new or different possibilities or re-orienting her diminished sense and lived experience of possibility:

> Yeah. And so it definitely contributed to my breakdown, which for all intents and purposes completely changed my life. I thought when I went off work in

> May 2015, I'd be off work for maybe 2 weeks, and I'd be back to it, because I was like, "You know, I've dealt with depression and anxiety all my life. So I'm having a bad period. It'll be fine." Two years after the fact and I'm still no closer.

The accounts offered by Lucine and Sarah demonstrate how 'testing out of new possible identities' is not always a process in which those identities are more hopeful, positive or expansive than previously held identities and ideas about the future. For instance, both Lucine and Sarah provide poignant accounts of themselves entering a process of grappling with possible selves and futures in which they may be unable to ever fulfill their once hoped for dreams of economic and career success.

While Lucine describes how the work she does with a counsellor has helped her move from what she describes as "having lost all sense of who I was" to "start[ing] to get a better sense of who I was" the realizations she has are not always easy. As an example, Lucine talks about how this period has been one in which she has had to confront the likelihood that she "may not be like my sisters ever," whom Lucine describes as "successful." This realization bears extra weight given Lucine's foundational possibility story of the pressures and expectations of fulfilling family-authored possibilities.

Sarah, likewise, describes how the work she has been doing with a counsellor in taking stock of the losses sustained as a result of sexual violence have forced her to confront her current situation – one that she describes as being

> nowhere where I … would have thought I would be 5 years ago, 10 years ago, as a child. I would never have imagined that I would be 30 years old living off disability, trying to figure out – I thought I would be an archivist by now at some school managing some multi-million archive with a husband and 2

> perfect kids. [sigh]. But, life didn't really send me down that path. It sent me down this different path where I just learned to struggle with health and mental health issues, and always be the strong Sarah.

For Lucine, Sarah, and Claire the thought of wanting more and the process of claiming new identities present in the other women's narratives is not something that they can easily articulate as part of their retrospective accounts at the time of the interview. In part, this is because they are both still in the process of coming to terms with the ways that sexual violence has impacted various domains of their life, and how these impacts continue to create barriers that need to be addressed. Both women, for instance, highlighted how the economic costs of sexual violence have continued to limit them in their lives. Sarah, for instance, notes, that had she not experienced sexual violence:

> I would've gotten my degree like normal; I wouldn't be $70,000 in debt for the extended period of time. Like, I'm carrying a lot of student debt because I took so long to get my degree, which is affecting – that's why we live in an apartment, not a house.

Both women also talked about how the PTSD symptoms they have and continue to experience make it difficult for them to function in workplaces that are unwilling to make any accommodations.

In these possibility stories, the process or act of claiming new possible identities involves accepting these newly realized versions of self even if they are ones that are different than what they might have hoped. Lucine, for instance, while acknowledging that she may not ever fulfill her dream of being a librarian has come to a place of learning that this does not need to diminish what she did manage to accomplish during the past years:

> I started to realize my achievements although they are important and they're good, like, "Holy shit, I got a master's degree." It's not like I haven't worked my ass off. I didn't appreciate what they were. I didn't really understand what I was going through was not really out of – was out of the ordinary or that the effort I put in was harder and different than other people because I had nothing to gauge it with because again I grew up with a group of overachievers as a family. So, it was just, "Of course, you're going to be like that blah blah blah." My – it was like suddenly over this time – ok this thing might not be for you it's ok because you might not ever want to do it, because even if – learning that just because it sounds good on paper doesn't mean it's going to suit you when you actually got to work.

Sarah, on the other hand, is still looking for that type of acceptance and describes herself in a period of mourning and trying to understand the losses sustained as a result of sexual violence: "I'm very unhappy with how my life is right now, and I, I wonder how different it would have been, but meh life is life."

In these cases, women's possibility stories provided a deeper look at how the transformation of one's relationship to diminished possibility was not always positive, easy, or a matter of simply reconnecting with once-held possibilities. Rather, at times, it also involves a process of coming to terms with the long-standing impacts of sexual violence including its impact on one's ability to ever realize certain hopes and dreams.

Future-Oriented Possibility Stories

This section examines the third period covered in the overarching possibility story structure in which women construct and share the stories they are telling themselves at the time of the interview of what lays in front of them in the future. Having worked through and reflected on a retrospective account of the impact of

sexual violence on their thinking and orientation toward the future up to the present, these future-oriented possibility stories are a vital component of women's overall accounts of the impact of sexual violence on their sense of possibility. In this section, I analyze women's future-oriented possibility stories in relation to their structural and thematic elements drawing on the "dimensions of projectivity" (Mische, 2009; Sooles, 2020) framework described in detail in Chapter Three (See Appendix I: Analytical Guide). Specifically, I present an analysis of the similarities and differences in each woman's development of her future-oriented possibility story in terms of 1) its content, including the clarity and scope of its description of future possibility; 2) its engagement with themes of agency and meaning-making; and 3) its engagement with themes of generativity and social change – all elements that Mische (2009) and Sooles (2020) have identified as relevant to analyzing future-oriented narratives. Through this analysis, I identify three future-oriented possibility story sub-types: 1) endless possibility; 2) pragmatic possibility; and 3) limited possibility. For each of these future-oriented story sub-types, I first provide a general overview of their structural and thematic features and concerns, and then a more detailed analysis of these structural and thematic elements as they emerge in women's future-oriented possibility stories.

Table 3

Summary Future-Oriented Possibility Story Types and Characteristics

Dimensions of Projectivity (Mische, 2009; Sooles, 2020)		Endless Possibility	Pragmatic Possibility	Limited Possibility
Content				
	Reach – degree of extension into the future	Describes possibilities and possible selves many years in the future	Describes possibilities and possible selves a few years into the future but focused mostly on immediate future	Distressed, uncomfortable talking about future; unable to see into the future beyond the next few days
	Breadth – range of possibilities considered at different points in time	Broad range of possible selves that reflect unique hopes and dreams	A small number of possible selves mostly focused on futures where basic needs are met; possible selves are often more circumscribed than previously held possible selves before sexual violence	Limited to no range of possible selves; often includes expression of feared possible selves related to sexual violence
	Expandability – degree to which future possibilities are expanding or contracting	Strong evidence of expanding possibilities	Express hope for expanding possibilities but limited belief in agency or control to influence expandability	Future possibilities are contracting and doors are closing
	Clarity – degree of detail and clarity	Clearly articulated possible selves	Some specific ideas; but may also have practical limitations (i.e. money)	Little clarity in description of possible selves
Agency & Meaning				
	Volition – degree of perceived agency in future (i.e. active, passive, purposeful)	Strong expression and belief in personal agency to determine future and to handle future events	Some expression of early ideas about how to engage actively in shaping future but still figuring this out; starting to find some evidence of their own agency in the past which might help them in the future	Little to no sense of agency; agency is complicated by systemic and institutional barriers that are imagined to continue to exist in the future
	Contingency – degree to which future trajectories imagined as fixed/predetermined vs. flexible/uncertain	Future is flexible and adaptable where anything is possible	Future is somewhat flexible but very uncertain and limited in some ways by previous experiences and impacts of sexual violence	Future is fixed and unlikely to be changed

Dimensions of Projectivity (Mische, 2009; Sooles, 2020)	Endless Possibility	Pragmatic Possibility	Limited Possibility
Connectivity – degree of imagined logic and connection between elements	Recognizes and honours the route to possibility where sexual violence is a sign of strength and resilience	Still concerned about or "in" the sexual violence story but trying to make meaning and understand how experiences can support possibility-rich futures	Preliminary ideas about connection between sexual violence and future orientation but still in early stages.
Generativity & Social Change			
Sociality – degree to which future is 'peopled' with others whose actions are intertwined with the individual	Strong support system in place but more as a back up and/or as a source of enjoyment and strength; imagines enacting generativity in concrete ways in the future	Have supports in place but heavily reliant on them for basic daily functioning; expresses general hopes about helping others in the future	Limited to no supports in place; expresses vague hopes of helping others
Genre – the discursive mode in which future projections are described	Engages critically with dominant rape discourse and understands how this dominant discourse limits women's futures; authors future stories that challenge these discourses	Starting to question dominant rape discourses and explore how these have shaped ideas about the future; future stories are tentatively exploring new ways about understanding the aftermath of sexual violence	Aware of dominant rape discourses but just beginning to understand impact on past, present, and future; difficulty imagining a future that is not reflective of dominant messages in rape-supportive culture

Future-Oriented Stories of "Endless Possibility"

The future-oriented possibility stories three (Jocelyn, Marnie, and Destiny Star) of the eight participants tell are ones in which there is a sense of "endless possibility". These future-oriented possibility stories are marked by an undercurrent of hopefulness, engagement, and positivity about the coming years. Not only do the women who author these stories imagine futures that are far-reaching but they also see these futures as ones in which there are a wide range of possible selves still to be realized and that this range is continually expanding. While these women speak about a future filled with multiple and growing options, their future-oriented stories are not unfocused or unrealistic. As they articulate stories about their future possible selves, they do so with details and concrete ideas about what these possible selves are and the steps necessary to achieve them. As compared to some of the other women, these future possible selves are ones that reflect a commitment to their own values and purpose rather than simply survival. As women tell these stories about their future, it becomes clear that the hopefulness, confidence, and clarity with which they author these stories of expanding possibility comes from a well-cultivated connection with their own agency as the authors of these stories, and their belief in their own ability to intervene in and transform previously held stories that were limiting or fixed. Rather than evidence of an idealistic notion about the future, these women clearly articulate the route they have taken to get to a place of expanding possibility and are clear that there are many factors that have shaped and continue to shape this route. In describing their sense of possibility in the future, the women also recognize and insist upon a new genre for the possibility stories of women survivors of sexual violence in general, one that challenges the limited futures normally storied for survivors by dominant discourse. In this way, the expansive quality of the future-oriented stories of

possibility women tell are ones that extend far beyond their own individual lives to contribute to transforming the institutions, structures, attitudes, and beliefs that limit the possibilities for other women survivors of sexual violence.

Content.

Despite being the three oldest of the women interviewed, the futures that Jocelyn, Marnie, and Destiny Star imagine for themselves are long and filled with an ever-expanding scope of possibility. At the time of the interview, each of these women articulates a deep sense of certainty in the breadth and expansiveness of the possibilities her future holds:

> The biggest thing I think that now I know anything is possible, right? So the possibilities are endless whereas before really there was no possibilities for me, or I didn't see them. There was. There would have been. But I just didn't see them. (Jocelyn)
>
> I mean my life is filled with endless possibilities now, right? You know? Like, I know I can do just about anything. Like, I do. I wouldn't be afraid. (Marnie)
>
> I'm very big into making the most of every moment too, and that's one growing edge I have right now. (Destiny Star)

In their descriptions of these "endless possibilities," each of the women gives voice to specific possible selves toward which they are working. For Jocelyn, these possible selves include continuing her education and getting a PhD. For Marnie, these possible selves include volunteering in a third world country, embracing being a grandmother, and "continu[ing] to help people in one capacity or another." For Destiny Star, these possible selves include writing a play, organizing a self-defence workshop for women, and continuing to be involved in social justice work in her community. Beyond these more immediate future plans, these women hold visions of

their hoped-for possible selves into later life: Destiny Star imagines a future possible self in which she and her partner have retired and moved to Newfoundland to fulfill a mutually-held dream of living by the water on a boat. For Marnie, this commitment to and vision of herself as doing something extends far into later life: “Like I anticipate being a really old woman and you know still having a message to give to other women, right? … I’ll have the big dancing light in my eyes, and I’ll still be having tons of fun.”

Agency and Meaning.

Common to descriptions that speak to the breadth and expandability of the possible selves these women imagine for themselves in the future is their consideration of how realistic these future possible selves are to achieve. In these cases, women demonstrate how they have come to see or engaged in a process of meaning-making about their past and current circumstances in ways that have led them to story these obstacles and challenges as motivation for creating a better, more expansive future rather than as a reason to limit that future. In talking about their futures, all the women position themselves as agents in their own future:

> Like, I did not have any choice when I was little. I have a choice now, you know? I have a choice now, you know. I have many choices now, right? … Some days I feel like, “You’re not too bad after all.” And other days I’m like, “Well …” you know, the old tapes play. And so it’s my choice. I can listen to them. Or I can do something to stop them. Sometimes I listen to them for a little bit, and then I say, “But that’s not true.” You know? “That’s not true.” (Marnie)

> And you know what? And I can dream now, or, anything is possible now. Right? I can do anything I set my mind to or my heart is – anything I set my heart. I know I can do anything now. (Jocelyn)
>
> Like, you know, it's that point of complete and utter powerlessness too as you step forward and you keep stepping and accessing resources for yourself or distancing yourself from situations you gradually become empowered by these experiences and then you can arrive on the other side a powerful person. … So it's sort of that journey and the less impact or the more empowered you feel, like, you know, the more the possibilities open up. Like, it's, like, it's so awesome. (Destiny Star)

All three of these women recognize the power of choice is central to their realization of the agency they possess. At the same time, all of them are clear that maintaining agency and a sense of openness to their future and exercising the power of choice is a skill that they must continually cultivate and work on.

While all the women may have seen their futures as unchangeable in the past, they have worked hard and continue to work hard to challenge the limited options previously presented to them and that they held for themselves. At the point of the interview, these women are able to draw on examples of this hard work as a strategy for staying committed to authoring futures on their own terms. Here, Marnie describes how she draws on what she has accomplished to remind herself of the agency and ability she possesses, and that she can draw on to achieve her future goals:

> So for me, you know, just knowing what I've done in relation to trying to heal and the commitment that I made, like, you know, now in retrospect I look back at that and I think, "You're pretty friggin' awesome." Like, you know? You were just a little girl, you know? And you walked through this stuff that

> most people would not ever want to have to walk through, right? … I mean, it was very difficult. … Like, I look back and I think, "That was so difficult. Like, how did you do it? … How did you do it? …" Well, I just put one foot in front of the other. And even when I felt like I wanted to quit, I, I pushed on. I persevered, right? And so, you know when I think about that stuff, I think that's a pretty nice message to be sharing with the world, right?

While Marnie acknowledges that negative thoughts about her self-concept, and especially her intelligence can "still occasionally pop up" and she reports "feeling not good enough sometimes," she can now draw on the wisdom and strength she has collected over the years:

> My first response is to go inside myself, and just feel incredibly worthless, but I don't stay there anymore, and I think that's the difference. When I was younger that was kind of the place that I stayed. Now, once in a blue moon, I visit that place and then I go, "Oh, I don't belong here anymore."

It's clear that as a 53-year old woman, Marnie "belongs" in an emotional and physical space in which a positive self-concept of herself as a strong and resilient woman for whom "anything is possible" is firmly intact.

Like Marnie, Jocelyn is clear that maintaining a more expansive sense of possibility requires ongoing work and vigilance against falling into old patterns. At the time of the interview, Jocelyn is particularly focused on this ongoing work as it relates to her intimate relationships because as she explains, "that's where it still affects me to this day, right? That's where I still need to grow." Speaking more broadly of how she maintains the gains she has experienced and her new openness to the future, Jocelyn, like Marnie, is clear that ongoing work will always be required:

> Because I think it always impacts in some way, and as life goes on and the journey goes on, you discover, you might discover that, 'Oh, I'm off on my thinking here' or 'Oh, here's a trigger. I need to work on that.' So it doesn't stop.

As both Marnie and Jocelyn make clear, although the futures they imagine for themselves are rich in possibility they are also ones in which the impacts of the sexual violence they experienced will not magically disappear.

Destiny Star continues to practice connecting with the agency she holds in working toward desired possible selves, stating the concept of "growing edges" is something meaningful to her:

> I know I have growing edges, and I'm in no way perfect, but you know I am very assertive and you know I'm really good with people, like, so I can pick out good things in me, but I can see where there's potential for change and growth, and we all have it or there'd be no point in living really, if we were all attained perfection at some point really. What would be the point?

While these women demonstrate a strong sense of connectivity in their narratives in terms of how the struggles they have gone through and the lessons they have learned along the way have equipped them with the tools they need know to continue to navigate the impacts of sexual violence, they are also all strongly committed to an analysis of how their understanding of these connections can be helpful to others. In these descriptions, the meaning-making work they have done is such that the women have come to understand their experiences of violence and abuse as catalysts for the possibilities they are imagining for themselves in the future. Jocelyn's experience of sexual abuse has ultimately come to shape her work life in

positive ways, and she, like Marnie, also embraces her role as a helper, in her case working as a counsellor for women who have experienced sexual violence:

> It's [sexual violence] impacted me in a way that I have a passion to do that, I think that, I can see where they're [other survivors of sexual violence] at when – but I can also see the other side of it, and bringing them there is, is a passion that I have. So, how's it going to continue to affect me as far as I am always looking at different ways or thinking, you know, I might need more specialized training in this area, or maybe I need to go back to you know school and do this, or how can I better my skills or how can I grow as a person in this area of my life so that I can help women. So, I think it keeps pushing me to kind of grow in that area.

Destiny Star who does not provide professional counselling but does offer mentorship and guidance to young girls living on the street similarly talks about her future as one in which she will continue to help others. Her ability to help others is an outcome of her experiences of violence which she describes as using "garbage for good."

> Well, once you've overcome sort of these challenges and you've walked through them then you know like the big thing for me is now it's possible for me to use all that sort of garbage for good. Right? That's the big thing. If I hadn't had all those experiences, like from rape, or the ones I had in the ghetto with my pimp, um, you know, I wouldn't be able to help or connect with people in the same way I do cause some people feel more comfortable coming to me and eventually I can talk to them into going to a street outreach worker. … So, and, it gives me that possibility to connect with all these people, and so if I hadn't of overcame that or hadn't been shaped by that, like, you know, and

> I'm a very strong person. Like, that that's what my man said, "You're a very strong woman."

Generativity and Social Change.

As the women describe the possibilities they imagine for themselves in the future and the self-knowledge they draw on in understanding themselves as agents of these futures, they also indicate that the sense of endless possibility they see for their futures is one they want to extend to and nurture with others. While they acknowledge the hard work they have done and the agency they possess, they are also deeply connected to the world around them and recognize the importance of supports and the need for social change. They also deeply believe that future oriented stories of expanding and endless possibility are ones that can be available for all survivors of sexual violence.

In describing their futures, the narratives these women articulate are ones that exhibit a strong focus on and engagement with generativity, and one that is supported by concrete strategies and actions for enacting that generativity. For example, drawing on what she has learned about the importance of "finding other people" to healing and changing the life trajectories of women survivors – "I mean fortunately I found people or they found me. We found each other, and we were able to kind of support each other through the process, right?" – Marnie sees her future as one in which she will continue to provide that support for others:

> Like even if I'm not working – say at 63 for some reason I'm not working … I would still be doing something like volunteering at a soup kitchen, or, you know, I would be doing something, right? Like, that stuff is part of what drives me, what motivates me, and I think that for me, it's really difficult to

> feel sorry for yourself, and sad about your lot in life when you see other people who are really struggling.

Likewise, Jocelyn, now working as a counsellor to support women survivors, describes an important part of her future as one in which she "is always looking at different ways or thinking, you know, I might need more specialized training in this area, or maybe I need to go back to, you know, school and do this, or how can I better my skills, or how can I grow as a person in this area of my life so that I can help women."

It is perhaps Destiny Star's articulation of and concern with generativity that is most compelling in terms of its commitment to creating systemic change for others. Despite the continued marginalization Destiny Star experiences with poverty, housing precarity, mental health challenges, and unemployment, she sees her future as one rich with opportunities for changing the systems that create that marginalization not only for herself but for others. For example, when Destiny Star talks about community services and her involvement in them, she uses the personal pronoun "we" – a language choice that denotes a sense of community and shows that she is concerned not only with her own individual situation but rather with re-shaping the system to support the community more broadly: "Yeah, and we've got wonderful outreach services. It's taken forever, and so, but we are starting to do a lot of work with the Housing First model." It's clear that Destiny Star sees her involvement in community action as a type of "job" that inspires her and in which she finds meaning that she will carry out into the future:

> I really have some exciting stuff going on. Um, I do a lot of work with the Community Action Group on Homelessness. And we're fine-tuning our peer-

advisory group to be more of a working group for people with lived experience.

Underlying this common theme and preoccupation with generativity in their future-oriented narratives is the goal of creating and modeling a new genre of possibility story for women survivors that challenges dominant discourse. For example, Jocelyn's life and the work she does with other survivors becomes a model of possibility – a survivor who through her own process and healing becomes a person that other survivors can look to for a model of what's possible. Recognizing and embracing possibility in Jocelyn's life is not at this point just about individual achievement: recognizing and embracing possibility becomes a subtle politicized act through which she can attempt to create change for survivors of sexual violence. Along these lines, she notes: "Every once in a while I think, 'Geez, maybe I should go back and do my PhD,' you know?"

Like Jocelyn, Marnie offers her life as an example of a more possibility-rich story for survivors of sexual violence. She reflects on the message she feels her life can communicate to other survivors:

> You know, like it's a pretty nice message to share with the world, and that would be the message I would want to share. Not that I am, you know, "Look at me. I'm this loser. with this neon sign on my forehead that says 'fuck up,' you know?" That's not the message that I want to share. The message that I would be wanting to share is that there is hope, but you do have to have a little bit of courage and you have to be willing to persevere, like you have to be like—and I mean fortunately I found people or they found me. We found each other, and we were able to kind of support each other through the process, right?

As she makes clear, survivors have a role to play in cultivating possibility in other survivors. Here she reflects on the importance of a woman who told her she was a "thriver":

> That was so powerful to me when [the conference organizer] said that to me many, many years ago. Like, you know, "Oh, ok. Not that I totally believe you, but thanks, you know?" And, you know, today I could say that, "Oh yeah, I believe I am a thriver." Right? You know? Um, so, I think, yeah, how we speak to each other, the things that we say to each other, the messages that we give to each other as women to empower and encourage, right? You know?

Marnie's role as a helper, as someone passing on this message of hope and possibilities to others is, in closing, a key possible self that she hopes for at the close of the interview:

> I anticipate being a really old woman and you know still having a message to give to other women, right and not one of those bitter people, like, sitting around with the lines around my mouth [laughing] because I'm so unhappy and miserable.

This hoped for possible self, as she makes clear, is hers to realize:

> I figure I say this to, you know, some of the younger women that I spend time with, like, 'You get better. You get bitter or you get better. Kind of your choice? Right? Like you get bitter or you get better.' I prefer to get better. You know?

Compared to the young girl who had "no choice" and no possibility, it is clear and significant that Marnie sees "choice" as a key feature of her life and hers to use toward reaching her hoped for possible selves.

Throughout her interview, Destiny Star offers numerous examples of how she plans to enact generativity and to challenge the attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate sexual violence, and that perpetuate limiting ideas of sexual violence survivors. Referring to her "street kids," Destiny Star explains her commitment to continuing to help girls who have been abandoned by their families and/or the system and helps to protect and support them. Like Marnie and Jocelyn, a significant and important part of Destiny Star's future involves cultivating possibility in other survivors and reminding them of their humanity and potential.

Missy's Future-Oriented Possibility Story

Missy draws on many of the features evident in the future-oriented possibility stories shared by Marnie, Jocelyn, and Destiny Star in terms of breadth and expandability. For instance, she explains her orientation to the future as follows:

> Definitely … excited just to see what happens, what I do with my life, what I do with my experiences. Um, what I – just everything is like super exciting to just think that in 10 years that everything in my life could be, like, *so* different. Like I could be living somewhere else, I could have kids, I could be travelling, I could have a job I never thought I would have. There's just so many things that could happen, and so it's really exciting.

She also makes some preliminary connections between her experience of sexual violence and the person she has become. Like these other women, Missy acknowledges the ongoing work she must engage in to manage the impacts of sexual violence: "I feel like I'm doing a lot better, but then there's some days that I just wish that it, that I could stop thinking of it." However, her description of the future as something "super exciting" in which "many things could happen" is underlined by a positivity and agency similarly expressed by Jocelyn, Marnie, and Destiny Star in her

ability to manage these challenges as they come up. Missy also finds herself drawing on her experience in order to help challenge the limited narratives available to capture sexual violence. She provides an elaborate example of her telling her brother about sexual violence in order to make sure he understands issues of consent, and she imagines herself in the future as the mother of a son whom she will repeatedly talk to about sexual violence and consent: "I definitely want to put the emphasis if I ever have a son on what's ok and not ok, even if it drives him crazy [laughs]."

Despite sharing many of the qualities of the future-oriented stories that describe a sense of endless possibility in the future, when examined in the context of her overall story of possibility this final part told in her future-oriented possibility story shows itself to be less markedly connected to or shaped by her experience of sexual violence than those of Marnie, Jocelyn, and Destiny Star. In telling her future-oriented possibility story, for example, she maintains a logical and strategic stance similar to the one she had articulated holding early on in her life. Here, she explains in a matter-of-fact way a plan for her future that has been little changed by her experience of sexual violence:

> I definitely hope to – even if I don't have my masters by within the next 10 years – like, I'm hoping to. I said that if after my education degree, I don't get a full-time teaching time right away I'm going to supply teach and take my masters like online or something. Um, so that's that. That's the goal for that. And if I do get a teaching job right away, I'll teach for a bit and see how it goes and then go from there.

Again, Missy's ability to continue to nurture a sense of endless possibility as she looks toward her future following sexual violence is in no means meant to minimize her experience, and the courage and resilience she demonstrates in seeking

support, reporting sexual violence, and continuing to pursue her goals. At the same time, in this sense, Missy's future-oriented possibility story of endless possibility offers an example through which it is possible to again witness how the provision of meaningful support in the immediate aftermath of sexual violence that validates a survivor's experience can play a role in ensuring that her relationship to possibility and her hopes for the future also remain intact.

Future-Oriented Stories of Pragmatic Possibility

In the future-oriented possibility stories they author, two (Lucine and Shauna) of the women adopt a pragmatic attitude in describing their sense of possibility for the future. These future-oriented stories of pragmatic possibility stories are more measured than those told by women who see the future as one of endless possibility. While the participants who author these stories identify possible selves, these selves are ones that are primarily grounded in the concerns and goals the participants hold for their more immediate futures rather than those many years from the present. In describing these possible selves and futures, women identify a range of possible selves. However, these are often ones that reflect their current preoccupations with meeting their basic needs and overcoming the challenges they face in the domains of employment, education, economic security, and relationships as a result of sexual violence. The circumscribed breadth and expandability of these possible futures is also evident in the general and vague terms in which these futures and the processes necessary to achieve them are described, and the pragmatic quality to the types or content of possible selves imagined. As compared to the possible futures described by the women who tell stories of endless possibility, the future possible selves as imagined within these possibility stories may contain some evidence of hopes or goals that reflect a commitment to pre-sexual violence values and purpose but are primarily

characterized by a practical focus on creating a future in which their basic needs are met. As women tell these stories about their future, it becomes clear that the measured and pragmatic approach they adopt to their future reflects a tentative (though emerging) connection with their own agency as authors of these stories, and their belief in their own ability to intervene in and transform previously held stories that characterized possibility as limiting or fixed.

While the women have begun to cultivate tools and strategies that might help them create the futures they imagine for themselves, they are still figuring these out and are often struggling to confront systemic and structural barriers that reinforce or complicate their efforts. In these stories, women are starting to piece together and make meaning of the connection between sexual violence and their future possibilities, but they also continue to struggle with its impacts and are still concerned with or "in" the sexual violence story. Like the women who author endless possibility stories, these women also place great value on the supports in their lives; however, their relationship to these supports is one more of heavy reliance rather than mutual sharing or giving of support, and they see ongoing reliance of these supports as a big part of their future stories. While these women see their futures as ones in which they will help others, they are still figuring out what an alternative, more possibility-rich future might look like for themselves rather than being at a point where they might advocate for and model new future-oriented possibility stories for others in the way that those who tell stories of endless possibility are equipped to do.

Content.

The women who tell pragmatic possibility stories about their future focus in these stories on possibilities located in the not-too-distant future, and that are reflective of and still deeply connected to their present-day concerns and

preoccupations. For example, while Lucine is clear that "there *is* a future" there, and Shauna admits that she "think[s] about [the future] all the time" both are still unsure of what these futures might contain and the extent of the possibilities therein:

> But, my future, I'm just trying to think. I don't know what's going to happen. My goal is at least start part-time somewhere. Where? I'm not sure. I need to talk to the people at [employment services] about that, about what I want and have them help establish things. Because I'm going to need things. (Lucine)

> Yeah, yeah, and I just want to be able to do what I want, and I want to not let anyone tie me down. And probably things will change. You know, like right now I'm 19, and I really don't want kids 'cause the whole thought of it really just scares me, and probably when I'm 30—what if that changes? (Shauna)

As these passages demonstrate, although both Lucine and Shauna have ideas about what they might want for the future, their language reveals a level of ambiguity about their agency and ability to imagine a future of expanding possibilities ("I don't know what's going to happen," "I'm not sure," "what if that changes?"). As they elaborate on the possible selves they hold for themselves in the future, they articulate stories about the future that are marked primarily by a pragmatic and measured focus on what they might need to meet their basic needs, as well as a tentative introduction of some other hopes, such as traveling, owning a car, and helping others:

> What I hope for the most is being able to live on my own. … Living on my own, having my own job. I'd like a pet. I'd like to be able to visit people. And really the end all be all is to help others. To continue doing that. Stay connected with people I care about. I don't have grandiose goals in terms of changing the world, maybe anymore, but I kind of realize that the most

important thing I can do is help people one on one because helping people one on one you make them able to help other people. (Lucine).

Travel the world with a bunch of money, no kids, no husband [laughs]. … Nothing to tie me down. No commitments. And, I'd probably have a vehicle, and a super awesome job that lets me do whatever I want. I see myself being content and happy, and I see myself with strong relationships, and I see myself—in 10 years I see myself being able to wake up every day in the morning and actually want to, you know, like want to wake up, and want to get up and want to live like and do things. I mean it's like that today, I mean sometimes I have my moments, but I want to be, I just want to be really, really happy. Like just I don't know if that's a really unrealistic goal or what, but I know like you take the bad with the good and obviously I can't be happy all the time. I just want to be like happy, like just pure like from the inside no one can ruin this for me kind of thing, you know? (Shauna)

While the women do articulate some specific ideas of themselves in the future – someone who is able to live on their own, someone who owns a car, someone who has a bunch of money – the clarity and focus of these possible selves remains blurry. Shauna, for instance, describes a possible self in which she is someone with "a super awesome job that lets me do whatever I want" but exactly what that job is remains unclear. Similarly, Lucine also imagines a possible self who "ha[s] my own job" but struggles to articulate what that job might be. In contrast to the future-oriented stories of endless possibility, the possibility stories that women who adopt a more pragmatic approach to future possibility focus more on the feelings, values, or emotions they hope that future contains – "stay[ing] connected to people," "helping others, "wanting to wake up every day in the morning and actually want to … get up and want to live

and do things," "be[ing] happy." They also maintain a cautious orientation toward the future in which they understand or acknowledge themselves to be living lives that are not what they most imagined for themselves: Lucine's future is not one in which she is living out the "grandiose goals in terms of changing the world," she once held, for example. Shauna acknowledges that "I can't be happy all the time."

Agency and Meaning.

As these women describe their sense of possibility in the future, the measured and circumscribed content of the possibilities therein reflects the cautious way in which they approach their agency in these futures, and their ability to shape these futures in the ways that they want. In the above passages, we can see how their future-oriented descriptions contain questions or doubts throughout: "Like I don't know if that's an unrealistic goal or what?" (Shauna); "What if that changes?" (Shauna); "I don't know what's going to happen" (Lucine); "I need to talk to the people … about that, about what I want" (Lucine). In part, the possible futures that these women imagine and the route to achieving these futures are clouded by the practical struggles they are facing in the present that make it difficult to imagine the endless possibilities available to some of the other women. As Lucine attempts to describe her future in the following passages, her future-oriented narrative is itself interrupted by reminders of the struggles she is facing with sleeping, student loans, and paying off a debt to her parents:

> But, my future, I'm just trying to think. I don't know what's going to happen. My goal is to at least start part-time somewhere. Where? I'm not sure. I need to talk to the people at [employment services] about that, about what I want and have them help me establish things. Because I'm going to need things. *My sleep schedule still completely fucked up.* … My parents will help me out, but I

> do have student loan. It's only 24,000 dollars, which isn't bad, especially because it's only my masters, but I do also owe my parents $7000 because they bailed out my line of credit, and I don't like having those debts. … I do not. Um, so that is weighing on my mind*, which reminds me I need to tell student loans, I can't pay it yet*. (italics added)

Likewise, as Shauna talks about the hope she has of returning to university, she too gets caught up in the practical realities that stand in the way: "it's just my job and financial situation which is preventing my from pursuing it."

Despite the barriers that both women articulate, they are at the time in the interview actively engaged in activities that are geared toward allowing them more agency and flexibility in determining their future paths. While Shauna hopes to go back to university, she has in the meantime decided to pursue training to be a Personal Support Worker – a job that she describes brings her a lot of joy, and that can provide her with the income she needs to potentially return to university; she starts journaling and writes down her "goals" for the future, and she repeatedly emphasizes her desire to engage actively in the process of expanding her future: "I'm ready to learn and move forward."

Lucine, likewise, provides some concrete examples of her growing ability to move toward a more expansive future even in the face of continued practical and systemic barriers of living on social assistance. At one point in the interview she provides a moving example of her persistence despite constant frustrations she faces as she tries to start swimming at a local pool to improve her health but finds she is unable to afford the membership at the pool: "I felt a lot of depression over that, 'cause I'm like I wanted to do it but I failed again." With the help of an occupational therapist, however, Lucine describes how she is able to figure out an alternative that

will allow her to go swimming. Lucine describes this incident as one that demonstrates how she is learning the process of finding creative alternatives as one she can use to pursue her goals in the future: "So I'm still going to need to try to frame it differently, but just the fact I still had a downer day, I still felt like shit, but it's the fact that I can still think about. … the fact that it's not the end all be all. I can feel down, but I already did think about what I could do otherwise." Like Shauna's new practice of writing down her goals and "resetting herself," Lucine's efforts to "think about what I could do otherwise" reveal emerging practices in connecting with a sense of agency and resourcefulness in realizing the futures they imagine for themselves, and in honouring their right to these futures. As Lucine comments speaking of getting caught in patterns that are limiting: "Sometimes, I can break out of it now. Sometimes I can go, 'You're just anxious. You're not a failure. Keep trying.'"

An important part of cautiously opening themselves up to the idea of more expansive and self-authored futures is the meaning-making the women are engaging with in terms of the connections they make between their experiences of sexual violence and the futures they imagine for themselves. Thus, one of the elements that separates these possibility stories from those told by women in the final type of future-oriented story of limited possibility is their growing commitment to finding strategies that will help them create the futures they want, namely by starting to find some evidence of their own agency in the past which might help them in the future, and in imagining future selves in which they do possess that agency. While being honest about the immediate challenges she experiences with PTSD and anxiety – challenges that she imagines will continue to play a role in defining and shaping her future – Lucine is also starting to understand how the sexual violence she experienced

has equipped her with the knowledge and empathy to better understand herself and others:

> Going through what I did with [my abuser] opened up an ability for me to empathize with people with these problems, with anxiety, with depression, with post-traumatic stress that I didn't really understand myself. That going through all these things made me a better person and able to grasp things that my family, the rest of my family does not get. And it's through that compassion that I've been able to help a lot of other people."

Similar to Marnie, Jocelyn and Destiny Star, Lucine explains how she is working to see her experiences of sexual violence as opening up new possibilities for her. She elaborates: "I don't enjoy what happened to me, but the possibilities I have now wouldn't exist with what I went through with him then. Like, and the ability to empathize, the ability to even be kind to myself came out those experiences."

Shauna too speaks about how although she is still struggling with the impact of what happened to her and is still very much in the process of meaning-making, she is also coming to recognize or understand her experiences as ones that have helped her connect with new or different possibilities than she once imagined:

> I just try to remind myself I would never, ever change anything because it makes me who I am today, and like it does cross my mind daily but I just try to let it pass, like let it cross. Usually with every other thought I'm over-analyzing it and doing all these things. But with that, it's just something that happened, and it's weird to think that it's a part of who I am, but it is.

Generativity and Social Change.

Similar to the future-oriented stories of endless possibility, the future-oriented stories told by Shauna and Lucine contain "helper" possible selves:

> But what really matters to me the most, and I've learned this, is that I love helping people. Helping people is a fundamental part of who I am as a person. It makes me feel satisfied. Nothing makes me happier than knowing I've helped someone else out. (Lucine)

Like the other participants, Shauna sees herself having a helping possible future self; she sees her caseworker as an example of the type of role she would like to see herself in:

> Being able to have that not authority or power but trust from these individuals who are so broken and addicted to drugs, like come in for help, like you have that trust. They come to you. They want to share thing with you. They want you to help them solve their issues. I want to be the person that, like, they come to. I want to be someone that can help them, and help them work through their stuff, and maybe even share some of my experiences if that helps them. And, like, just be able to do what they did for me, you know? Like return the favour, I guess.

While their commitment and desire to helping others in the future aligns with the theme of helping others that is prominent in the stories of endless possibility, Lucine and Shauna's future-oriented stories show that they have yet to take concrete steps toward engaging in these helping possible selves as they are themselves still working through their own struggles and reliant on their supports. In the same way that they have remained cautious and measured in other elements of their possibility stories, the women in this category are still struggling to articulate new stories about surviving sexual violence that challenge dominant discourse. Shauna and Lucine are still coming to terms with the ways their possibility stories of sexual violence have been shaped by dominant discourse in ways that also shapes the options they imagine

for their futures. Lucine, for example, talks about how she is starting to understand that some of the pressures that she's feeling to achieve certain futures or selves are merely societal expectations that she can choose not to buy into: "So realizing sometimes solutions or expectations of society don't work for you and that's ok 'cause you can change them to make them work for you." In this sense, these women seem on the cusp of claiming new future-oriented possibility stories for themselves as survivors; however, the persistent practical and systemic barriers that they face and include in their possibility stories serve as important reminders of the ways in which larger systems can collude with dominant discourse to deny survivors possibility-rich futures.

Future-Oriented Stories of Limited Possibility

The future-oriented possibility stories the final two women (Claire and Sarah) author are ones of "limited possibility." The future-oriented possibility stories in this category are marked by an undercurrent of ambivalence and skepticism about the coming years. Unlike the other future-oriented possibility stories, these possibility stories reveal uncertainty not only about what possibilities might exist in the future but in the existence of these futures themselves. Reluctant to discuss their future hopes and dreams, these participants identify a limited range of possible selves; when they do, these possible selves are focused only on what needs to be accomplished in the immediate future to continue to survive. What longer-term possibilities that extend beyond the next few days are vague, and for the most part considered increasingly limited and fixed. As these women tell their future-oriented possibility stories, it is evident that the precarity and ambivalence that characterizes these future stories is rooted in the sense that the women have little to no agency in shaping these futures, and that as such a future of limited and contracting possibilities is fixed. The

precarious economic, employment, and relational contexts in which their lives have and are unfolding, and the limited access to meaningful supports for healing further exacerbate women's lack of agency to change their circumstances and look toward more possibility-rich futures. While these women – like all the women interviewed – have at this point connected with some form of professional support, unlike the others they remain largely skeptical of how or if these supports will assist them in creating alternative futures and have seen only minimal change so far. For these women, the process of meaning-making geared toward understanding the connections between their past experiences of sexual violence and their future possibilities is limited only to understandings of how these experiences have curtailed the futures they had once hoped for. While these women are able to identify a few general ways their experiences have strengthened their resilience, their future-oriented possibility stories do not include examples of how to put that resilience into practice in defining their futures, such as those that are evident in the future-oriented stories of endless possibility. In this sense, the women in this category see their futures as ones that reflect and play out limiting versions of possibility as told in dominant discourse; indeed, where these women do describe future selves with clarity it is when they describe with conviction the likelihood of themselves and other women continuing to experience sexual violence.

Content.

For the two women who author future-oriented stories of limited possibility, identifying future possible selves or describing the future in general is something that is distressing and uncomfortable; not only do the women resist identifying the possibilities in that future but they are deeply skeptical and ambivalent about the existence of any future and/or it being something of concern to them:

> I don't really think much about the future. I don't, and I think I don't know maybe the lack of possibility, like, maybe I don't know. Honestly, like, right now I just sort of keep it with where I am now. (Claire)
>
> For my future, I mean, I don't know how, like at this point, like in all honesty looking forward I, my, my dreams for the future have changed from where I was even three years ago." (Sarah)

The stilted language, broken sentences, and expressions of uncertainty in both the above passages suggest that Claire and Sarah's sense of future is unclear. The lack of clarity and ambivalence Claire and Sarah hold about their futures is also evident in their attempts to articulate the possible selves they have for themselves in the future. In both cases, the women focus predominantly on their concerns for the very immediate future and limit their descriptions to futures in which they are able to survive and meet their most basic needs of food, clothing, personal care, and freedom from violence.

Claire is only able to describe the future in terms of what she does *not* see as happening:

> And now, I'm not, you know, expecting that I'm going to be walking home and someone's going to jump me, and I'm not going to expect and I'm going to wake up and my underwear is on the other side of the room, and I'm not going to expect that I'm going to overdose on a bunch of drugs, or wake up somewhere that I was obviously left to die.

Sarah likewise offers a circumscribed description of her immediate future:

> pretty much my job every day is just to stay healthy and try to live a good life, I guess … They're [her counsellors and support people] still pretty much on board trying to get me stabilized for like self-care and, … eating, dressing, and

showering, which – ok, well I haven't eaten, but I've done all the other stuff today.

For Claire and Sarah longer-term possibilities that exist beyond the very immediate future are only barely visible. In the following passage, Claire identifies some general hopes of getting a job and a place to live but remains unconvinced about when or how that might be possible:

> Well, I mean now, I kind of like I want to get like a permanent job, get a place within in five years. I don't think I can make this happen in 2 years, maybe 5 years, maybe 10, maybe think about having like a family. I don't know. I feel like there's more I can do now, but it's just the whole like getting there.

Sarah, likewise, reveals the ambiguity she experiences about her future – and the sense of fear that ambiguity provokes for her:

> I mean going forward, I don't know what I'm going to do with my life. I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to work again, which is a very scary prospect for me. I guess, even for you, for women our generation the idea that I may not be able to work. I'm 30 years old, going on permanent di[sability]— I mean a few months ago I couldn't even say these sentences without freaking out because it was so terrifying.

As Claire and Sarah struggle to author their future-oriented possibility stories their narratives reveal clues suggesting the distress they feel in doing so, the lack of thought they have given to their futures, and their efforts at self-soothing as they come to terms in the context of the interview with their fear, ambivalent, and precariousness of their futures. As if to apologize for her uncertainty about the future, Claire notes, for instance, "I know I should be thinking about your [sic] future," and then goes onto to describe what the life a future child she might have would look like:

> Like they would have food, and they would have a place to live, and they would have both of their parents in their life who would completely love and support them, and they'll have people focused on them, and have them as their priority, and they're going to, like, you know, if they want to join a club, they're going to join the club and they're not going to be, like, worried. They're going to be worried about as little as they can. Like, when I was younger I was worried about money, and I was worried about my mom, and I was worried about my sisters, and I want them only have to worry about themselves, and be able to talk to me and tell me about what's worrying them and I can help them. You know, like they're going to have enough money to live on; not enough money for them to be spoiled. They're not going to be an only kid because I don't want them to be spoiled, like, they're going to have the best life possible.

As this passage suggests, for Claire to speak explicitly about her own hoped-for possible selves as a good mother, a person who has enough money to meet her basic needs, and a person who does not live with worry but in fact has "the best life possible" is still too difficult to imagine, or too risky. While she may not be able to experience these possibilities herself she may be able to offer them to a child.

Sarah, likewise, at one point in her possibility story seems to shift her mode of narration to soothe herself and counter the negative future story she has been telling as if again to apologize for the difficult realities she has been forced to navigate as a result of sexual violence:

> But overall I mean I am, I'm a well-supported person. I'm an educated person. I know how to get help. I can advocate for myself. I just, I worry about the people who don't. But like, I mean, my future will be ok. [laughs]. It will be

> alright. That's – I'm like, "Oh man, that sounds so…" It will be alright. … Yeah, it will be an ok place. I think that there's still going to be ups and downs, probably a lot of downs.

Like Claire, Sarah shifts her focus to a concern for the future of others who may not be able to advocate for themselves in the same way she can, and to suggest that she can be satisfied with a future that is "ok" and "alright" and characterized by "probably a lot of downs."

In part, the strategy that Claire and Sarah use of focusing on describing their fears or hopes for the futures of other people underlines their overwhelming sense that both describe of the possibilities in their own life while not only already limited are continuing to contract. In speaking of her educational possible selves, 19-year old Claire observes the following about her future education and ability to be supported by others:

> I mean it kind of feels like this door is closing. I always thought I'd go back to high school and finish it, and obviously I don't think I can actually go to high school anymore. I'd have to do the adult alternative measures thing, and go through there, and ah, I mean I don't know it kind of means I can't really rely on other people.

The reality of this sense of future possibilities as contracting is most dramatically embodied in Sarah's admission that the agoraphobia she lives with has progressed to the point that she is essentially housebound:

> I'll be straight up honest, like, I still can't leave the house alone. I can't handle stress of any kind. … I feel like I'm a complete drain on society, and I'm on disability, completely useless, not contributing to the world at all … I'm very

> unhappy with how my life is right now, and I, I wonder how different it would have been.

Agency and Meaning.

As these women describe their future possible selves, the ambivalence and precariousness of these futures – emphasized by the sense that they aren't even sure if it's safe to imagine futures for themselves and do so by describing the futures of other people – is further demonstrated by the almost total lack of agency the women express in creating the futures they want, and, most importantly, in challenging or shifting the futures that they believe are available to them at this point in their lives. As the passages above demonstrate, the future for Claire and Sarah is full of questions that at this point they feel they are unable – or do not have a right – to answer for themselves. They state: "I don't know if I'm every going to be able to work again," "I don't know what I'm going to do with my life" (Sarah) and "I don't even know when I wake up if I'm going to have a good day or a bad day ….," "I don't think I can actually go to high school anymore" (Claire). For Claire, having agency to define or shape her future is a potentially emerging concept that is just starting to take shape. While Claire knows she is "doing things differently" when it comes to her future she is not able to articulate exactly what those 'things' are other than to say they are "things not in some ways slightly connected to my death":

> Well, yeah, I am doing things differently. But I don't know exactly how to explain it. This is actually is really, really new to me. … Yeah, like doing things that are not in some ways slightly connected to my death. … It just feels more like doing nothing. That's just what it feels like. So it's weird to hear you say doing things differently because it just feels like nothing.

To be sure, the feeling of "doing nothing" in the context of Claire's story has the potential to be the starting point of a more well-defined and claimed agency in authoring her own future; at the same time, however, she is still at the beginning of this process and that without access to the necessary supports may struggle to do so.

Sarah, likewise, adopts a detached attitude or stance toward the agency she has had and will continue to have in shaping her future. In her descriptions, Sarah attributes her inability to achieve the possibilities she once imagined for herself to fate or "life":

> Like, I, I am, I am nowhere where I am right now in my life then what I thought I would be 5 years ago, 10 years ago, as a child. I would never have imagined that I would be 30 years old living off of disability, trying to figure out—I thought I would be an archivist by now at some school managing some multi-million archive with a husband and 2 perfect kids. [sigh] But, life didn't really send me down that path. It sent me down this different path, where I just learned to struggle with health and mental health issues, and always be the strong Sarah.

While Claire seems to be in the process of connecting to a practice of "doing things differently," the compounding impacts of years of trauma have left Sarah doubtful of the possibility of any sort of flexibility for her future to be anything other than what "life" has dictated for her:

> You only have so many experiences before you're like, um, "Nope, I know my place in the world now. It's no longer this bright, shiny I'm going to go to university and I can do whatever I want because I'm a Canadian woman and I'm going to have an education, and, the world is my oyster." It's like, "No,

> there's what's possible now with what I have in my life, and how I've grown, and become a person."

Another important distinction that sets these possibility stories apart from the others is the lack of meaning-making Claire and Sarah have been able to do in terms of understanding or storying the connections between their experiences of sexual violence and their future orientation. Again, in this regard Claire seems to be on the cusp of staring to put some of these pieces together, and can identify some subtle changes in herself:

> I'm not quite sure exactly where the turning point was, like, I feel like it was more of a gradual thing, like, I there wasn't just a day where I felt stronger or less scared but turning back around to the point I was even last year I realize like I'm not, I'm not the same person.

For Claire, these shifts and signs of resilience and understanding of how her experiences of sexual violence have made her "stronger, "more understanding, and "tougher," are still at the same time very much rooted in a sense of needing to survive in her immediate environment rather than an understanding that might help her shape a future that she wants.

For Sarah, on the other hand, the work of meaning-making is entirely new, and she is only beginning to recognize that there could in fact *be* a connection between her experiences of sexual violence and her future orientation:

> I've been completely blindsided by the—I always considered myself 2 years ago to be very knowledgeable about mental health. On the board, on the page. I was *completely* blindsided. Like, "Wow! You know what? I've never dealt with any of the trauma from that abusive relationship, and now it all makes sense why I'm having these panic attacks." … And it was, like, kind of the

> shock, of, like, how did I miss that? How did I not realize how deeply that abuse impacted me, and how I function, and who I am?

Generativity and Social Change.

For Claire and Sarah it appears that the ambivalence and precarity of the future-oriented possibility stories they author, and the limited meaning-making, agency, and expandability they articulate may also be informed by the relatively precarious social connections they have to others, and particularly to professional supports. While all the other women talk at length about the important role formal and informal supports have played in helping them get to the point they are at today, and the role they imagine these supports having in their lives in the future, Sarah's and Claire's possibility stories in general, and, in particular, their future-oriented possibility stories are populated by a cast of people markedly different than those of the other women. Although Claire and Sarah have connected with professional supports at the time of the interview, their hopes for these connections and the ways these supports might assist them in creating the futures they want reveal a level of skepticism that is different from the other women, all of whom offer extensive praise for the professional supports they have in their life. Here Claire describes her experience in a drug treatment centre, and her ongoing care:

> I went into rehab, and ah, I can't say that I stopped doing drugs and stuff altogether right after that, but it's, I kind of slowed down quite a bit, and when I stopped doing hard drugs all the time I was around a lot, quite a bit of a different group of people. … I'm supposed to take medication for it but the medication makes me feel really numb, and I don't get really mad or sad, but I also I don't feel happy.

Here Sarah offers a description revealing her reluctance and even fear about working with supports:

> Where now, like I as I said, like I'm currently going through treatment for depression, PTSD, like all stuff, and it makes a bit harder because there's an anxiety of, like, again, I now have a psychiatrist, clinician, an occupational therapist, and my psychiatrist is actually a guy, which it took me a while to warm up to that idea, but I didn't have an option for a female psychiatrist, cause it's so hard Right? But now, that's just how, like, part of me—I wish I could just be like, "Oh, it's fine. It's just one guy." But it does colour your experience. It does make you distrustful because there were no warning sings.

For Claire and Sarah, the notion of helping others is still quite distant although it is present. Claire notes that "I actually find now that, now when I have a friend that's been in this situation that they often come to me;" however, she struggles to explain why others might see her as a safe person to talk to: "I have no idea. If, but, ah, just this week I've had three or four people come up to, like, just talk to me." Claire is ambivalent about taking on this role of supportive listener:

> I like to help people but like there's just sometimes where like if I hear another person's problem I might actually explode, but I find that I can actually talk to them and help them out in some way, like, I can listen to them.

Much like Claire, the people that Sarah is connected to are friends who have also experienced sexual violence. Her interview is filled with references to other women survivors; however, unlike the women who tell future-oriented stories of endless possibility who see these friendships and opportunities to connect with other survivors as opportunities to recognize possibility-rich narratives and resilience, Sarah experiences the extensive histories of sexual violence she sees in almost everyone she

knows or surrounds herself with as evidence of the harm and inevitability of sexual violence in women' lives. While it is clear that sexual violence has shaped the futures of all of the women interviewed, it is striking that in the future-oriented stories of limited possibility, the women's narratives are marked by certainty and clarity when they describe future sexual assault victims' possible selves. In the following passage, for instance, the shift in tone in Sarah's description of her future from ambivalence and uncertainty ("I don't know," etc.) to certainty ("For sure") when she describes the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence in the future is striking:

> Do I think I will ever experience sexual violence again? *For sure*. … I hope that it in the future that I'm going to deal with it better than I have previously, but it depends because every experience is different. Maybe I will get actually violently raped. That would suck a lot. [Laughs]. … Um, but, yeah, no, that's an interesting thing, but like even like, ok I've reached this pinnacle of my life and I've gotten through all these experiences, but no I still think it's a 100% possible that I'll walk out of the house tomorrow and a man will come out of an alley way and hold a knife to my throat.

In part, the limited possibilities that Sarah imagines for her future are underlined by a very real assessment of the threat of sexual violence in women's lives; one that she is only able to avoid by never leaving her house. For Claire, and particularly for Sarah, the idea of other future oriented possibility stories that do not unfold as stories filled with additional harm and suffering are too outside the realm of their experience to even begin to imagine.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This study focuses on the relationship between sexual violence and possibility in the lives of women who have experienced sexual violence. In its broadest terms, this study aimed to answer the following research question: What are women's understandings of the relationship between personal experiences of sexual violence and possibility in their lives? More specifically, in this study, I sought to understand 1) how women define and describe possibility; 2) in what ways women understand sexual violence shapes their relationship to possibility; 3) what strategies women utilize to address the impact of sexual violence on their relationship with possibility; and 4) what women's understandings about the relationship between sexual violence and possibility can teach us about how better to respond to and address sexual violence on both an individual and societal level.

In this chapter, I begin by providing a summary of the findings presented in the previous chapter. I then look more deeply at two areas addressed in the analysis. First, I engage critically with dominant rape and victimization discourse on women's storying of possibility, and I consider how women's possibility stories both reflect and resist these discourses. Secondly, I situate women's possibility stories as vital records of the significant though often overlooked cumulative effect of sexual violence on women's economic security, and I discuss the value of this particular focus in these accounts in resisting dominant rape and victimization discourse.

Summary of Findings

To organize their telling of their relationship with possibility, its variations across the lifespan, and the significance of sexual violence in shaping this relationship, women invoked various types of possibility stories that reflected different periods in their lives and the various relationships to possibility therein. In

these stories, possibility emerged as a complex, multi-layered concept that was reflective of the social contexts in which women lived and that was shaped particularly by gender norms and expectations embedded within dominant patriarchal discourses. Sexual violence was one factor that showed itself to intersect with and shape women's possibility stories in distinct ways reflective of the complex social context within which sexual violence occurs and is understood.

In telling their foundational possibility stories, women provided important contextual information about their childhood and adolescence and the messages and lessons they learned about possibility in these contexts. For the women interviewed, the foundational possibility stories they told fell into three types: 1) stories in which possibility is limited; 2) stories in which possibility is constrained by family expectations; and 3) stories in which possibility is nurtured and embraced. The qualities and characteristics emphasized in these stories revealed themselves to reflect a variety of contextual factors, including socio-economic status, family beliefs and values, and cultural expectations. Common to all the foundational possibility story types was the realization that there existed a complex set of societal and familial expectations and pressures against which they would be measured and within which they would negotiate their future. Women's foundational possibility stories thus showed themselves to be important starting points through which to explore the ways in which women's relationship with possibility is filtered through the lens of gender and numerous other intersecting factors from a young age. For women to talk about their relationship to possibility they also needed to talk about their social location and positionality. Thus, even in these early stories, the women interviewed resisted and complicated simplistic notions of "seizing 'possibility'" as solely a matter of individual will and tenacity; while some of the women reflected on the hopes and

dreams they remembered having for themselves as young girls, it was clear that even from a young age they were aware that their ability to realize these hopes and dreams was interwoven with social contexts and norms over which they had varying levels of control.

Women's foundational possibility stories performed important groundwork for understanding the complexity of women's understanding of their relationship to possibility generally. However, the pervasiveness of sexual violence and harm emerging as a central theme in these stories established it as a defining experience and reality with which all the women needed to contend as young girls and adolescents exploring and imagining what might be possible for them in their lives. In their foundational stories, the women made explicit links between sexual violence and possibility. For some, sexual violence was a foundational lens through which they understood their identity and sense of self for as long as they could remember. For others, sexual violence was another in a number of experiences that affirmed and solidified broader societal messages about the importance of conforming to gender norms and expectations, particularly the requirement of pleasing others. For others, sexual violence marked a radical interruption in the path they were trying to forge toward what had been expansive idea about what might be possible for them. In all cases, their relationship to possibility was inextricably linked with sexual violence such that as they entered adulthood the hopes and dreams the young women held for themselves were already being shaped by the violence they had been subjected to within a socio-cultural context that showed little concern or interest in the suffering they were experiencing as a result of that violence or its impact on their lives in the future.

In the second period of their possibility stories, the women further developed their story about the relationship between sexual violence and possibility by providing a retrospective account of this relationship over the previous years. Interestingly, women's retrospective possibility story during this period from post-assault to the present followed a similar trajectory, albeit with individual variations along the way, that hinged upon the point at which women were able to access support: the trajectory of this second period of the possibility story moved from 1) post-assault to 'rock bottom'; to 2) 'rock bottom' to getting support; to 3) getting support to the present. In describing these periods in their lives, women deepened their account of the relationship between sexual violence and possibility as it looked at these different periods.

In describing the period post-assault to 'rock bottom' – a period common to all the women's stories in which they were unable to access external support and were required to confront and manage the effects of sexual violence on their own – women told stories of diminishing possibility. Not only did these accounts outline the myriad of effects of sexual violence in their lives but they also provided an analysis of the specific ways the systems and institutions that women were living in colluded to support these narratives of diminishing possibility. In particular, women pointed to the ways in which they were unable to name their experiences of sexual violence or safely speak about them. Diminished possibility was reflected in the subsequent shame, guilt, and fear of further violence they endured when unable to access meaningful and supportive assistance early on and the necessity of utilizing survival strategies that often moved them further away from their hoped-for possible selves. In this sense, women explained how in addition to sexual violence itself, the ongoing secondary impacts and victimization they experienced during this time played a

significant role in their understanding of and relationship with possibility in their lives. Within their stories of diminishing possibility, women shared powerful examples of how rape-supportive culture not only further contributed to their diminished self-concept but also created additional barriers for them pursuing their educational, professional, and relational goals. The challenges and failures that women experienced in the domains of education, employment, and relationship reinforced the negative messages embedded within dominant, rape-supportive discourse about their worth, value, and lives creating a difficult-to-escape cycle within which the telling of alternative, possibility-rich stories about the future became increasingly difficult to imagine and achieve.

In the second part of these retrospective accounts, all the women focused on a key turning point in which they were finally able to get access to some form of support, albeit only after they hit what Sarah referred to as "rock bottom." Except for Missy, for all the women interviewed, the story of diminishing possibility culminated at this "rock bottom" or crisis moment in which it became untenable for them to continue as they had been. Despite the traumatic elements of these 'rock bottom' moments they were also instances that connected them with supportive others. Supports for the women interviewed took different forms and speak to the myriad of ways that sexual violence had affected their lives during the period prior to being able to access support. They include accessing individual and/or group counselling; attending in-patient drug and alcohol treatment centres; seeking support from occupational therapists, employment, and social services; and identifying supportive family and friends. Connecting with supportive others finally provided a space for women to name their experience of sexual violence, and, as such, marked a turning point at which they began what was a long and complex process of repairing their

relationship to possibility and unpacking the story of diminishing possibility in which they had been living.

In the third part of their retrospective accounts, women told stories of repairing possibility. While this process was unique for each woman, and the women interviewed were at various stages in this work, there emerged four tasks that seemed central to re-examining and creating a more generative relationship with possibility. These included: 1) revising understandings of self in relationship to sexual violence; 2) testing out new possibilities; 3) claiming new possible identities; and 4) confronting new realities and grieving lost possible selves. As described by the women interviewed the work of repairing possibility was not linear: women engaged in these tasks at different times and in different areas of their lives. For instance, while three of the women had made important headway in re-envisioning the possibilities they saw for themselves in the domain of work and career, they were still in the early stages of this work as it related to intimate relationships in their lives. Moreover, the women made clear that the work of 'repairing' their relationship with possibility was not necessarily about restoring the status quo and achieving the possibilities they had held for themselves prior to experiencing sexual violence. Some women had reached a point in this repair work where they were able to articulate examples of the ways they had made meaning of the lost possibilities sexual violence had created and had been able to find new possibilities because of it. Nonetheless, women's consistent acknowledgement of lost possibility also demanded that these intangible losses not be overlooked or ignored. Indeed, woven throughout women's storying of "repairing possibility" was an emerging awareness of their experience of sexual violence within a broader socio-cultural context and a desire to contribute in ways that would change this context for others.

The third and final period of women's possibility stories encompasses each woman's conceptualization of what she imagines in her life in the future from the time of the interview, and how or if she sees sexual violence as a factor shaping her upcoming years. The women interviewed authored three types of future-oriented possibility stories: 1) endless possibility; 2) pragmatic possibility; and 3) limited possibility. Future-oriented stories of endless possibility were characterized by an expansive and hopeful approach to the future in which the women saw themselves as competent agents in reaching the goals they set out for themselves and others as generally cooperative and supportive in their attempts to reach these goals. In telling future-oriented stories of pragmatic possibility, women adopted a more measured and practical attitude toward their future that revealed both an expanding idea of what might be possible in their lives but also a cautious awareness of the ways the challenges they had faced in the past and the many barriers they continued to confront might continue to pose problems in the future in ways that could get in the way of them achieving their goals. Future-oriented stories of limited possibility were told by the women who were still in the early stages of healing from sexual violence, and who were preoccupied with the pressures and difficulties of ensuring they could meet their basic needs. Perhaps because of the relative lack of external support these women had received at the point of telling their future-oriented stories in the interviews for this project compared to the other women, they were less likely to communicate clear hopes and goals for the future and had greater difficulty imagining a future in which sexual violence and its effects would not continue to play a significant and defining feature in their everyday lives. Collectively, women's future-oriented possibility stories provided an opportunity to recognize that sexual violence *does* shape women's future, and that women themselves are acutely aware of this impact as another area of

concern that they carry. At the same time, inviting women to share their future-oriented possibility stories also became a way to learn about and document the resilience that women cultivate and the strategies that they identify as necessary to ensure they have the support needed to achieve the sorts of possibility-rich futures that women like Marnie and Jocelyn imagine for themselves. As I will discuss in the reminder of this chapter through a deeper analysis of three key areas emerging from this study's findings, the possibility story as authored by women survivors of sexual violence gives voice to a nuanced and politicized account of what is possible and what is at stake in the fight to end sexual violence.

Possibility Stories as Interventions in Dominant Rape and Victim Discourse

Central to narrative inquiry rooted in social constructionist epistemology is recognition of the influence of social, cultural, and discursive contexts on the stories individuals tell about their lives and experiences (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). As such, in analyzing women's stories about their relationship to possibility it was vital to do so in a way that centred and elucidated the ways these stories were shaped by dominant narratives of sexual violence, and the way that the possibility story structure and sub-types reflected and resisted these dominant narratives. The thematic and structural insights that were gained through narrative analysis offered evidence of the complexity of the relationship between sexual violence and women's relationship to possibility; however, to unpack these relationships fully and in ways that were geared toward social change required a constant centring of social context.

While possible selves research identifies the role of social context in the formulation of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), its use of primarily quantitative methodologies leaves little room to unpack the nuanced way in which dominant discourse and social context is at work in determining these possible selves.

As feminist research on sexual violence has emphasized, however, women's narratives about experiences of sexual violence and its aftermath – including, as this study has demonstrated, how women think about and approach their futures – are deeply inflected with and shaped by the social contexts in which they occur (i.e. Gavey, 2005, Muldoon, Taylor, & Norma, 2015; Wasco, 2003; Wood & Rennie, 1994). As Anderson and Doherty (2003) and others (Brown, 2013; Gavey, 1999; 2005; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014) have outlined, dominant narratives about sexual violence that reflects a "rape-supportive culture" (Anderson & Doherty, 2008, p. 3) reinforce and perpetuate specific discursive formulations of what qualifies as rape against which survivors' experiences continue to be measured. These dominant stories are reflected in institutions, policies, bureaucracies, media, and broader public discourse. They are mobilized against survivors in ways that serve to minimize women's claims of sexual violence; question the character of the woman herself; and position her as blameworthy should her experience or identity not reflect that set out in these dominant stories. For Black, Indigenous, and racialized girls and women these dominant discourses even go so far as to inform and support actions, policies, and attitudes that criminalize or otherwise punish victims for the assault they have experienced and/or for speaking out about the assault (Anderson & Doherty, 2003; National Inquiry, 2019; Poon, Dawson & Morton, 2014). Thus, not only do dominant rape discourses work to police or measure what "counts" as rape, they also work to police and shape the identities – including, I would argue, the possible selves – of those who experience sexual violence in the aftermath of that violence by promoting and reinforcing limited and fixed stories about women as victims and women's victimization (Gavey, 1999; Gilson, 2016; Lamb, 1999; Leisenring, 2006).

This study contributes to and builds on this discussion by critically examining women's possibility stories as reflections of and interventions in these dominant discourses. As I will explain, women's possibility stories are important sites through which to explore how in policing "victimhood" dominant discourse specific to sexual violence serves also to police the ways women who have experienced sexual violence might take steps to enact hoped for possible selves. At the same time, however, as much as women's possibility stories reflect the limitations imposed on survivors' lives within a rape-supportive culture, these possibility story types also offer evidence of resistance and alternatives to the limited versions of the future offered to survivors within these dominant narratives. In this way, this study reinforces feminist claims that women's understandings of sexual violence including their storying of possibility be read with a critical eye to the dominant discourses that shape them (Anderson & Doherty, 2003; Brown, 2013; Gavey, 2005; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014).

In addition to unpacking the problematic constructions within rape-supportive dominant discourse of what can be rightfully labeled "rape" (Gavey, 1999; 2005), feminist researchers have also drawn attention to the ways in which these discourses work to enforce specific ideas about the identities of women as "victims" both during and in the aftermath of sexual violence (Manne, 2018; Lamb, 1999; Leisenring, 2006). These analyses have focused largely on the ways that dominant rape scripts make a woman's ability to name her experience as rape and have it recognized as such contingent upon her ability to enact a particular version of victimhood (Gavey, 1999; Gilson, 2016; Lamb, 1999; Manne, 2018). To align with these dominant narratives,

> being a "culturally approved victim" (Lamb 1999, p. 117) entails demonstrating significant suffering, distress, and humiliation and appearing

visibly distraught while simultaneously being deferential, proper, and poised. … A genuine experience of victimization is thought to create enduring damage to the victim's psyche or body, but those victimized are also expected to be coherent, consistent, and rational both during and after the event. (Gilson, 2016, p. 80)

Beyond not accurately representing the complexities and ambiguities of women's experiences of victimization (Lamb, 1999; Gilson, 2016), dominant formulations of the "culturally approved victim" also implicitly place stringent limitations on women's lives in the aftermath of sexual violence that I suggest holds implications for what sort of futures they might imagine for themselves as well as the material or concrete steps they can take to achieve these future goals. Indeed, although not explicitly formulated as such, embedded within this dominant version of victimhood are messages about what victims can expect in their future and who they can expect to be in that future (what possible selves exist). As Wood and Rennie (1994) observe, "women who are raped are victimized not only by the act itself, but also by their transformation into victims in the public domain" (p. 126). This transformation, as Wood and Rennie (1994) argue, holds specific implications for women's futures: "although the status of victim may afford some benefits in obtaining services, and gaining sympathy, it carries with it implications for future interaction in a world that has little tolerance for victims" (p. 126). Indeed, central to the constructionist, feminist critique of dominant victim discourse is recognition and problematization of the "simplistic oppositions between victim/agent, passive/active, powerless/powerful, weak/strong, and feminine/masculine" (Gilson, 2006, p. 87) upon which dominant victim discourse requires women to negotiate their identity *as victims* (Gilson, 2016; Lamb, 1999; Leisenring, 2006; McKenzie-Mohr; 2014). This

construction of victimhood forces women to navigate what Leisenring calls the "double-bind of victimhood" (p. 326):

> [B]eing a legitimate and worthy victim means demonstrating blamelessness, helplessness, and passivity – traits that are not valued in a culture that prizes individualism. … Having to claim an identity associated with weakness, helplessness, and powerlessness is not desirable. To counter these associations, many women attemp[t] to show that they possessed some level of control in their relationships, by highlighting how they were agents, by taking some level of responsibility for the violence, and by claiming a 'survivor' identity. However, the irony is that in doing so, women risk opening themselves to blame and losing their victim status altogether. (p. 326)

To be sure, as these feminist interventions demonstrate, negotiating one's identity as a "victim" is a fraught exercise for a number of reasons not the least of which being that failure to do so correctly can have significant material consequences in terms of access to support, justice, and the freedom to "move on" with one's life in ways that align with one's hopes and desires for the future.

In this study, women's possibility stories are important sites through which to explore how in policing "victimhood" dominant discourse specific to sexual violence serves also to police the ways women who have experienced sexual violence might take steps to enact hoped for future selves. For example, the ramifications of the "double-bind of victimhood" and the challenges that women face in negotiating this double-bind as they look to their future is clearly shown by Lucine in her discussion of her career hopes and expectations for the future. As described in the previous chapter, a key turning point in Lucine's possibility story occurs when she is fired from a job that she has spent many years seeking the necessary qualifications and one that

aligns with a dream she holds for herself to help others. Lucine describes how shortly after taking up the position she finds that the lack of predictability, flexibility, and clarity in her role create significant challenges for her to utilize the strategies she has developed to manage ongoing struggles with concentration and anxiety linked to the trauma in her past. When she is fired after only a month, Lucine describes her thought process about what has happened and the responses available to her:

> I didn't last a month. I got fired within a month. … Laid off but they gave me extra money, so I'm assuming that it was to cover me. I could have probably argued it was with my anxiety issues that it was a humanitarian, like it was, you know, I can't, (Interviewer: A human rights kind of thing?), a human rights thing. I probably could have, but I'm also not dumb and know that if I keep my mouth shut then I won't have a red mark completely for the province.

Here, Lucine's reflections and thinking are in effect a process in which she attempts to weigh the pros and cons of identifying herself as a "victim" – while doing so may assist her in keeping her job and getting the supports she needs to be successful in her job it also has the potential to hold long-term future repercussions, what she describes as leaving "a red mark" on her record. Her concern about these long-term repercussions show Lucine's keen awareness of the potential for dominant notions of victimhood to be used against her in future job-seeking within the relatively intimate institutional setting that she works, an institutional setting that she has determined has "little tolerance for victimhood" (Wood & Rennie, 1994, p. 126).

The possibility stories of Marnie and Jocelyn are also instructive to read in relation to discourses of the "culturally-approved victim" and its power to shape how women approach their futures. Like Lucine, both Marnie and Jocelyn offer examples of the strategic and pragmatic choices they have made throughout their lives in

choosing how and when they identify as victims/survivors. Marnie, for example, recalls herself in one of her first jobs and the fear she carried that her employer would find out about her history of sexual violence. She notes, “I remember starting there [at the job] and thinking, ‘Oh my god, if they know who I am, they’ll fire me,’ you know?” Jocelyn, likewise, believes it is imperative that no one she goes to school with or works with knows about the experiences of sexual abuse she has endured, her mantra for many years being “the biggest thing was keeping the secret.” While Marnie, Jocelyn, and many of the other women interviewed talk about the shame they carry related to their victimization and how this shame stops them from telling others about the abuse they are or have experienced, it is important to consider how dominant victim discourse and its depiction of victims as weak, damaged, and helpless not only exacerbates this shame but also severely and materially limits the possibilities in their lives should they identify themselves as victims. Like Lucine, the decision Marnie and Jocelyn make to stay silent about their experiences of violence and to not publicly identify themselves as survivors/victims may in part be connected to the shame they struggle with but as they make clear it is also the result of their ability to strategically read public attitudes and beliefs and to make decisions and act in ways that their victimization is not used against them in their efforts to pursue other goals.

Further to this, it is helpful to explore examples that Marnie and Jocelyn provide when later in life they do choose to publicly identify themselves as women who have experienced sexual violence. Marnie, for instance, describes a powerful moment when she speaks at a major conference and while doing so identifies herself as a “survivor.” Jocelyn, likewise, comes to claim her experience as a “survivor” as integral to the work she does supporting other women who have experienced

violence. Reading these moments within the context of the larger possibility stories that each woman tells shows the decisions that women make in positioning themselves in relation to dominant victim discourses are inextricably linked to the other decisions they are negotiating about their needs and goals for the future. In this sense, they reflect where they are in their possibility story and what type of possibility story they are enacting.

Certainly, as women's stories of "repairing possibility" demonstrated identifying environments and situations in which it was possible for them to name their experiences of sexual violence and receive support were integral to assisting them in moving toward more possibility-rich ideas about the future. Nonetheless, as women's stories of "diminishing possibility" revealed about the perils and difficulties of making such disclosures safely, it is clear that to conclude that women simply need to name their experiences and claim their identity as a "survivor" for all to be well is problematic. Instead, recognizing that the accounts women like Marnie and Jocelyn provide about naming publicly their experiences of sexual violence and their identities as survivors occur within the possibility story type of repairing possibility is deeply significant and should not be overlooked. In general, the stories of repairing possibility" are told by women once they have secured meaningful support and are engaged in a process of re-building many of the losses they have previously sustained. For Marnie and Jocelyn, both of whom were perhaps the farthest along on the path of repairing possibility, this is also a time in which they experience education and career success, establish economic security, and feel confident in handling their trauma symptoms. Only when both women are financially, emotionally, and professionally secure enough to no longer need access to the services and supports that come with one's ability to enact the part of the "culturally-approved victim" do they deem it safe

to take this step. This reveals the pernicious ways in which dominant victim discourse requires women to continue to be vigilant and police themselves as to the potential immediate and long-term impacts associated with claiming this identity.

Examples such as these demonstrate that while women's possibility stories clearly reflect elements of dominant victim discourse, they also contain within them records of women's attempts to resist and strategically negotiate these discourses, and that women's ability to do so effectively is connected to the possibilities they are able to imagine and realize. In their research, McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2014) describe this type of strategic negotiation in navigating dominant rape discourse and its formulation of victimhood as "tightrope talk" (p. 76). As a form of counterstorying or resistance to the binary "either/or" identities and formulations upon which dominant victim discourse rests, "tightrope talk" involves just the sort of strategic, "both/and" positioning that women like Lucine, Marnie, and Jocelyn take up and describe in their accounts. As narrative researchers working within a feminist, social constructionist epistemological framework it is thus imperative to remain attuned to "tightrope talk" in women's narratives of sexual violence as part of a broader commitment to dismantling rape supportive culture (Brown, 2013; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2015).

In the case of women's possibility stories, recognizing how women's descriptions of their relationship with possibility may be shaped by or evidence this "tightrope talk" is an important step in recognizing the politicized accounts women offer via their possibility stories. Lucine's account of her dismissal from her job and her subsequent decision "to keep her mouth shut" is an example where this type of awareness of "tightrope talk" is vital to not miss the politicized message contained therein. Rather than interpret Lucine's decision as a sign of acquiescence to the ideas

of passivity or “endless suffering” central to dominant victim discourse, as feminist narrative researchers we can in fact show her decision to “keep [her] mouth shut” and accept her dismissal from the position without pursuing further action as an act of agency in which she relies on her own assessment of the troubling and rape-supportive ways in which the institution she hopes to work operates (“I’m not dumb”) to protect herself and her chances for future employment. Moreover, read in this light, we can also explore how Lucine’s unemployment status at the time of the interview is both a reflection of the systems that have discriminated against her and a commitment she has made to gather the resources that she knows she will need to be able to return to a world that “has little tolerance for victims.” As researchers, it is imperative not to read the pragmatism evident in Lucine’s possibility story as an acceptance of discriminatory institutional practices and actions as just the “way things are.” Rather, the pragmatism is an invitation or “entry point” (Brown, 2013, p. 23) to “other interpretations and experiences which live outside the dominant story” (Brown, 2013, p. 23). In this case, it is an invitation to dig deeper to recognize the critique contained within Lucine’s account of the ways in which rape-supportive culture and institutions continue to betray survivors by requiring them to go to such efforts in order to function within them, and to continue to place the responsibility on survivors to adapt themselves to these spaces rather than having the institutions themselves take on this responsibility.

Emerging as a key finding from this study, then, is the suggestion that the practice of “tightrope talk” extends into and is reflected in women’s storying of their relationship to possibility and their imagined futures. The “either/or” binaries upon which “culturally approved victimhood” rests require women to cautiously and creatively position themselves as they strive to create the futures they want for

themselves. This is especially the case if in order to create those futures they require or desire support from institutions, people, or others who maintain and sustain dominant victim and rape-supportive discourse. To be sure, the very fact that women must engage in "tightrope talk" at all underlines the dangers that continue to exist within a rape-supportive culture when survivors strive to craft their futures and the possibilities they hope to achieve therein while managing the ongoing impacts of the violence they have experienced.

Most significantly, however, in the context of this thesis, this approach shows how the concept of possibility in the lives of women survivors of sexual violence is one that is itself deeply and uniquely demarcated by the messages that these dominant narratives communicate about victimization and survivorship as an identity that bears an influence on one's future. Nonetheless, the women interviewed demonstrate the strategic acumen and agency they must call on in their attempts to build futures in the aftermath of sexual violence despite dominant discourses of victimization that would prefer to see them as permanently damaged and helpless. As such, women's possibility stories perform an important function in deepening our understanding of what victimization looks like. In this way, women's possibility stories contribute to a larger feminist project aimed at recognizing and honouring what McKenzie-Mohr describes as the "strategies women used to disrupt the harmful or otherwise limiting narratives available to them and assert alternative framings of their rape experiences" (McKenzie-Mohr, 2014, p. 71).

The Compounding Impact of Sexual Violence and Women's Economic Security

Women's possibility stories reflect many examples of how dominant victim discourse limits women's decisions and lives and the ways in which women in some cases manage to strategically negotiate these limitations. Nonetheless, the fact

remains that the vivid accounts in women's possibility stories of the experiences and attempts of survivors of sexual violence to pursue their hopes and goals powerfully expose the mechanisms through which rape-supportive culture and the formulations of victimhood it offers work to disrupt women's efforts to build the futures they want for themselves. In this section, I delve more deeply into the record contained within women's possibility stories of the significant though often overlooked cumulative effect of sexual violence on women's economic security. While I look more closely at this as a key thematic concern that emerged in this study's findings, I also present it as an example of the ways in which storying possibility can make visible an account of the compounding and intersecting nature of the effects of sexual violence across women's lives. I then discuss the value and importance of these particular accounts in feminist efforts to continue to resist and challenge dominant rape and victimization discourse.

Despite significant efforts on the part of feminist advocates to challenge such pathologizing understandings, sexual violence is still largely approached within a medicalized model that characterizes the impacts to be primarily psychological and the process of healing to be something done individually (Brown, 2012; 2013; Burstow, 2003). This conceptualization of sexual violence, according to feminists and advocates, depoliticizes sexual violence and divorces it from the structural contexts that support it (Brown, 2012; 2013; Burstow, 2003). In doing so, these approaches also largely ignore or minimize formulations of sexual violence as a significant contributor to women's ongoing inequality across all domains. In asking women to describe the impact of sexual violence on their relationship to possibility, this thesis opened up a powerful space within which women were able to articulate a much more nuanced, complex, and political account of the effects of sexual violence, and the

variations in these effects across their lifespan in a way that moved away from a focus solely on the psychological impacts. It also provided space for women to make important connections between these impacts. In keeping with the bulk of previous research, the women I spoke with certainly identified and described the psychological suffering they endured in the aftermath of sexual violence, particularly as this related to their self-concept. However, as they made connections between sexual violence, its impact on self-concept, and possibility, they also talked about their education, their careers, their income, and their families in ways that showed these areas of their lives to also have been profoundly affected by sexual violence. In doing so, women's possibility stories and the accounts therein made important contributions to current research not only by centring the often-overlooked effects of sexual violence on education and employment but also on the ways in which these effects snowball and intersect to fundamentally undermine women's economic security and equality.

Relatively little research examines the impact of sexual violence on young girls' and women's educations. While a handful of studies examining the educational trajectories of child sexual abuse survivors find that they are less likely to complete a college or post-secondary degree (Hyman, 2000; Schilling, Aseltine Jr., & Gore, 2007), less attention has been paid to the specific ways that survivors understand the connection between their experiences of sexual violence and education success and achievement (Albaugh & Nauta, 2005). One exception is emerging research focused on the impact of sexual assault as experienced by women attending post-secondary institutions: this research has begun to document how sexual assault survivors link a decrease in grades and attendance to their experience of sexual violence which in turn negatively impacts their educational trajectories and goals (Potter, Howard, Murphy & Moyniham, 2018; Raymond, 2018). In the present study, the powerful accounts that

participants revealed about how their experiences of sexual violence interfered with their education provide important evidence of some of the often overlooked and unnamed losses associated with sexual violence. In addition to noting how following their experience of sexual violence, women found it difficult to concentrate, saw a decrease in their grades, changed majors to something less difficult, took substantially longer than they had hoped to complete their education, and in some cases left school altogether, the women discussed the broader implications of these educational challenges. For some of the participants, these created significant additional economic problems. For others, it meant abandoning once hoped-for career possible selves completely. For all the women who similarly expressed having at one time a deep commitment to learning and education sexual violence had transformed their relationship to learning. That almost all of the women interviewed in this project identified themselves as extremely high achieving further underlined the profound and intangible losses of the contributions they had hoped to make were it not for sexual violence.

Like the current research on education, relatively little research talks about the impact of sexual violence on women's employment, career, and occupational trajectories. A handful of studies are beginning to document the negative effects that sexual violence holds on women's occupational and professional pathways (Loya, 2015; Nickisher, 2018; Potter, Howard, Murphy & Moynihan, 2018), particularly as this relates to experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace (Holland & Cortina, 2016; McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2017). While fewer studies look specifically at how experiences of sexual violence that occur outside of the workplace have an impact on women's employment and work those that do investigate this connection find that women sexual assault survivors are likely to experience negative

impacts on their career (Loya, 2015; Nickisher, 2018). The possibility stories offered by the women interviewed contribute to this emerging body of research by shedding light on some of the specific pathways through which sexual violence implicitly compromises women's professional goals. These include interrupting their educational training necessary for certain professions; interfering with their ability to perform necessary tasks in workplaces; and decreasing their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy in their chosen professional field and subsequently leading them to leave their hoped-for profession. Like their descriptions of educational institutions, women in this study illustrated how places of employment can themselves become fraught sites for survivors of sexual violence when there exists little to no sexual violence-specific or trauma-informed understanding. Moreover, in some cases, the workplace itself becomes a site of further sexual violence. Sarah's and Claire's accounts of the sexual harassment and harm they experience in the workplace, for example, echo emerging evidence that finds that almost 30% of women are the target of inappropriate sexual behaviour in the workplace (Statistics Canada, 2019).

The examples and illustrations women offered of the specific ways sexual violence interfered with their education and careers offer important information in each of these areas. Perhaps more significantly, however, was the way in which in telling their possibility stories the women made evident the cumulative and compounding nature of these effects across their lifespan that ultimately threatened to seriously compromising their economic security. The negative impact of sexual violence on women's economic and social security documented in current literature was mirrored by the stories told by the women interviewed in this thesis (Loya, 2014, 2015; McLaughlin, Uggen & Blackstone, 2017). In addition to the economic costs associated with sexual violence itself, such as medical bills or mental health

counselling costs, sexual violence is recognized to hold an array of economic ramifications in women's lives such as those discussed above associated with triggering negative changes in educational and occupational attainment and stability (Loya, 2014; 2015), as well as economic consequences associated with coping with their experience of violence. In this way, this study contributed to research on the economic impacts of sexual violence by demonstrating how in authoring possibility stories women identify the levers through which sexual violence is linked with economic precarity in women's lives. Sarah, for instance, highlighted the additional student debt she had accumulated as a result of the increased length of time it took her to complete her degree. Lucine, likewise, talked about the additional debt she is carrying as a result of a shopping addiction she developed as a means of coping with the impacts of the violence she had experienced in the absence of other supports. Moreover, that four of the participants were unemployed and on long-term disability or social assistance at the time of the interview in part as a result of ongoing struggles related to their experiences of sexual violence further underlines the significant economic effects of sexual violence. The significant economic impacts sexual violence can hold for young women is additionally concerning given ample research demonstrating how poverty and the associated precarity it creates are associated with an increased risk for additional sexual victimization (Sit & Stermac, 2017). Again, the stories shared by the women in this thesis echo findings in this body of research that show poverty and homelessness to be factors that drive young women into survival sex work (Hodzic & Chrismas, 2018). Destiny Star and Claire, for instance, both experience repeated incidents of sexual violence when they are forced to engage in survival sex work to meet their basic needs.

Another way that the exploration of women's relationship to possibility and sexual violence contributed in new ways to a systematic accounting of the economic effects of that violence was in women's discussions of "lost possible selves" (King & Raspin, 2004). The powerful articulation the women interviewed provided of "lost possible selves" (King & Raspin, 2004) in the specific domain of educational and career achievement offer additional insights into the pathways through which sexual violence can hold long-term economic effects in women's lives. In telling their foundational and retrospective possibility stories, many of the women alluded to the educational and occupational possible selves they had dreamed about prior to experiencing sexual violence, and how in the aftermath of that violence these educational and occupational possible selves were "lost." For instance, among the "lost" occupational possible selves identified by the women interviewed included a "geneticist," an "archivist," (Sarah); a "professor" (Lucine), and a "social worker" (Destiny Star). Some of the women managed to re-claim these "lost" possible selves by fulfilling early occupational goals later in life, such as Jocelyn who after many years of working in a different field found herself able to pursue her childhood dream of being a social worker. However, for others, such as Sarah and Lucine, both of whom were on long-term disability at the time of the interview and in Sarah's words was "unsure if she would ever work again," sexual violence had at least for now robbed them of the occupational possible selves they had once hoped to achieve; it was clear that grieving these lost possible selves would be a necessary part of the work of repairing their sense of possibility.

Bringing to light the stories of women's lost educational and occupational possible selves in the aftermath of sexual violence is an overlooked but vital step in more fully articulating and depicting the impact of sexual violence on women's

educational and professional attainment and well-being, as well as on women's economic security. Some effort to capture this impact is evident in the inclusion of the categories of "lost education," "lost current income," and "lost future income" in statistical analysis of the economic impact of sexual violence (Hoodenbah, Zhang & McDonal, 2014). As the possibility stories articulated in this thesis demonstrate, these are indeed important indicators that begin to conceptualize the impact of sexual violence on the possible futures survivors of sexual violence, particularly in the domain of employment and professional well-being. In addition to the economic impacts, however, these stories of lost possible selves make visible the more nebulous and intangible losses that occur when women are prevented from pursuing their dreams as a consequence of sexual violence. Listening to the articulate, wise, and compassionate insights of the women interviewed, it was difficult not to wonder what Sarah might be able to achieve as a geneticist; Destiny Star as a social worker, and Lucine as a professor if they had been provided with the supports that they needed early on to protect and nurture these possible selves.

Ultimately by opening up space for women to identify some of the lesser acknowledged economic impacts of sexual violence, to make connections among some of these effects in ways that demonstrate their cumulative impact, and in giving voice to possibilities that were lost as a result of sexual violence, women's possibility stories show themselves to offer politicized accounts of the ways in which sexual violence and the rape-supportive culture in which it occurs stand as a profound and powerful barrier in women's attempts to succeed and advance in educational and professional realms, and to attain economic security and safety. In this sense, unpacking the effect of sexual violence on women's sense of possibility emerged as a powerful tool in re-centring a politicized and structural analysis of sexual violence,

even extending this analysis to position sexual violence as a lever through which women's inequality is sustained.

Implications for Social Work Research and Practice

Exploring how women who have experienced sexual violence understand that violence to shape the possibilities they have or will realize in their lives remains a largely unexplored and overlooked area in both social work research and practice literature. Nonetheless, as this thesis demonstrated, inviting women to talk about the relationship between sexual violence and possibility opened up a powerful space within which women examined the effects of sexual violence on their lives in new ways, and, in doing so, offered insights into how social workers might direct their work in supporting survivors and eradicating sexual violence. In this section, I will consider four areas in which this research holds implications for social work research and practice centred on supporting survivors of sexual violence: 1) using narrative approaches in becoming attuned to 'possibility stories'; 2) recognizing and confronting factors that diminish possibility; 3) supporting the process of repairing and rebuilding possibility; and 4) mobilizing 'possibility' for transformative and systemic change.

Using Narrative Approaches in Becoming Attuned to Possibility Stories

Although the study of possible selves and future orientation has primarily utilized quantitative methodologies in its approach to research, this study supports a small but emerging body of research that sees the benefit that qualitative, narrative methodologies hold for understanding the concept of possibility (Mische, 2009; Sooles, 2020; Sooles, Tromp, & Mooren, 2015). To be sure, the women interviewed in this study clearly define and describe their relationship to possibility, and the way they understand that relationship to be shaped by sexual violence through story and

narrative. Utilizing a narrative approach allowed space for the stories that they told surrounding their possible selves – their histories, contexts, and meanings – to emerge and underlined the opportunity that narrative inquiry offers to more fully understand the concept of possibility in general and the concept of possibility in the lives of women survivors specifically. For social work researchers interested in examining the concept of possibility this thesis shows the relevance of a narrative approach, and at the same time suggests a few insights about what specifically that narrative approach might look like. Two areas related to how a narrative approach can be useful in listening for possibility are explored: 1) creating opportunities for meaning-making and connectivity by allowing for holistic accounts to emerge; and 2) supporting the emancipatory potential of social work research.

Holistic accounts.

The study of possible selves is primarily concerned with the selves that people imagine for themselves in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Seigner, 2009). At the outset of this project as I set out to learn about how women survivors of sexual violence understand their relationship to the possibilities their lives hold, I too hypothesized that it would be in their descriptions of their imagined futures (from the time of the interview) that women would develop and share these understandings. Nonetheless, as I worked through the interview data, it became clear that women's stories and descriptions about their relationship with possibility were not contained only to the temporal period of the future. Rather, in what I came to label as foundational possibility stories and retrospective possibility stories, the women interviewed revealed that telling their future-oriented possibility stories necessitated revisiting, grappling with, and unearthing – sometimes for the first time – the various forms their relationship with possibility had taken throughout their lives. In other

words, as the overarching possibility story structure and its multi-directional temporal organization emerged across the interview data, it became clear that for the women interviewed in this project, the story they told about the possibilities they were holding for the future at the time of the interview was just one chapter in a lifelong, evolving story they could and wanted to tell about their relationship to possibility. In this sense, beyond what their accounts revealed about the impacts of sexual violence in women's lives (as discussed above), their possibility stories invited a deeper consideration of the methodological and analytical strategies that could best engage with these multi-directional and multi-layered stories. It became clear that the "dimensions of projectivity" analytical framework when applied to analyze the narratives of sexual violence survivors was further enriched by the application of key teachings within narrative inquiry related to adopting a "holistic approach" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998) to the analysis of women's stories in general, and to the analysis of these dimensions of projectivity in particular.

The value in keeping the larger story "intact" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53) while conducting narrative analysis is described in Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber's (1998) formulation of a "holistic approach" to narrative analysis. In contrast to "categorical" approaches that focus on common themes or categories that emerge across multiple data sources, a holistic approach is one in which "an individual's story is viewed as a whole and the parts within it are interpreted in relation to other parts of the story" (Beal, 2013, p. 694; Lieblich et al., 1998). Within Lieblich et al.'s (1998) framework, holistic approaches might focus on content ("holistic-content"), that is what happened in the story, or form or structure ("holistic-form") (p. 12). For researchers that utilize holistic approaches, it is through attention to the relationship between the parts of the story across the lifespan that a deeper understanding of the

experience or phenomenon under investigation might be unearthed (i.e. Beal, 2013; Riessman, 2008).

The value in maintaining a holistic lens to the analysis of women's possibility stories and the development of the various dimensions of projectivity (Mische, 2009) therein is evident, for instance, if we consider the construction of agency in Marnie's interview. In her future-oriented possibility story, Marnie describes the unwavering sense of agency she feels to create the future she wants: "I mean my life is filled with endless possibilities now, right? You know? Like, I can do just about anything" (Marnie). Nonetheless, to focus only on Marnie's future-oriented possibility story risks erasing a much richer understanding of Marnie's experience and the sense of agency she is now able to articulate that is revealed by tracing its development across or representation in other parts of her story. Applying a holistic lens that approaches Marnie's foundational, retrospective, and future-oriented possibility stories as one overarching and intact story allows for the contextualization of Marnie's current understanding of her sense of agency as she looks toward the future as the culmination of a life-long process that began with a much different set of beliefs or stories about the role she imagined herself being able to play in creating the life she wanted. As Marnie puts it, the story of her strong sense of agency begins when she is a young girl with a limited idea about the possibilities her life might hold -- "I didn't see my possibilities as being huge and bountiful when I was younger" – and no sense of her own ability in creating anything different: "I couldn't even imagine having a job. Like I couldn't. I just felt so – I don't even know the word – just so unable to cope, you know? Unable to cope with everything, you know?" (Marnie). As Marnie's story demonstrates, a holistic analysis that keeps intact and honours the complex and life-long journeys that the women interviewed offered is shown to be integral to

capturing the complexity and radicalness of their possibility stories. To be sure, the powerful story Marnie offers about possibility is not so much communicated through an analysis of what she identifies as her hopes for the future in her future-oriented possibility story (i.e. her hope to be a grandmother, to travel, to help others) as it is in the transformation she describes herself undergoing from a child who was "unable to cope with everything" and who "was constantly afraid, like *constantly* afraid" to a 53-year old woman who says with confidence as she looks toward her future, "Like, I know I can do just about anything. Like, I do. I wouldn't be afraid."

This example demonstrates the usefulness of a narrative approach in capturing and reflecting what emerged as the complex, context-based constructions of possibility in women's accounts of sexual violence. More than this, however, as this study suggested the exploration and relevance of understanding the phenomenon of one's relationship to possibility gains its true power when this is done within a holistic approach that makes room for a consideration of the relationships among various elements of an individual story across the lifespan and traces the development and modification of narrative strategies to describe these relationships over time (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 2008). As researchers and practitioners interested in developing a more nuanced engagement with and understanding of sexual violence and its effects on the possibilities that exist for women across the lifespan, a holistic approach to narrative analysis showed itself to be a vital part of enriching and doing justice to the complexity of women's possibility stories in general, and women's future-oriented possibility stories specifically.

Emancipatory potential.

Beyond offering a more nuanced picture of how women survivors of sexual violence understand their future than is possible through the more frequently used

quantitative survey methods in the field of possible selves research, narrative inquiry as a methodology offers an opportunity to recognize and foster the “emancipatory” potential of this research (Brown, 2013; Jirek, 2016; Madigan, 2003; Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006) -- another finding that holds relevance for social workers interested in supporting survivors in challenging dominant discourse and social context surrounding sexual violence. According to Wolgemuth and Donohue (2013), emancipatory narrative research recognizes and pursues the potential for narrative inquiry to “facilitat[e] transformation on social and individual levels” (p. 1023) by “loosen[ing] the bonds of given identities, foster[ing] the creation of new modes of being, and challeng[ing] the rigid connections between bodies and subjectivities” (p. 1024). As Brown (2013) has pointed out, Madigan’s (2003) concept of “counterviewing” as the practice and position of interviewing that “offers a re-examination and a broader cultural location of problem conversations” (p. 4) is also one aligned with fostering the emancipatory potential of narrative research. For instance, in asking questions that challenge, expose, and deconstruct rather than reproduce dominant discourse (Brown, 2013; Madigan, 2003), counterviewing supports emancipatory research’s goal of transformation and social justice (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006) by supporting participants in authoring alternative or counterstories to these dominant stories (Brown, 2013; Madigan, 2003).

In her discussion of the emancipatory potential of narrative research with women survivors of sexual violence and trauma, Brown (2013) observes how “counterviewing is particularly important when researchers acknowledge the constraints women face in telling their stories in the context of dominant discourse and audiences that support this discourse” (p. 2). As Brown (2013) argues, “interviewing women about violence and trauma requires some awareness of the

dangers for women associated with speaking of violence as well as the need to create space for women to be able to talk about trauma” (p. 25). As such, researchers need to be attuned to the narrative strategies women may be utilizing to navigate the difficulties in speaking about their experience within the confines of dominant narratives and recognize these as entry points into “other interpretations and experiences which live outside the dominant story” (Brown, 2013, p. 23). In the present study, asking women survivors questions about possibility was itself a form of counterviewing that posed a challenge to dominant discourses of trauma and victimization that as discussed in the previous section largely erase or restrict the possibilities survivors might imagine for themselves. During the interviews, some participants, in fact, remarked that it was this focus on possibility that attracted them to the study. For instance, when I asked Sarah early in the interview to describe her relationship to possibility, she first noted, “Yeah, that’s an interesting question. That’s cool. That’s why I like this study.”

Discussing possibility and possible selves with survivors of sexual violence as a form of counterviewing was further evidenced in the ways in which participants used the interview space to make new connections between their experiences of sexual violence and possibility to tell stories that resisted dominant discourse, as well as to recognize – in some cases for the first time – the strategies of resistance and the resilience they had utilized to repair their relationship to possibility throughout their lives. Even in cases where some of these connections were more negative or difficult to recognize for the participant, the interview offered opportunities to make previously unmade connections between events in ways that helped them to shift these away from an individualized or pathologized problem narrative to their experience and struggle as one that is reflective of a systemic and social problem. For

example, toward the end of Sarah's interview she pauses to reflects on the story she has told about sexual violence in the life and the many other women survivors she has referenced throughout the interview: "Like, and it [sexual violence] has really far-reaching effects cause I never really until this moment went, 'Huh.'" Marnie similarly comments the following:

> So it was – I mean telling this it's like, 'Holy shit, this should be a book.' And, you know, really it probably should. Like there was a huge amount of friggn' trauma, right? And, you know, I often wonder, like, I'm a fairly resilient woman … Like I'm a fairly resilient woman, and a pretty strong woman, you know, but I certainly wasn't always that way, right?

Asking questions that supported women in forging previously unseen connections about their experiences allowed for meaning-making that both sexual violence and narrative studies identify as important to fostering resilience. Such meaning-making can allow women to recognize their own resistance to dominant stories that seek to deny that resilience (Draucker et al., 2009; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; White, 2007).

As I have tried to do in my own analysis of women's storying of possibility, the presence or absence that the various dimensions of projectivity (i.e. agency, connectivity, clarity, etc.) take in their possibility stories are far from a direct reflection of an individual woman's ability or inability to cultivate possibility in her life; rather, to borrow Brown's (2013) language, women's storying of agency, connectivity, and the other dimensions are a "critical entry point" (p. 25) to what must be complex analytical reflections of the cumulative effect and ongoing influence violence, rape supportive culture, inadequate resources, and systematic, intersectional oppression holds on survivors' lives and over the possibility stories they can tell. In

this vein, the role of the narrative researcher in working with women survivors of sexual violence is to not simply take these possibility stories at face value or to see evidence in these stories of women's struggles and at times failures to create the lives they want as affirmation of dominant ideas about women's victimization. Instead, following Brown's lead, it is imperative that the narrative researcher and social workers approach the different genres of possibility stories that women tell as an opportunity to uncover a more fulsome understanding of why and how a woman's relationship to possibility and her future is storied in this way, and to look for ways to foster alternative, move empowering stories.

Becoming attuned to, listening for, making visible, and mobilizing "possibility stories" are all important practices that this thesis and its findings show can benefit both social work researchers and practitioners in better supporting sexual violence survivors and in pursuing advocacy to end sexual violence. Nonetheless, to date, sexual violence research has largely ignored the relevance and value of exploring the concept of possibility in relation to sexual violence. Likewise, possible selves research has largely ignored the opportunity for its research to work from an emancipatory orientation when asking people to think about their future orientation and possible selves. As the variety of possibility stories offered in this thesis demonstrate, and the complex themes and descriptions they reveal about the various effects of sexual violence, there is great value in becoming attuned to and listening for women's possibility stories within their accounts of sexual violence. What also become clear, however, is that doing so requires an approach that allows for what this thesis demonstrated are the rich, nuanced, and multi-layered strategies and discourses that women draw on in talking about possibility in relationship to sexual violence. As demonstrated in the variety and depth of possibility stories identified in this thesis, I

suggest that it is a narrative approach that is best suited to support social work researchers and practitioners in becoming attuned to and engaging in meaningful ways with women's understandings of the effects and implications of sexual violence on the possibilities in their lives. In particular, social work researchers and practitioners interested in attuning to and mobilizing women's possibility stories may benefit from leveraging the emphasis in narrative approaches and practice in making space for holistic accounts across the lifespan and recognizing and fostering the emancipatory potential of this research. Doing so, as we will see in the next section, can in turn provide further evidence and clues on how social work practitioners can support survivors in navigating these systems.

Recognizing and Confronting Factors that Diminish Possibility

In both thematic and structural terms, women's possibility stories hinged upon accounts of their experiences in seeking support following sexual violence. As described within the stories of "diminishing possibility" women told, the barriers to accessing support were so great that with the exception of Missy it was not until they hit a crisis point or "rock bottom," to use Sarah's words, that they were connected to some form of support. In that period from post-assault to getting support, women's experiences of being blamed, not believed, and questioned echoed findings in current research on secondary harm and victimization (Ahrens, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, & Barnes, 2001). Told as a story of "diminishing possibility," the women interviewed described experiences of secondary wounding set in a variety of institutions and settings -- schools, workplaces, social services, housing programs, social assistance and disability assistance programs to name a few -- as well as from friends and family. In keeping with existing research, the women interviewed emphasized how encountering secondary wounding in these spaces

caused them to question the legitimacy of their experience and their part in it (Shaw, Campbell, Cain, & Feeney, 2016) and often resulted in feelings of shame and guilt (Campbell, 2008, Campbell et al., 2001; Sigurvinsdottier & Ullman, 2015). However, they also illustrated how secondary wounding created additional harm by compromising their economic and social security. In these instances, secondary wounding that had a direct and indirect impact on women's economic security included being kicked out of school; being fired from jobs; being unable to access economic and housing supports, and experiencing further acts of physical, emotional, and sexual violence. I suggest that this study offers two areas relevant to social work research and practice related to addressing secondary wounding that could if addressed have a positive impact on women's relationship to possibility: 1) expanding efforts to challenge institutional secondary wounding and training efforts beyond traditional spaces of the criminal justice and health care settings; and 2) addressing the distinct forms of secondary wounding in the lives of girls and young women.

Expanding responses to secondary wounding.

The need to acknowledge and challenge rape-supportive beliefs and attitudes that manifest in various forms of secondary wounding and victimization for sexual violence survivors is widely recognized in feminist research and advocacy (Campbell, 2008). As this literature rightly explores, tackling rape supportive attitudes is essential in providing women with supportive environments in which they may name their experiences of sexual violence, access health care and therapeutic support, and navigate the justice system without being subject to additional forms of harm (Campbell, 2005; 2008; Campbell et al., 2001). In particular, in recent years, much energy has been directed toward addressing manifestations of secondary wounding that occur within policing and the criminal justice system's response and handling of

sexual violence (Campbell, 2005; 2008; Dumont, Miller, & Myhr, 2003; Quinlan, 2016). While concrete action to reform policing and the criminal justice system are undoubtedly important, some advocates argue that given the extremely low number of survivors that actually engage with this system focusing all our attention on this space may cause us to overlook the other areas in which survivors may seek support and in which they may encounter secondary wounding (Bielski, 2017; Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Certainly, in the present study, women described few interactions with the police and justice system related to sexual violence. For instance, only one of the participants made a report to the police (that was ultimately successful).[15] Thus, while continuing to dedicate efforts to reforming the criminal justice system is an ongoing and essential area in which social workers can support systemic change for survivors that may ultimately lead to greater reporting numbers and conviction rates, the findings from this thesis align with work of advocates calling for continued efforts on the part of social workers to support a more expansive understanding of and response to secondary wounding (Bielski, 2017; Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Given what this thesis showed to be the compounding and lasting economic, social, and psychological impact of secondary wounding women were subjected to in schools, places of employment, and social services, it is clear there remains much work to be done in these areas to minimize the barriers women confront in the aftermath of sexual violence, and to support them in cultivating possibility-rich futures. The stories of diminishing possibility show that

[15] Only one other participant described considering reporting to the police, something that she ultimately chose not to do for fear of the disruption it would cause to her own life and her community. One participant was part of a large class action lawsuit against a health care professional who had perpetrated sexual violence; however, her experience was deemed not severe enough to participate in the trial. One participant was herself criminalized while working as a sex worker.

secondary victimization continues to permeate less obvious and less widely discussed areas of survivors' lives. In working to support sexual violence survivors via dismantling rape-supportive beliefs and institutions, considering those spaces intricately linked to a survivors' potential to cultivate possibility must also be considered, such as schools and workplaces. In addition, as I will describe in more detail in the next section, this must include considering the existence and distinct impacts of secondary wounding in the lives of girls and young women.

Acknowledging the extent of sexual violence in the lives of young women.

Identifying and mapping the possibility stories of the women interviewed revealed important realities about sexual violence in the lives of young women. Although recruitment for this study did not specify an age at which participants' experience of sexual violence occurred, all the participants in this study had experienced at least one incident of sexual violence by the age of eighteen. For all but two of the participants, the childhoods and adolescence of the study participants had been marked by other forms of violence, neglect, and harm. In addition, in a number of interviews, participants alluded to other experiences had by acquaintances, friends, and family members that suggested a wider cast of young girls whose lives were marked by experiences of sexual abuse and harm.[16] In this sense, while participants identified numerous factors that shaped the sense of possibility they held during the developmental stage of childhood and adolescence – family, community, peers,

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[16] For example, over the course of her interview, Sarah referred to the experiences of sexual violence had by many other young women in her life and the impacts of these experiences on their lives: her "best friend [who] can't drive down the street now … because she'll have a panic attack driving past the place where a man videotaped her without her knowledge;" another friend who is sexual assaulted by her boyfriend; the women who come into the clothing store she works in who are worried about purchasing clothes that will be perceived as "too sexy" for work, to name just a few. Missy, likewise, references at least three other girls on her university campus she finds out had been sexually assaulted by the same perpetrator. Marnie, likewise, talks about the sexual abuse her mother experienced while still in her teens.

societal messaging – sexualized violence emerged as a disturbingly regular and pervasive lever through which the early ideas participants – and many other women in their lives – held about their self-worth, value, and competency were defined. We can recall again, Sarah's powerful evaluation of this reality:

> It's [sexual violence] the norm rather than the exception and it is something that at least my generation, we, we grow into it. Like, we have those moments where we realize things. Like, this is what the rest of my life is going to look like. I have to be on the lookout for this for the rest of my life. Make sure you cross the street when there's a guy ahead of you. Like, you know? You don't come out of the womb thinking these things. They happen because of your experiences.

The women in this study are not unique both in their experiences of childhood sexual abuse and in the difficulties they faced in accessing support during their childhood and youth. Although it is difficult to ascertain a definitive picture of prevalence, existing research indicates that childhood sexual abuse in Canada is a pervasive and serious issue with some estimates being that 1 in 10 Canadians have been sexually victimized before the age of 18 (Afifi et al., 2014). Despite the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in Canada, there remains serious gaps and barriers in supports and services (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, & Lateef, 2017). This lack of support is particularly troubling given that research has demonstrated the vital role that access to support and services can make when provided early on for children and youth (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, & Lateef, 2017); for those who do not receive that support the outcomes across all these domains are negative. To be sure, one of the most troubling findings emerging from the foundational possibility stories was the lack of support or services available to them as girls and young women. Again, as

women told their stories of “diminishing possibility” it became clear that the lack of support provided to them as young girls had long-lasting and compounding effects on all areas of their lives into adulthood.

Prevention and awareness initiatives aimed at increasing awareness about sexual assault and consent are becoming increasingly common in educational settings in Canada, especially post-secondary campuses (Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2017). The benefits of this programming are reflected in Missy’s story in this thesis where she was able to access sexual violence-specific supports within her university. Ongoing efforts to build responsive campus-based sexual assault response programs then are an important means of ensuring young sexual violence survivors do not experience diminishing possibility in the realm of education. Less attention, however, has been paid to the need for and effectiveness of such efforts within institutions that serve girls and youth prior to the age of 18, and/or the distinct experiences of secondary victimization endured by young girls and women in these settings. While research in this area is sparse, a few studies examine the prevalence of secondary harm against young childhood sexual abuse survivors within the child welfare system (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018), the juvenile correctional system (Cesaroni & Peterson-Badali, 2017), and elementary school system (Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc., 2018) suggest a significant gap in knowledge and training. Similarly, studies show that people in general are reluctant to discuss or acknowledge child sexual abuse (Weatherred, 2015). The lack of attention to this area is especially troubling given that the majority of victims of child sexual abuse are Indigenous and racialized (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018), and points to the pressing need for an intersectional understanding of the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse and the supports that are needed to support children in diverse ways.

While significant work has been done to address myths and misconceptions about sexual violence, many people are still reluctant to acknowledge or recognize the reality of childhood sexual abuse and its effects on women's lives (Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc., 2021). This is reflected in women's powerful voicing in this thesis of their own perception of the lack of care or concern for the violence they experienced from those around them even when they made efforts as young girls to seek out that support. The women interviewed in this thesis made clear what was at stake as they described the impact of being ignored, blamed, and shamed as children who were experiencing sexual abuse: the message they took from this lack of concern about their own lack of competence and value showed how in denying girls and young women access to the safe and effective supports they need these systems collude early on to confirm the already precarious ideas of future possibility these girls hold. Social workers have an important role to play is supporting advocacy and training efforts that provide education about childhood sexual abuse and the ways in which to support girls and young women.

Supporting Women in Developing Strategies for "Repairing Possibility"

Addressing the structural and institutional barriers created within a rape-supportive culture that perpetuates secondary victimization and continues to make it difficult to name experiences of sexual violence are vital tasks that may help to interrupt women's stories of 'diminishing possibility' early on and/or before they hit rock bottom. Although this study was not focused specifically on therapeutic or counselling interventions and support related to possible selves, the stories women told about "repairing possibility" suggested that women survivors of sexual violence may also benefit from individual and group support that guide them in both acknowledging and repairing the distinct ways their relationship to possibility – and

the possible selves they imagine for themselves – has been shaped by sexual violence and other experiences. For the women interviewed in this thesis, a number of strategies emerged as valuable in assisting them in repairing possibility and supporting their overall healing. These included:

- Re-visiting and critically engaging with previous understandings of self-concept and self-blame in relationship to sexual violence
- Identifying and collecting evidence of new possibility stories or possible selves, such as examples of where women succeed in something they previously thought they were incapable of performing
- Making commitments to new possibilities and laying out concrete plans to achieve them
- Acknowledging and grieving lost possible selves
- Making connections between sexual violence and other life domains, such as education and career, in ways that support a systemic rather than individualizing or pathologizing understanding of failures and successes
- Finding ways to support other women who have experienced sexual violence, and/or participating in social advocacy
- Tending to positive relationships and practices that support future goals

Including discussions and explorations related to possible selves and future orientation that aligns with these strategies offers another way for social workers to support a more general call on the part of those working in the area of post-traumatic growth and resiliency to develop practice strategies that support survivors in fostering "living well" in the aftermath of sexual violence (McKenzie-Mohr, 2014, p. 70; Kirkner & Ullman, 2019; Woodward & Joseph, 2003). Ultimately, as the women in this thesis demonstrated, being supported in the "tasks" of repairing possibility not

only supports women on an individual-level in beginning to carve out new possibilities and pathways for the future but also in its very focus on communicating the importance and value of survivors' futures and the possibilities therein contributes to a broader systemic challenge to dominant narratives that want to limit these futures.

Mobilizing Possibility for Transformative and Systemic Change

In documenting the possibility story types and sub-types and the distinct thematic concerns raised in each, this thesis deepened understanding of sexual violence not only in women's individual lives and in relation to their psychological, physical, spiritual, social, and economic health but also in the ways in which sexual violence and the institutions and structures that collude to sustain rape-supportive attitudes, polices, and practices contribute to and perpetuate women's inequality by reinforcing barriers that prevent women from achieving their full potential. While documenting these impacts and the strategies and efforts that women use to manage them is important, I suggest that their lies additional implications for social justice work in listening and tending to women's stories about their relationship to possibility and the way this relationship is shaped by sexual violence by centring, honouring and acting upon women's expertise in identifying and outlining what is at stake, what needs to be done, and what is in fact possible in the future when it comes to eradicating sexual violence. Despite the clear ways in which sexual violence keeps women from advancing in education, careers, relationships or other areas of life, this clear link between sexual violence and inequality is rarely made in advocacy and transformative social justice efforts. I suggest that there is great value in recognizing the political potency of the concept of possibility as a tool through which advocates can continue to resist an individualized understanding of sexual violence and instead

insist that it is an issue that must be addressed through the transformation of institutions and systems.

One strategy through which social workers may harness the power of women's future-oriented possibility stories to guide change can be found in emerging ideas about the relevance of speculative and visionary fictions in guiding transformative social justice movements. Increasingly, social justice advocates are looking toward imaginative visions of the future contained within visionary or speculative fiction to propose and work out radical alternatives for addressing current social issues, including sexual violence (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Imarisha & brown, 2015). Emerging out of the transformative social justice movement, advocates argue that the genre of speculative and visionary fiction – a genre that Imarisha (2015) explains, "allows us to imagine possibilities outside of what exists today" (np) – provides space to explore alternative versions of what the future might look like depending on how various social issues are addressed. In this sense, speculative fictions can serve as dystopian warnings, pragmatic or realistic guides, and utopian visions about the futures we are in the process of creating.

Understood through this framework, the future-oriented possibility story types that women utilized in this thesis might be mapped onto or reflect these different genres of speculative fictions. For instance, women's stories of limited possibility are characterized by or give voice to a dystopian vision of the future for survivors; women's stories of pragmatic possibility offer realist visions of this future; and women's stories of endless possibility paint a utopian picture of what the future might look like for survivors. Understood in these terms, the future-oriented possibility stories women share are more than an account of how they imagine their future to be shaped by their experiences of sexual violence. Rather, in telling their future-oriented

possibility stories women become powerful contributors to a mutually-authored future-oriented possibility story that outlines the case for and route toward a possibility-rich future that embodies the values of equality, belonging, strength, and expansion.

Read through the framework of speculative fiction theory and genre, the future-oriented possibility stories women survivors tell take on new meaning as a vehicle through which transformative social change and justice might be explored, mapped out, and achieved. Read as dystopian, realistic, and utopian speculative fictions, these future-oriented possibility stories are seen to centre the issue of sexual violence and the institutional and societal norms that support it. Each of the possibility stories use a different genre to illustrate why and how change must happen: the stories of limited possibility read as dystopian fictions serve as warnings pointing to the extensive loss of possibility and the pain and suffering associated with it should the messages and needs evident in these stories continue to be ignored; the stories of pragmatic possibility read as realistic fictions offer instructions, guidance and wisdom of what might be possible if the notion of possibility-rich futures for survivors is not ignored. Finally, the stories of endless possibility read as utopian speculative fictions offer visions that push us outside of our imaginative constraints and fundamentally challenge the limited and dominant discourses that currently exist for defining what the future might look like for survivors. Instead, these utopian speculative fictions – or future-oriented stories of endless possibility – offer a new vision that offers a radically different version of society in which sexual violence survivors are supported, validated, and seen as experts that can lead the change to creating a society in which sexual violence is eradicated completely. Approaching survivors' future-oriented possibility stories as a genre of speculative fiction provides a preliminary example of

how these stories when read alongside each other might be used by social workers as resources offering guidance and tools necessary to engage in transformative social justice work. Drawing on these stories and the lessons they contain can be a way for social workers to support the creation of possibility-rich futures for survivors of sexual violence and in so doing participate in work that seeks to restore equality and justice and challenge the dominant genre of survivorship. As such, the concept and idea of possibility stories is one that may benefit from and that aligns with emerging social justice work that seeks to mobilize speculative fictions, that is the telling of desired futures to identify the social change we want to see and the strategies that are necessary to get there. This thesis suggests that encouraging women survivors to look toward their future and to share and develop future-oriented possibility stories may be a potent intervention at both the individual and collective level. As social workers, we can use these future-oriented possibility stories alongside survivors as guides in our work.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this chapter, I provide concluding thoughts to pull together the findings presented in this thesis. First, I address the limitations of the study, and identify opportunities for future research. Then, I provide a final summary of the key learnings emerging from women's possibility stories. In doing so, I reflect on how the ongoing study of women's understanding of the impact of sexual violence on the possibilities in their lives can support both individual and systemic change.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

In making space for women to share stories about the relationship they held with possibility across their lives and to speak specifically about how that relationship had been shaped by sexual violence, this study aimed to introduce and explore the usefulness of possibility as a concept through which to articulate the myriad effects that sexual violence holds and the creative strategies that women use to navigate and survive in the face of these effects. In identifying and articulating the possibility story structure based on its analysis of the experiences shared by the women interviewed, this thesis set out a narrative framework through which women's stories about the relationship to possibility might be studied. Despite being based in the same geographical region, participants in this study included women of different ages, races, cultural backgrounds, economic status, and ability. These intersecting identity and socio-economic factors showed themselves to be significant and relevant to understanding the possibility stories the women interviewed in this study shared. This finding aligns with existing research emphasizing the ways that race, ethnicity, ability, and economic status shape women's experiences of sexual violence in distinct ways (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, & Johnson, 2018). Moreover, that these intersecting factors and identities also showed themselves to be relevant to the types of possibility

stories that women told reflects findings in possible selves research that document how race, age, and economic status are related to possible selves (i.e. Klaw, 2008; Rathbone et al., 2016; Waid & Frazier, 2003). Further research that examines the research questions posed in this study among broader population of sexual violence survivors, and that considers the intersecting identities of those survivors is needed to fully develop an intersectional analysis and model of the possibility story structure and its potential variations.

An additional limitation of this study is that participants were self-selected. As such, the women interviewed for this thesis were ones who for various reasons were interested in discussing the concept of possibility in relationship to their experience of sexual violence. A limitation then posed by this self-selection of participants is that the data collected in this thesis emerged from women pre-disposed for some reason to discuss their experiences of sexual violence through this lens or for whom the particular focus of this study held some relevance. Thus, findings in this study that suggest that supporting survivors in engaging in telling possibility stories are again preliminary. Further study of the relevance of possibility as a way of understanding and storying experiences of sexual violence among a general sample could help to better understand this.

Related to the issue of self-selection is that all the women interviewed in thesis had at the time of the interview been able to connect with some form of support. A telling commonality that emerged in the women's possibility stories in this thesis was their descriptions of the extent of suffering they endured on their own in the aftermath of sexual violence, and their descriptions of only being able to access support once they hit a "rock bottom" or crisis point. Certainly, this finding points to opportunities for further research examining the ongoing barriers that exist for survivors of sexual

violence in seeking support, particularly within educational and employment settings. Nonetheless, all the women interviewed are ones who when they hit "rock bottom" were in fact able to find some form of support. The vital importance that all the women gave to this access to support, and the subsequent way that this support shaped the possibility stories they authored aligns with existing sexual violence research that consistently shows the importance of access to support in the healing process (i.e. Draucker et al., 2009; Kirkner & Ullman, 2020; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). However, in speaking only with women who had been able to access support of some form, this thesis does not contain the stories of women who similarly may have found themselves in crisis or at "rock bottom" and were unable to find that support. The possibility stories and the possibility story structure that might emerge in conversation with women in this situation may indeed be much different and offers a rich and important area for further exploration. Such studies could offer vital information about the experiences of survivors who are most marginalized and whose voices are most often left out of research studies such as these.

Finally, in its approach to narrative inquiry this thesis drew on the "dimensions of projectivity" analytical framework. The dimensions of projectivity (Mische, 2009; Sooles, 2020) framework offered a consistent set of factors against which women's stories were analyzed and compared. This framework – one that had yet to be applied specifically to narrative accounts of sexual violence – showed itself to be applicable to this context. Further study of the applicability of the dimensions of projectivity framework and other methodological approaches to research focused on the future-oriented stories of sexual violence survivors is needed. While such research could build on the current project by applying this methodology to a larger sample size, opportunities to conduct a mixed methods study that utilizes relevant quantitative

measures, such as the *Possible Selves Questionnaire* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) could allow for a more rigorous analysis aimed at better understanding the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methods to the study of possibility in the specific context of sexual violence.

In addition to the areas for further research identified above, this thesis points to many areas of potential further research that could benefit sexual violence survivors and advocates. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this thesis began to document the significant though still largely overlooked economic effects of sexual violence on survivors. While this was not the specific focus of this thesis, certainly further research that aims to systematically document the economic impacts of sexual violence across the lifespan is needed to fully articulate the concrete ways that sexual violence undermines women's economic and social security. On a similar note, this thesis made an important intervention in how the effects of sexual violence are conceptualized by identifying and arguing for the relevance of the concept of "lost possible selves" as a necessary category through which to understand and make visible some of the unnamed effects of sexual violence. Similar recent attempts to quantify such factors as "lost education" and "lost future income" (Hoodenbah, Zhang & McDonal, 2014) suggest an important opportunity for further research that makes visible the seemingly invisible effects and losses of sexual violence. Studies in this area have the potential to bolster feminist and advocate structural analysis of sexual violence and its impact on women's economic and social security and equality.

Final Reflections: Possibility as a Path for Social Justice

Despite the differences in their experiences, all the women were able and willing to help me begin to understand how they thought about the possibilities in their lives, and more specifically, how their thinking about possibility was shaped by

sexual violence. Women's ideas about the possibilities in their lives and their ability to fulfill those possibilities were shaped by multiple factors that include but are not limited to sexual violence. Age, race, education, employment, economic stability, housing, and disability are all factors that shape the stories women tell about their futures, and the stories they tell about their relationship with their futures across the lifespan. To be sure, the women had different relationships to possibility and thinking about their future in general: while Shauna said that she thinks "a lot" about her future and "where [she] see[s] [her]self in 10 years," Claire told me that she "do[es]n't really think much about the future." Moreover, each of the women I interviewed was at her own unique place in what I have presented as each woman's possibility story at the time she participated in the interview. While the two oldest women I interviewed, Marnie and Jocelyn, saw their lives full of possibility at the time of the interview and were reaping the rewards of many years of hard work in healing from their experiences of sexual violence, others like Lucine and Sarah were in the process of coming to terms with possible futures that were much more circumscribed than what they had imaged as young girls. Destiny Star and Shauna were in the midst of fighting for possibilities they still held tightly to but were doing so in the contexts of poverty, homelessness, and addiction that made this fight even more difficult and the realization of the possibilities they hoped for seem even more precarious. Finally, Claire, the youngest of the women I interviewed who was about to turn 20 at the time of the interview and embark on what she called "adulting," was only just beginning to believe that she would have a future at all having felt that until very recently that she would have been dead by now having already endured multiple acts of childhood sexual abuse and sexual violence. I was hopeful that Claire was at the beginning of a possibility story that would turn out like Marnie and Jocelyn's. However, it was clear

as the women's stories had shown that the likelihood of Claire describing her future as one filled with "endless possibilities" was going to involve traversing a long and difficult road as long as the rape-supportive institutions she was being forced to navigate and the challenges these institutions created for her to secure basic supports continued unchanged.

As their interviews revealed, women define and describe possibility and their relationship to possibility by telling what I have labeled as possibility stories. More than a story that is focused solely on their future as they imagine it at the time of the interview or a simple description of what women want in the future, a possibility story as authored by the women interviewed is a story that contains a complex record of their hopes, losses, transformations, and dreams across the lifespan. For the women interviewed, to describe, define, and story possibility necessitated sharing retrospective accounts of the hopes and fears they held as children; present-day accounts of their relationship to possibility at the current moment, and prospective or future-oriented accounts of what that relationship might look like in the upcoming years. Storying possibility also required telling other larger stories about their families, communities, societies, schools, workplaces, gender, race, addiction, and selves over time. As these stories demonstrated, women's relationship with possibility was inflected by the contexts in which they lived, and involved women explaining how these contexts were ones that supported the futures they hoped for and colluded against them in failing to protect them from the futures they feared. Most significantly, the possibility story also emerged as a narrative genre within which women grappled with their histories and experiences of sexual violence and their identity as victims/survivors. In this sense, storying possibility involved telling – in some cases for the first time – stories about the profound suffering and loss that

sexual violence had created. It also, however, involved telling stories about the resilience and repair work they had accomplished despite this suffering and loss. In the voices of the women shared in this thesis, storying possibility was a way to tell their individual stories about the ways that sexual violence intersected with their hopes, dreams, and plans throughout their lives. In doing so, storying possibility also became a way for women to engage in a politicized life review through which they offered their individual stories as potential guides for collective action aimed at eradicating sexual violence and its pernicious impact on the possibilities of women's lives both in the present and in the imagined futures they hoped to create.

My motivation and interest in understanding how experiences of sexual violence shape women's sense of possibility is rooted in a long-standing commitment to challenging the systems and structures that deny women the right to a life free from violence. To deny women the right to a life free from violence is also to deny women the freedom to embrace and enact the possibilities they imagine for their lives. Rather, sexual violence – along with all forms of gender-based violence – too often violates women's sense of possibility in ways that robs them of the freedom and joy of creating the lives they might imagine for themselves. In doing so, sexual violence also robs the families, communities, and societies in which they live of the achievements and contributions these women have to offer should they be able to nurture and realize the possibilities their lives hold without the interruptions and devastation that violence causes. This thesis and the resulting conversations I had with the eight women I interviewed for this thesis is one attempt to more systematically document and make visible the profound effect of sexual violence on the possibilities in women's lives, and to make a case for the pressing relevance of acknowledging possibility as an integral concept and area of exploration for social justice.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate -- Information Letter / Letter to Editor

Dear Editor:

I am writing to request publication of the following letter requesting participants for a research project. I would greatly appreciate it if you could publish the following letter:

Research Project: The Role of Sexual Violence in Shaping Possibility in Women's Lives

I am a Masters student in social work at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. For my thesis, I am speaking with women who have experienced sexual violence. I am interested in learning more about how women think about the possibilities their lives hold and the ways experiences of sexual violence change or shape those possibilities.

Research on the impacts of sexual violence often focuses on its effects on women's present physical, emotional, and psychological health. However, little research considers how women's ideas about their futures change following sexual violence. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the role of sexual violence in shaping women's dreams, hopes, goals, ambitions, and ideas about the future. The findings from this research may be helpful in providing guidance and new understandings in supporting other women who have experienced sexual violence.

I would like to speak with you if:

- you are a self-identified woman
- you are 19 years of age or older
- you have experienced sexual violence (for example, childhood sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner sexual violence, or any other unwanted sexual experience)
- you are not involved in any current or pending legal proceeding related to the experience(s) of sexual violence
- you are able to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually convenient location in the Greater Fredericton Area

Participation in this research involves taking part in an individual face-to-face interview. In this interview, you will be invited to share your thoughts about how your experience(s) of sexual violence has shaped the possibilities you imagine for yourself in the future. The interview will take about 2 hours, and it will take place at a time and location of your choosing. You will receive $20 in return for your participation.

All of the information you share in the interview will be kept confidential. Interviews will be used for research purposes only. Interviews do not involve counselling or therapy.

If you are interested in this study (or would like to ask questions about participation), please contact Erin Whitmore at (506) 470-2415 and leave a confidential message, or email ewhitmor@dal.ca. In order to protect your confidentiality, please consider whether your email address contains any identifying information or links you do not want the researcher to know.

Sincerely,
Erin Whitmore

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate - Email

Hello,
As you may be aware, I am currently working on a thesis for my Masters of Social Work degree. For my research, I am speaking with women who have experienced sexual violence. I am interested in learning more about how women think about the possibilities their lives hold and the ways experiences of sexual violence change or shape those possibilities.

I am currently recruiting participants to take part in an individual face-to-face interview with me about this topic. I would greatly appreciate it if you would share this invitation with those who might be interested in participating or who could pass the invitation along to others.

Thank you very much for your support. Please see below for the Invitation to Participate.
Erin

Hello,
I am a Masters student in social work at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. For my thesis, I am speaking with women who have experienced sexual violence. I am interested in learning more about how women think about the possibilities their lives hold and the ways experiences of sexual violence change or shape those possibilities.

Research on the impacts of sexual violence often focuses on its effects on women's present physical, emotional, and psychological health. However, little research considers how women's ideas about their futures change following sexual violence. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the role of sexual violence in shaping women's dreams, hopes, goals, ambitions, and ideas about the future. The findings from this research may be helpful in providing guidance and new understandings in supporting other women who have experienced sexual violence.

I would like to speak with you if:

- you are a self-identified woman
- you are 19 years of age or older
- you have experienced sexual violence (for example, childhood sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner sexual violence, or any other unwanted sexual experience)
- you are not involved in any current or pending legal proceeding related to the experience(s) of sexual violence
- you are able to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually convenient location in the Greater Fredericton Area

Participation in this research involves taking part in an individual face-to-face interview. In this interview, you will be invited to share your thoughts about how your experience(s) of sexual violence has shaped the possibilities you imagine for yourself in the future. The interview will take about 2 hours, and it will take place at a time and location of your choosing. You will receive $20 in return for your participation.

All of the information you share in the interview will be kept confidential. Interviews will be used for research purposes only. Interviews do not involve counselling or therapy.

If you are interested in this study (or would like to ask questions about participation), please contact Erin Whitmore at (506) 470-2415 and leave a confidential message, or email ewhitmor@dal.ca. In order to protect your confidentiality, please consider whether your email address contains any identifying information or links you do not want the researcher to know.

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate – Online Postings

Research participants needed for study on sexual violence

I am a Masters student in social work at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. For my thesis, I am speaking with women who have experienced sexual violence. I am interested in learning more about how women think about the possibilities their lives hold and the ways experiences of sexual violence change or shape those possibilities.

I am currently recruiting participants to take part in an individual interview with me about this topic.

Please respond if you:

- identify as a woman and are at least 19 years old
- have experienced sexual violence (for example, childhood sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner sexual violence, or any other unwanted sexual experience)
- are not involved in any current or pending legal proceedings related to the experience(s) of sexual violence
- you are able to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually convenient location in the Greater Fredericton Area

Participation in this research involves taking part in an individual face-to-face interview. In this interview, you will be invited to share your thoughts about how your experience(s) of sexual violence has shaped the possibilities you imagine for yourself in the future. The interview will take about 2 hours, and it will take place at a time and location of your choosing. You will receive $20 in return for your participation.

All of the information you share in the interview will be kept confidential. Interviews will be used for research purposes only. Interviews do not involve counselling or therapy.

If you are interested in this study (or would like to ask questions about participation), please contact Erin Whitmore at (506) 470-2415 and leave a confidential message, or email ewhitmor@dal.ca. In order to protect your confidentiality, please consider whether your email address contains any identifying information or links you do not want the researcher to know.

Appendix D: Invitation to Participate – Poster

WOMEN NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Women needed to take part in an individual face-to-face interview for a study exploring **how women think about the possibilities their lives hold** and the **way experiences of sexual violence shape those possibilities**.

Please respond if you:

- identify as a woman and are at least 19 years old
- have experienced sexual violence (for example, childhood sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, or any other unwanted sexual experience)
- are not involved in any current or pending legal proceedings related to sexual violence
- are interested in sharing your thoughts about how sexual violence shapes the possibilities your life holds
- are able to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually convenient location in the Greater Fredericton Area

The interview will last **approximately 2 hours**. You will receive **$20 in recognition of your participation**.

This study is being conducted by a graduate student in the Masters of Social Work program at Dalhousie University. If you are interested in taking part in an interview or if you have any questions please contact **Erin Whitmore** at ewhitmor@dal.ca or (506) 470-2415. Your participation is **voluntary and confidential**. Interviews will be used for **research purposes only**. They **do not involve counselling or therapy**.

*In order to protect your confidentiality, please consider whether your email address contains any identifying information or links you do not want the researcher to know.

Research Interview
Contact: Erin Whitmore
ewhitmor@dal.ca
(506) 470-2415

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(506) 470-2415

Research Interview
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Appendix E: Screening Document -- Script for Initial Phone Contact

Introduce self and provide overview of research project:
"Hello. Thanks so much for expressing an interest in my research project. I'm wondering if I can begin by telling you a little bit about the project and what would be involved in participating in the study. Then, I can answer any questions you have."

"As you may have seen on the information poster about this project, I am working on my Master's degree in Social Work at Dalhousie University. For my research, I am interviewing women who have experienced sexual violence. I am interested in learning more about how women think about the possibilities their lives hold and the ways experiences of sexual violence change or shape those possibilities. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the role of sexual violence in shaping women's dreams, hopes, goals, ambitions, and ideas about the future. The findings from this research may be helpful in providing guidance and new understandings in supporting other women who have experienced sexual violence."

Provide overview of what is involved in participating:
"I'll tell you a little bit about the interview process. Participation in this project involves taking part in a face-to-face interview. The interview will last about 2 hours, and participants will receive $20.00 for their time. Participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You are welcome to ask questions throughout the interview if there is anything that is unclear. You are also welcome to not answer questions or stop the interview at any time. I will be recording the interview, and then later transcribing the taped interview into a written document. The only people who will hear the interview and read the transcript will be me and my supervisor. Any information you share in the interview will be confidential."

"I am planning on interviewing 6 to 8 women for this project. After I complete the interviews, I will be analyzing the transcripts. The analysis will be what forms the basis of my thesis, as well as other presentations and articles. I want to assure you that in any report I make about the study's findings I will not use your real name nor will I reveal any identifying information. I will be giving each participant an opportunity to review the interview transcript if you wish to do so and provide additional feedback."

If the participant is a past or current client of the researcher: "I also want to take a moment to further clarify with you that this interview is for research purposes not counselling. This means that during the interview I will be asking you questions and gathering information for the purposes of better understand the topic I am researching. The interview will not involve any sort of therapeutic support, processing, or problem-solving."

Ask participant for questions and interest in participation:

"I've provided a brief overview of the research and what participation in this study involves. I'm wondering if you have any questions about the study and your potential participation in an interview."

If participant indicates she is still interested in potential participation, review the following screening criteria:

"I have a bit more information I want to review with you, as well as a few questions I'd like to ask you. Would that be ok?"

"As you likely read on the information flyer, there are a couple of criteria that need to be met in order to participate:"

"Are you currently 19 years of age or older?"

"Have you experienced sexual violence? A 'yes' or 'no' answer will be fine at this time."

"Are you involved in any current or pending legal proceedings related to sexual violence?"

"Are you able to meet for a face-to-face interview at a mutually agreed upon location in the Greater Fredericton Area?"

If the individual does not meet this criteria explain that in order to participate in this study these criteria must be met.

"Unfortunately, in order to participate in this study you must meet the criteria I just outlined. Thank you for calling. I really appreciate your interest in this research."

If the individual *does* meet this criteria, continue with the following screening questions:

"I would also like to ask you a few questions about whether you're currently dealing with any significant difficulties or crises in your life. I am checking with any potential participant about these questions just to make sure your participation in this study won't pose additional challenges to you."

"Have you faced a crisis or loss in the past 6 months that you believe will make it difficult for you to participate in an interview about your experience of sexual violence?"

"Have you had thoughts about hurting yourself or committing suicide or have you attempted suicide in the past 6 months?"

If the individual answers "Yes" to either of these questions, explain that she will not be able to participate in the study:

"Given some of the current challenges you are facing, I will not be able to let you participate in the study. Before we end our conversation, though, I'm wondering whether you been able to get support for these challenges? Would you be interested in finding out about some options for support? I can provide you with a list of services that might be helpful to you." (See Appendix H for Potential Resources)

Thank you for calling. I really appreciate your interest in this research.

If the individual answers "No" to both of these questions:

"Would you be interested in participating in this study?"

If she says "No," thank her for calling and end the call.

If she says "Yes":
"Great! Let's set up a time and place to meet. Do you have a preference about where and when you would like to complete the interview? We can meet at my office, in your home, or some other private place."

Once interview details are arranged, encourage her to contact with any additional questions and end the call:

“Please feel free to get in touch if you have any other questions or concerns at any point before the interview. I really appreciate your interest in this project. I look forward to speaking with you soon.”

Appendix F: Research Instrument – Interview Guide

Main Questions

These are guiding questions. The interviewer will draw on these questions as needed but may not ask all of the questions.

1. Can you tell me about yourself? Feel free to include any aspects of your identity and experiences that have been important to you, and any other information you believe will help me understand about who you are.
2. How has sexual violence impacted or shaped your life and/or your identity?
   a. Has sexual violence impacted your sense of identity / self in negative ways?
   b. Has sexual violence impacted your sense of identity / self in positive ways?
   c. Has your understanding or perspective of the impact(s) of the sexual violence on your life changed over time?
3. As you know from the recruitment material for this interview, I am interested in understanding how women think about the possibilities their lives hold. Can you describe what this idea of possibility means to you? How does 'possibility' enter into your life? (*If necessary, provide the following prompt:* For example, you might want to think about possibility as what you have imagined for yourself in terms of who you want to be in the world, what you hope for, or dream about. Maybe you want to think about the possibilities you see in terms of your education, career, relationships, or other aspects of your life that are important to you.)
   a. Tell me about how sexual violence has shaped your sense of possibility.
4. Imagine it is 10 years from today. Describe what your life will look like? How would this description be different if you had not experienced sexual violence? Have there been changes in how you imagine your future since your experience of sexual violence?
5. Tell me about how your life changed after your experience of sexual violence (prompt for changes in self-concept and material circumstances).
6. What have you done since the experience of sexual violence to manage / cope / address / live with these impacts? (prompt for formal and informal support; coping strategies; lifestyle changes)

Follow-up Questions / Themes

Throughout the interview focus on these themes as prompts for further elaboration and exploration:

Self-Concept / Identity:

- How has sexual violence shaped how you see yourself?
- How do you see yourself in the future?

Self-Efficacy:

- Have there been changes in how you understand your own capabilities since your experience of sexual violence?

Hopes / Dreams:

- Can you describe some of the hopes and dreams you hold or did hold for your life?
- How are or have these hopes and dreams shaped or impacted by your experience of sexual violence?

Ambition / Goals:

- How has ambition played a role in your life?
- What changes have you noticed in your sense of ambition?

Purpose / Meaning:

- How would you describe your sense of purpose or meaning over time?

- How has your experience of sexual violence shaped your sense of purpose or meaning?

Imagined Future

- What do you imagine for your future? What do you hope for? What do you fear?
- How does your experience of sexual violence shape your hopes and fears for the future?

Relationships

- Can you describe the possibilities you've imagined for relationships with others in your life?
- How does your experience of sexual violence shape the possibilities you see in terms of your relationships?

<u>Prompts to encourage further exploration and elaboration:</u>

Can you tell me more about what that was like?
You mentioned ________. Can you give me an example of this?
You mentioned ________. Can you tell me what that was like for you?
You talked about _______. Can you tell me more about this?

<u>Specific Questions</u>

1. What is/was your relationship to the assailant?
2. How old were you when you experienced sexual violence?
3. Have you experienced any other violence?
4. What, if any, formal support did you access? (i.e. counselling, medical care)

Final Question

Is there anything we have not talked about that you would like to add?

Appendix G: List of Resources

CHIMO Help Line:	1-800-667-5005 (province-wide)
Fredericton Sexual Assault Support Line:	506-454-0437
Fredericton After-Hours Mobile Crisis Team:	506-453-2132
Community Mental Health Clinic:	506-453-2132
Victim Services:	506-453-2768
Transition Houses / Shelters:	
Women in Transition House	506-459-2300
Gignoo Transition House	506-458-1236

Appendix H: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Project title: Understanding the role of sexual violence in shaping women's sense of possibility

Lead researcher:
Erin Whitmore
Masters of Social Work Candidate
Dalhousie University
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Other researchers
Catrina Brown, PhD (Supervisor)
Associate Professor
School of Social Work
Dalhousie University
(902) 494-7150
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Introduction

My name is Erin Whitmore, and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Social Work program at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting as part of my MSW degree. Choosing whether or not to take part in this research is entirely your choice. The information below tells you about what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do, and about any benefit, risk, inconvenience or discomfort you might experience. Please read this form carefully, taking as much time as you need. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with the researcher. Please ask the researcher about anything you do not understand, and please ask as many questions as you like. If you have questions later, please contact Erin Whitmore.

Purpose and Outline of the Research Study

The purpose of this research study is to explore how women understand the possibilities their lives hold and the ways experiences of sexual violence shape those possibilities. To accomplish this objective, the researcher will be conducting individual face-to-face interviews with 6 to 8 women who have experiences of sexual violence about their understanding of the role of these experiences in shaping their ideas about future possibilities. The information gathered in this study will contribute to understandings of the role of sexual violence in women's lives and may be helpful to other women who have experienced sexual violence and those who support them. The information gathered in this study is for research purposes only and does not involve therapeutic counselling.

Who Can Take Part in the Research Study?

You may participate in this study if:

- you are a self-identified woman
- you are 19 years of age or older
- you have experienced sexual violence (for example, childhood sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner sexual violence, or any other unwanted sexual experience)
- you are not involved in a current or pending legal proceeding related to an experience of sexual violence
- you are able to participate in a face-to-face interview at a mutually convenient location in the Greater Fredericton Area

What You Will Be Asked to Do

Participation in this study will involve a face-to-face interview. This interview will be conducted by the researcher. The interview will take approximately 2 hours. The interview will take place at a time and place mutually agreeable to you and the researcher. During the interview, you will be invited to discuss how your experience(s) of sexual violence have shaped the possibilities you have imagined and continue to imagine for yourself. It is up to you to decide how much information you want to share in the interview. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into a written document by the researcher. The only person who will listen to the recording is the researcher. The researcher may share interview transcripts with the thesis supervisor for verification purposes. Any data shared between the researcher and the thesis supervisor will be transmitted via a Dalhousie secure server. If you would like to do so, you can receive a copy of the interview transcript. Again, if you want, you can read this transcript and make any desired changes to better reflect your experiences. Also, you may request that information you provided in the interview be removed from the transcript without giving an explanation. Any suggestions for changes to the interview transcript must be provided before the researcher begins analyzing the interview. The researcher will inform you of this date. This study will be completed by Fall, 2017.

Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts

The risks for associated with participation in this study are minimal; however, you may experience emotional discomfort when describing your experiences related to sexual violence. The researcher will make every effort to make sure that you feel safe, supported, and validated. If the interview is causing you too much distress, a number of options will be discussed (taking a break, moving on to a different question, meeting on a later date, or withdrawing from the study). You will also be provided with a list of local resources in case you would like additional support.

While there are no direct benefits to you for participation in this study, the information you provide may be helpful in contributing to an understanding of sexual violence that can support other women in similar circumstances. Some individuals find that sharing their experience of sexual violence can be empowering and meaningful.

Compensation / Reimbursement

To thank you for your time, you will receive $20 for your participation in the interview. If you decide to stop the interview, you will still receive $20.

How your information will be protected:

Your privacy will be protected at all stages of participation in this study. The interview will

take place at a location mutually agreeable to you and the researcher in the Greater Fredericton Area that allows for your privacy to be protected, such as a location where you will not be heard by anyone other than the researcher. Steps will also be taken to ensure your privacy is maintained in any communication between you and the researcher. The researcher will work with you to identify a method of communication that best ensures your privacy (i.e. sending communications without an email address or email subject line that discloses study participation). The names or any other identifying information about you or any of the participants in this study will not be available to anyone except for the researcher.

All information you provide will remain confidential. This means that any identifying details of what you share (i.e. names and places) will be removed so that no one can identify you. However, in the following situations, the researcher will be required to break confidentiality:

1) She becomes aware of current neglect or abuse of a child under the age of 19;
2) She becomes aware that the participant is threatening harm to herself or another person;
3) She becomes aware of sexual abuse perpetrated by a health care professional toward an adult or child; or
4) She is subpoenaed to court.

If any of these circumstances arrive, the researcher will contact the relevant authority depending on the situation. This may involve contacting social services, mental health or psychiatric care, or relevant health care professional bodies.

The recording of your interview will be transcribed by the researcher into a written document. Any identifying information will be removed from the transcripts. The interview transcripts will be analyzed along with other participants' transcripts. The analysis will form the basis of a thesis, presentations, and articles on the study's findings. In any document or presentation, your identity will be protected. This means that **you will not be identified in any way in the thesis, presentations, or articles.** Reports of research findings will involve the use of direct quotations from research participants; however, the researcher will again ensure that no information that may identify the participant will be quoted. Additionally, the researcher will refer to participants by pseudonyms (not your name) in all reports of research findings. Also, the researcher will use a participant pseudonym in any written and computer records so that information about you contains no names. All your identifying information will be securely stored. All electronic records will be kept secure in an encrypted file on the researcher's password protected computer. Additionally, to further ensure security of data storage, data will be stored on a Dalhousie secure server. The researcher will be the only individual with direct access to the data. The researcher may share interview transcripts with the thesis supervisor for verification purposes. Any data shared between the researcher and the thesis supervisor will be transmitted via a Dalhousie secure server. Data will be retained for 5 years. After that time, all participant data will be destroyed. The researcher has an obligation to keep all research information private.

If You Decide to Stop Participating

You are free to stop the interview at any time without giving a reason and with no negative consequences. If you do decide to stop the interview, you can also decide whether you want any of the information that you have contributed up to that point to be removed or if you will allow the researcher to use that information. You can also decide to withdraw from the study at any point after the completion of the interview provided the researcher has not begun analysis of the interview. After that time, it will become impossible to remove the information you provide in the interview because it will already be analyzed. If you do decide to withdraw from the study and do not want any of the information provided to be used in the study, all of your information gathered in the study (audio recording, transcript, consent form) will be destroyed immediately.

How to Obtain Results

The researcher will provide you with a summary of the findings from this study. You can obtain these findings by indicating your interest and including your contact information at the end of the signature page on this form.

Questions

We are happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. Please contact Erin Whitmore (at 506 470-2415, ewhitmor@dal.ca) or Catrina Brown (at 902 494-7150, catrina.brown@dal.ca) at any time with questions, comments, or concerns about the research study (if you are calling long distance, please call collect). We will also tell you if any new information comes up that could affect your decision to participate.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email: ethics@dal.ca (and reference REB file # 20XX-XXXX).

Signature Page

Project Title: The role of sexual violence in shaping women's understandings of possibility

Lead Researcher:
Erin Whitmore
Masters of Social Work Candidate
Dalhousie University
(506) 470-2415
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I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I have been asked to take part in one face-to-face interview that will occur at a location acceptable to me, and that the interview will be recorded. I understand direct quotes of things I say may be used without identifying me. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time before the analysis of the interview.

______________________ ____________________ ______________________
Name Signature Date

I confirm I have completed the interview and agree that direct quotes without my name may be used.

___________________________ ___________
Signature Date

I would like to receive a copy of my interview transcript. Yes _____ No _____

If "yes," please indicate how you would like the researcher to contact you when the transcript is prepared:

____

I would like to receive a summary of the research findings. Yes _____ No _____

If "Yes," please indicate how you would like the researcher to send the summary of research findings to you:

____

Please note: By listing an email address, you are indicating that you understand the security limitations of email and have considered whether your email address contains or is linked elsewhere to any identifying information.

For past or current clients of the researcher at the Fredericton Sexual Assault Centre only:

I understand that my participation in this interview will not impact my ability to utilize services at the Fredericton Sexual Assault Centre. I also understand that if I choose to withdraw from the interview at any point, my decision to withdraw from the interview will not impact my ability to utilize services at the Fredericton Sexual Assault Centre.

____
Signature

Appendix G: Analytical Guide

Narrative approach to imagined futures – Thematic clusters (Sooles, 2020)	Dimensions of Projectivity (Mische, 2009)
Theme 1 **-** Balancing clarity and reach (includes *reach* and *clarity*). Focus is on examining the vividness of future images and episodic quality, including "specifics of happenings, sensory and perceptual information about the event that is recounted, … details about inner thoughts and emotions that accompany the memory/future thought" (p. 5)	**Reach**: "the degree of extension that imagined futures have into the short, middle, and long term, along with the future scenarios imagined at each stage" (p. 699). **Clarity: "**the degree of detail and clarity with which the future is imagined" (p. 700).
Theme 2 – The experience and meaning of future time (includes *contingency, connectivity, volition, sociality, and genre*). Focus is on examining the 'what, why, how, and to whom' of the imagined future through contingency (fixed or open; control-oriented or open anticipation; connectivity (emplotment); volition (agency or passivity); sociality (the role of social context); and how all of these reflect the genre of the imagined future to e "emphasize the multiplicity, ambiguity and sociocultural shaping of future time dimensions" (p. 8).	**Contingency: "**the degree to which future trajectories are imagined as fixed and predetermined versus flexible, uncertain, and dependent on local circumstances" (p. 700) **Connectivity:** "the imagined logic of connection between temporal elements. … [including] models of causality, agency, and influence" (p. 701) **Volition: "**the relation of motion or influence that the actor holds in regard to the impending future" (i.e. passive, receptive or active, purposeful) (p. 701) **Sociality:** "the degree to which future projections are 'peopled' with others whose actions and reactions are seen as intertwined with our own" (i.e. future selves, future relationships) (p. 701). **Genre:** "the recognizable discursive 'mode' in which future projections are elaborated" (i.e. the future as a comedy, tragedy, melodrama, etc.) (p. 701).
Theme 3 – Engaging spaces of the possible (includes *breadth* and *expandability*). Focus is on examining the capacity for generating possibilities, including the multiplicity or breadth and range or expandability of possibilities.	**Breadth**: "the range of possibilities considered at different points in time" (p. 699) **Expandability:** "the degree to which future possibilities are seen as expanding or contracting" (i.e. are possibilities opening up and increasing or closing and decreasing?) (p. 700)