

Coping and Perpetuating Silence in a Romantic Relationship: Framing Strategies Used by Rape Survivors

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This study examined the framing strategies used by rape survivors when discussing rape with romantic partners. We also explored how the strategies were used during the coping process and how they were used to sequester discourse about rape. Participant observation of a sexual assault support group, four in-depth interviews, and three critical incident reports were used to gather data from rape survivors. The study served to expand and validate French's (2003) work on rape survivors' coping strategies. Thematic, interpretive analysis revealed evidence for existing strategies concerning communication in general. In the context of romantic relationships, we found evidence for several of French's strategies, as well as four additional emergent strategies. Finally, we discuss implications and provide suggestions for future research.

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When the seven women walked in to the cramped room and took their seats, the only thing they about each other was that they shared a struggle to overcome an experience that they had all been through: rape. The women's discomfort was understandable. Rape in general, and more specifically acquaintance rape, is a subject many consider unmentionable. There is intense fear surrounding the subject. Botta and Pingree (1997) suggested that "a haze of silence continues to shadow the issue of acquaintance rape" (p. 211). Due to the traumatic nature of the assault, it is often difficult for rape survivors to discuss their feelings surrounding the situation (Rothbaum, Kozak, Foa, & Whitaker, 2001; Sudderth, 1998).

This silence can be partially attributed to the fact it can be difficult to determine what can be considered rape both by society and by survivors (Botta & Pingree, 1997; Rynard & Krebs, 1997; Warshaw, 1994). This definitional difference entrenches the dangerous mindset that some rape survivors' stories are illegitimate or fabricated. Warshaw (1994) explained the evolution of the term *rape* in the 1970s and how it has been defined and redefined since then, including the evolution of the term *acquaintance rape*. Rape survivors often have trouble recognizing and labeling their rape as *rape* because of this societally contested definition (Botta & Pingree, 1997). The mixed messages surrounding the term can cause confusion and frustration among survivors.

Unfortunately, acquaintance rape is far more prevalent than society tends to acknowledge (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Botta & Pingree suggested that acquaintance rape is commonly anonymously recounted among women, but rarely reported to authorities. Because women have trouble determining whether their assault was *rape*, they do not feel they should report these incidents. Often the closer the assailant is to the survivor, relationally, the less likely the woman is to report the rape (Rhynard and Krebs, 1997). Smith, White and Holland found that every case of rape in their data set was imposed by a romantic partner, and was verbally coercive in nature.

Much research suggests that rape can cause severe psychological trauma for survivors (Rothbaum, et. al, 2001; Spitzberg, Marshall, & Cupach, 2001). Karp, Silber, Holstrom, and Stock, (1995) found that rape survivors often undergo psychotherapy, attribute negative characteristics to themselves, and have more personal problems post-trauma. They found that specifically *acquaintance* rape can make the trauma of rape even more difficult. Research has also studied how rape survivors cope (Draucker, 2001; Orbuch, Harvey, Davis, and Merbach, 1994; Sudderth, 1998).

A smaller body of literature has begun to explore how communication is important in the coping process as women redefine their experiences (Botta & Pingree, 1997; French, 2003; Warshaw, 1994). Warshaw presented suggestions for healing and recovery through this process, noting that communication with significant others post-rape is paramount in coping. French's (2003) study looked at communication strategies involved in rhetorically framing the rape, and how these mechanisms aided in survivors' ability cope.

Extending French's (2003) work, we will focus specifically on post-rape communication, as survivors discuss with each other how they make sense of their rape with their partner. First, we will review relevant literature in framing strategies, coping, and the impacts of rape on

romantic relationships. Next, we will outline the methods and procedures for conducting this qualitative, interpretive study. Finally, we will discuss our results and their implications, and provide directions for future research.

Framing Strategies

It is paramount to identify how rape survivors rhetorically express their feelings about their experience post-rape. Framing the situation can be part of this expression, as the individual must determine how to communicatively make sense of what happened (Bateson, 1972). The frame is an interpretation of a message that exists in social interaction and is meta-communicative because it serves to evaluate the message. Clair (1993) defined framing devices as “rhetorical/discursive practices that define or assign interpretation to the social event by the actor or actors” (p. 188). Her research confirmed seven framing strategies: (a) accepting dominant interests; (b) simple misunderstanding; (c) reification; (d) trivialization; (e) denotative hesitancy; and (f) public/private expression –public/private domain. Though Clair (1993) developed the use of these strategies within the workplace, she focused on victims of sexual harassment and how hegemony is used to silence women’s voices in an organization.

Coping Strategies

French (2003) extended Clair’s (1993) work to explore the use of these strategies in rape survivor communication. French’s (2003) study explored the paradox of acquaintance rape, as each participant discussed their struggle to determine how to frame their experience immediately after the assault. Blame was the primary manifestation of paradox, focusing on three themes: (a) how the victim felt, (b) how others felt about the victim blaming themselves, and (c) how others blamed the victim. French (2001) found Clair’s (1993) strategies, and two additional framing strategies: *positivity* and *meta-narratives*. Positivity rationalizes positive changes in the participant’s life seen as directly linked to the assault, the paradox in finding positive outcome from rape. Meta-narrative illustrated participants’ framing their own experience as rape after hearing similar stories from other survivors. French’s study provided an in-depth exploration of how framing strategies were used by women to cope with their rape; however, this study did not explore any specific differences in the use of framing strategies based on the context of communication. Nor did this study consider the nature of the relationship between the survivor and who the survivor was communicating with while engaging in framing strategies.

Contributing to research in context and relationship, Sudderth (1998) explored rape survivors’ decisions to disclose the rape. Most participants expressed their decision not to discuss was based on their own difficulty defining the rape, and negative responses in the past impacted their decision not to share again. Sudderth (1998) also found several responses to delayed disclosure, including the belief that the survivor was redefining the sexual interaction as non-consensual. While this study does not address the *way* in which rape survivors disclosed about their rape, it does suggest that context may impact decisions to disclose.

Orbuch et. al (1994) broadened Sudderth’s (1998) research, exploring context and process of communicating about assault. Quantitative results suggested the extent of account-making was positively associated with success in coping, and negatively associated with degree of negative impact on close relationships. Although this study established a need for studying the processes of confiding about rape, it did not provide detailed examination of such processes.

Draucker (2001) conducted a study which focused on how women make sense of their sexual assault experiences with a family member, partner, or acquaintance, claiming that women pursue their own safety, take justice into their own hands, and make something good out of bad experiences. He suggested that this construction allows for women to accept the world as an unjust reality rather than re-framing the rape as a positive occurrence. Women in this study considered the re-framing of rape in a positive light to be unproductive.

Romantic Partners and Rape

Research indicates there is a difference between the way men and women view and define rape, and males tend to perpetuate rape myths more often than females. Women have a propensity to sympathize with the survivor's perspective, while men are more likely to be influenced by rape myths (Anderson, 1999, Heppner, et.al., 1995, Simpson & Senn, 2003). Thus, ways female rape survivors communicate with their opposite-sex romantic partners is ripe for exploration. Connop and Petrak, (2004) explored male reactions to female partners' disclosure about their experience with rape. The study found participants felt talking about the assault was apt to be problematic, and lead to arguments. Anger from partners was related to blame and responsibility. Specifically males' confusion about whether the partner had contributed to the rape by consuming alcohol or dressing provocatively and other rape myths perpetuated anger among partners. Female participants described feeling partners lost respect for them following disclosure of the assault. This study provided useful insight into the males' responses post-disclosure; however, it did not explore the process of disclosing, nor how the woman made sense of this process.

While past studies have addressed coping strategies used by rape survivors, most have not focused on the communicative framing of the rape. Although French (2003) examined how rape survivors use framing strategies for coping, her study did not address specific contexts. As Connop & Petrak (2004) noted, romantic relationship communication concerning rape is difficult and can cause problems within relationships. Because research suggests a difference between the way women and men view rape, it is logical to infer women use particular framing strategies when talking about rape to a male romantic partner. In particular, women may often use protective strategies.

To further explore potential differences in communicative framing strategies when talking about rape in different contexts, we examined communication in romantic relationships. Through this study, we sought to bridge the gap between literature in these areas and work to validate current research in rape survivor communication, extending this research to the context of romantic relationship communication about rape. This led us to the following research question:

RQ1: What framing strategies do rape survivors use when talking about their rape in romantic relationships?

Methods

The goal of our research was to identify and analyze the framing strategies of female rape survivors in the context of post-rape, opposite-sex, romantic relationships. To achieve our goal,

we used several methods of data collection: Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and critical incident reports. Data collected were then analyzed according to evidence of participants' communicative framing strategies. The framing strategies were then coded into existing and emergent themes.

Participants

One of the authors participated in a sexual assault survivor support group, in which six other members were present. All participants were female college students ranging in age from 18-28. Participants for in-depth interviews and critical incident reports were volunteers, contacted through the support group and through acquaintances of the authors, using a snowball approach. Four participants completed in-depth interviews. Three participants completed critical incident reports either because they preferred to do so, or because their location did not permit a face-to-face interview.

Procedures

Support Group

One researcher, because of personal experience, joined a sexual assault survivor support group and engaged in participant-observation. Support group meetings were 90 minute sessions, once a week for four weeks. Observation began from the first group meeting. The participant-researcher created field notes after each meeting because note-taking throughout meetings would have been conspicuous and distracting for the group members. Discussion during the support group was facilitated by one male and one female. These leaders were not told that the group was being observed; however, they were informed that the researcher was working on a project concerning rape survivor communication¹. As a member of the group, the researcher planned to guide conversation occasionally to the subject of conversing with opposite-sex romantic partners post-rape. However, romantic relationship communication arose frequently without prompting. In the meetings, the researcher did reveal her personal experiences in order to maintain a disclosure level similar to other group members and to establish trust.

In-depth Interviews

The other two researchers conducted in-depth interviews with four participants. The interviews consisted of 11 semi-structured questions; participants were asked to discuss their experiences talking about the rape in general and with a romantic partner (see Appendix A). Members of the support group were presented the opportunity to participate in interviews; two of the support group members were interviewed. Interviews ranged in length from 45-75 minutes. Researchers conducted interviews where each interviewee indicated she was most comfortable. During each interview, one researcher took detailed notes, while the other researcher actively listened to the participants and guided conversation. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy when conducting interpretation and analysis. Participants were ensured of confidentiality and told that they could have access to results². The interview protocol was granted IRB approval.

Critical Incident Report

Three participants revealed their personal stories through critical incident reports (see Appendix B). The critical incident reports included several open-ended questions; the women

were asked to describe incidents of rape discussion with a male romantic partner. These reports were completed via email.

Data Analysis

Once data were collected, we conducted a thematic interpretive analysis of the interview transcripts, critical incident reports, and field notes. The researcher who participated in the support group conducted a preliminary analysis of her field notes. The other two researchers performed preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts and critical incidents. Each researcher read all of the data to get a feel for the participants and their stories. Next, researchers combed through the data looking for French's (2003) framing strategies and emergent themes. Data reduction was conducted by cross-checking themes and framing strategies, and by comparing each researcher's notes. This process was repeated to refine the emergent themes.

Results

Many of French's (2003) framing strategies were found in talk about rape and were used as coping strategies in the context of romantic relationships. Four emergent themes surrounding romantic relationship communication about rape were also discovered. Several of French's (2003) strategies were used by the women in our study to discuss rape, but not used to describe communication within the context of a romantic relationship³.

Existing Framing Strategies

Denotative Hesitancy

French defines denotative hesitancy as "a woman's reluctance or inability to describe her traumatic experience as rape" (2003, p. 308). Women often use this strategy when dealing with issues of self-blame. Zoramina explained that her first rapist had been her significant other, and the second was a friend whom she began dating. This made it difficult for her to define the situations as rape. Additionally, Kendra noted she believed that she ought to have been able to stop her rape, which continues to make it difficult for her to label it as such. All participants in our study made use of this strategy. In support group discussions, the women had difficulty defining their assaults as rape because their assailants were acquaintances. The women in the group agreed that it would be easier to acknowledge and cope with rape if they had been assaulted by a stranger.

In a critical incident report, Jill described how she blamed herself after her ex-boyfriend raped her. "I didn't want to think that someone who I'd spent 10 months of my life with would rape and hurt me so badly. So I just kept telling myself that it was partly my fault and it wasn't rape . . . it was just 'basically rape.'" Defining the assault as rape was initially more difficult for Jill than partially blaming herself because of her prior relationship with her assailant. Calling the assault "*basically* rape" made it easier to accept because it did not imply as harsh a betrayal by her ex-boyfriend as *rape* would have.

Lack of information about, or familiarity with sexual assaults also led participants to hesitate acknowledgment of their traumatic experience as rape. Elle explained in an interview that she was not sure at the time of her rape whether she could call it that. She said:

You hear about it in high school, like health classes, but you think ‘never going to happen to me, why am I listening?’ You know, because you never – you don’t know the outside world yet, everyone’s naïve usually, in high school. So I never thought anything like that would happen to me, or anyone I know. . . . So, no, I didn’t know if it was rape at that time.

Zoramina used denotative hesitancy when she told her husband about her assaults. She stated: “I didn’t tell him as rape, I said I had bad experiences.” Zoramina may not have been able to define the assaults as rape when she spoke with her husband because she may not have fully acknowledged them as rapes in her own mind.

Trivialization

“Women utilizing the trivialization framing strategy minimize or invalidate their personal interpretation of their experience” (French, p. 310). French argues that these women make light of the rape and the trauma that they experienced. In the support group this strategy came was used once. During support group discussion, Melissa shared that she repeatedly punished herself when she disclosed her abuse to others. She found that people questioned why she did not immediately put a stop to the abusive behavior. Rather than continue to face this line of questioning, she began to believe she actually could have stopped the abuse. Thus, she thought, if it could have been stopped, then it must not have been as upsetting and traumatic as she had originally thought.

In an interview, Tara described how she felt she should not take her rape seriously, because no else seemed to consider it a serious situation. She said:

Because nobody acted like it was a big deal, I was just kind of like, ‘well if nobody else thinks it’s a big deal then maybe it’s not.’ . . . I definitely didn’t ever think that I made it up, but I definitely thought that I made too big of a deal out of what happened. Like, ‘oh it wasn’t that big of a deal because we were already dating each other’ but that’s ridiculous. I know now that that’s ridiculous, but there were times when I thought that since other people didn’t think it was a big deal that I shouldn’t think it was a big deal.

In a critical incident report, Linda wondered: “Was I making a big deal of everything?” Jill wrote in her critical incident report she trivialized her experience when she described to her friends and boyfriend what happened by trying to act like nothing was wrong. She said:

I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it if it really wasn’t one, so I didn’t do much else. . . . I went through school trying to act as if nothing had happened.

By not acknowledging the seriousness of her assault, she was devaluing her interpretation of the incident. At the time, this seemed easier than accepting her feelings of anger and betrayal as valid.

Reification

“This frame often carries the message that there is nothing you can do about it: Boys will be boys” (French, 2003, p. 310). Reification perpetuates stereotypical ideas of rape and societal gender roles by claiming inappropriate male behavior is just a fact of life. One woman from the support group engaged in this framing strategy. The group discussed common rape myths such as “alcohol involvement negates the possibility of real assault” and “women only report sexual assault for attention.” Margaret noted that she often hears and believes rape myths surrounding alcohol consumption and women assuming blame by putting themselves in dangerous situations. When she accepts the rape myth that the woman is actually to blame after she consumes alcohol, Margaret deemphasizes the negative impact of her own rape and she shifts the blame from the rapist onto herself.

Tara exhibited reification in her response to a question about her perception of men. She stated in an interview:

I think I look at it as ‘that type of man that he was’ I try to avoid that type of man. . . . he was just like a good ol’ boy and an athlete on the team and . . . I guess you would say that I was turned off by athletes in college.

She went on to describe how she has not dated athletes since. Her statements implied that she believes society accepts, as fact, the message that athletes will act disrespectfully towards women and that it cannot be helped. This message served to devalue the trauma of Tara’s assault, because the message suggested that *disrespect is just something that happens when you date an athlete*. Therefore, the message also suggested that Tara was *asking for it* when she made the choice to date an athlete – which is something that she decided to avoid in the future.

Meta-narratives

French (2003) explains that this strategy is used when women share narratives and believe that coping with their experience is partially a result of hearing other women’s narratives. Women share stories with each other to understand their own. In the support group we found that all members of the support group engaged in the framing strategy. Crystal Lane, Margaret, and Zoramina, in particular, appreciated each others’ stories, because they each had experienced multiple rapes. Hearing stories that were similar to their own helped the group members to make sense of their own experiences. Melissa admitted that the shared narratives in the support group left her feeling vulnerable and scared, but the sharing helped her to make sense of the situation.

Meta-narrative was one of French’s (2003) strategies that appeared in romantic partner communication. In an interview, Zoramina said that she did not tell her romantic partner verbally, but used a written narrative to share her story: “I didn’t tell him verbally – I wrote about it into poetry, into a short story. I edited it and changed some aspects of it to make it not me.” Although she did not acknowledge the assaulted character as herself, she was able to share with her partner through the use of a story.

Public/Private Expression-Public/Private Domain

Private expression is used when women find it necessary to keep the rape to themselves (French, 2003). There are several possible scenarios for this to occur. Some rape survivors feel that no one will believe them, so they do not talk about it. In contrast, some women feel

compelled to rhetorically place their assault in the public domain by sharing it with large numbers of people. We found private expression in our interview with Tara, referring to everyday interaction and in romantic relationship communication. She explained repeatedly that she felt rape was a very private experience – that “it doesn’t come up in everyday conversation.” Tara shared that she has only talked about her rape to two romantic partners. She stated: “It’s very private. . . . It’s not like, ‘Oh, hi, my name is so and so and this is what happened.’” Tara chose to keep her rape primarily at a personal level, because she felt it was a private issue.

Emergent Strategies in Romantic Relationships

Through data analysis we found evidence for four unexpected emergent themes concerning rape survivors’ communication in romantic relationships: (a) ownership, (b) support-seeking, and (c) protection, and (d) minimization. Ownership, support-seeking, and protection were coping strategies which extend those discussed by French (2003). Minimization was a strategy used to sequester rape talk, which extends Clair’s (1993) work on sequestering sexual harassment.

Ownership

Ownership involved noting how rape has become a large part of a woman’s identity, which contributes to a sense of stability for the woman. We found that women would talk about it as part of their identity to their romantic partner. Zoramina shared in an interview that she thought talking about the rape should be similar to talking about a car accident. She stated:

I think people try too hard to look at it as something else, and I was saying to somebody who was questioning whether or not to tell the person they were dating that they’ve been raped. It shouldn’t be any different than how you deal with ‘ooh, I was in a really bad accident, I was really injured physically in this car accident. This is what happened and this is how it is still affecting me. I still can’t bowl or whatever it is.

Zoramina expressed a desire to take ownership of the situation through talking about it; she wanted to consider discussing her rape no different than talking about any other bad thing that could happen in her life. This could make the process of coping with the rape easier, because she has put it on the same level of importance as anything else she has lived through. This is different than trivializing, because it is not making light of the trauma of the situation; it is not undervaluing the impact of the rape, or shifting the blame onto the victim. In fact, Zoramina continued, refuting the idea that survivors should feel blame, suggesting that exaggerating the significance of talking about rape emphasized the stigma and *places* blame on the victim. She said:

If you have an accident and you weren’t driving, nobody ever says it was your fault. But if you were raped then suddenly, “Oh, well you shouldn’t have done that, you don’t really want to talk about it because you aren’t sure how that person’s going to react” I shouldn’t feel bad about sharing that.

Kendra explained in an interview that she also considered her assault to be a part of her identity. She said: “In a way it’s like that’s part of who I am now, as a person. And so, I can’t

really separate that. . . . I can't really separate it in my mind." Similar to Kendra's recognition of how she feels that the rape is a part of her now, Alexis wrote in a critical incident report: "The rape is a major part of my life, so I usually include it in the story of who I am." Talking about the rape as part of her identity, and part of the process of becoming the woman she is now, seemed to help Alexis normalize the rape.

Support-seeking

We found that many women framed talking about the rape to their partners as seeking emotional support. This strategy was used when the woman felt that the partner could be trusted with personal information of that magnitude. Most often the women saw disclosure of such personal information as a method for inducing support from their partner, and thus, reaching a deeper level of emotional intimacy with the partner. Jill explained in a critical incident report: "In each relationship that I've discussed the rape, I felt as though I could trust my partner just a little more. I also believe that my partner understood me better." By telling her partner about the rape, and allowing him to understand her perspective, she could feel closer to her partner. Feeling closer to her partner helped soothed her emotional wounds.

Elle noted in an interview that when she decides to tell partners she looks for support from them. She stated: "If it's going to be a romantic partner, hopefully they're already going to be understanding, and not judgmental. Elle discussed how talking about the rape and receiving support could help her deal with the situation. She said: "I think the more I talk about it, and the more I get it out there the better I feel about it . . . because all the people I've told have been supportive." When she received support from her partners after communication about the rape, Elle was better able to cope with what had happened to her. Talking about the rape was a way of seeking support from romantic partners.

Linda's description of talking about the rape also indicated that she seeks support from partners. However, in Linda's case, she never received that support. She wrote in a critical incident report:

It seems like I never hear what I want or need to hear at the time. I am not sure whose fault that it is, but it always happens. I have never felt like I was with a man who truly understood the pain that I went through and longed to help me when I get sad and times are tough.

Her account of communication with romantic partners showed how desperately she wanted to the discussion to result in support, and how negative reactions made her feel. She continued:

I tried over and over to talk in depth with him and it never got me anywhere. I even checked out a book on how to tell your partner the right way, and it still didn't work. This made me feel terrible; it used to consume my thoughts. Why didn't he care? What was wrong with me? God, I just wanted someone to care.

The fact that she did not received support, yet continued to share her story with partners afterwards, indicated that she was still looking for a supportive reaction. Her response showed how detrimental the reaction from the partner can be. She found it more difficult to understand

her rape because she did not receive the support she sought. Support-seeking seems to be a framing strategy that can aid in coping. However, if the reaction to communication is negative it can be harder to cope, in spite of the desire to receive support.

Protection

We found two communicative strategies emergent in our data that involved warning the romantic partner about the rape in order to protect themselves. The strategies in this category differed from the framing strategies found in Clair's (1993) research because they were not used by the women to keep the rape sequestered. Instead, we found that our participants actually viewed the process of talking about the rape as exposing their experiences to their partner – as a warning and as a method of protection. Through warning the partner, the woman could protect herself from situations that could hurt her in the future by educating her partner; the warning was a form of self-defense. In a critical incident report, Linda wrote about how she feels the need to warn all of her dating partners. She wrote:

Normally it is the first date. We would be sitting talking about our lives and I just blurt it out. And then I normally launch into this whole speech about how crazy I am, and how I am in therapy and taking medication, telling him way more than he needs to know on a first date. But I feel like I need to get it out, I need to make sure he knows what he is getting into. . . . I have told every boy that I have been on a date with since I started my therapy, and it's something I'm supposed to be working on. I still feel like I am lying if I become close with someone and I don't tell them about it.

This process of protection took two different forms in our study: testing the partner and preventative warning.

Testing the partner. We found that many women seemed to want to talk about the rape with their partner as a test. This is different than support seeking, because this process does not look for help in dealing with the rape. This strategy seemed to test the partner's commitment to the relationship, or to test the partner's character. By exposing themselves and their problems to their partners, the women who used testing could judge the man's response. When they wanted to test the man's commitment, women could determine whether partners were merely interested in sex or actually interested in developing serious relationships, thus protecting themselves from emotional hurt.

Kendra noted in an interview that using this strategy to test her partner's commitment when they first started dating, shortly after she was raped. She stated:

I wanted to start things off on the right foot. And I was like, 'if he doesn't still like me, doesn't support me, and does decide to leave, then he's not worth it anyway' I come with so much baggage with all this happening . . . I know that he really does care about me because he wouldn't put up with it if he didn't really care about me.

Several women in the support group also shared that talking about the rape with a romantic partner could show how serious the person was about the relationship. Melissa said that after talking about rape, people usually end up breaking up over it or something related to it. Cindy agreed, adding that most people, especially dating partners, just don't seem to care. So the process of sharing the rape with the partner gave women a chance to see his response, which then allowed them to determine his intentions. Alexis wrote in a critical incident report that one partner's response showed his potential for a serious relationship. She wrote: "It showed me that he was committed to me and to our relationship no matter what had been or what would come."

Alexis said this response also revealed her partner's character and his "maturity to handle something so heavy." In an interview, Zoramina said that if the man's response is unsupportive or negative she would not want to be with him. She said:

I'm much more conscious of how men respond and how men kind of go, 'oh, wow, ok – sorry that happened to you' and don't ask me anything, they don't go further to try to understand it. Those are the times you say, 'You know what this is probably not the best place for you emotionally, because that lets me know that when something really big is going on with me, you're not going to tap into it. You're not going to explore that.'

The partner's response to talking about the rape illuminated transparency for Zormina. The process of talking about the rape exposed the fact that the partner was not capable of being the kind of man that she wants.

Preventive warning. Several women discussed how talking about the rape with their partner could prevent future problems in the relationship. Jill explained in a critical incident report that this is necessary when a relationship starts to get physically intimate, in order to "avoid getting into a vulnerable situation." She said:

At the point when things do get physical, I immediately alert the guy as to what happened so that he knows to be extra sensitive when I tell him to slow down or stop. Once I've dated a guy for a longer period of time, I discuss the rape in detail with him, so he can understand what I'm NOT comfortable with when we're messing around. . . . I learned that this was an important step for me to take with a partner. My boyfriend and I were fooling around and he thought it would create some sexual tension to hold my arms down above my head . . . I realized I needed to explain to him what had happened so that he wouldn't accidentally create a reenactment of the rape (in my mind).

Jill decided that rather than put herself in a situation where she would be vulnerable and uncomfortable in sexual intimacy, she would warn her partner beforehand. She decided to protect herself. Tara also said that becoming intimate could be a circumstance where she would need to warn her partner. In an interview, she said:

I would tell [him] ‘no we can’t do this’ and if [he] would ask why then I would say, ‘this is what this other person did to me, if you do this then I’m just going to be taken aback.’

During her interview, Elle recalled that when she started dating someone shortly after she was raped, she had to tell him why she felt uncomfortable becoming intimate with him. She said: “I felt he needed to know why I was so closed on anything intimate – sexually intimate. . . . He was wanting things to happen, and I could tell that non-verbally.” To prevent a situation that could be painful for her, she decided to tell him that she had been raped.

Elle also explained her rape to a different partner after they saw her assailant out on campus. She stated:

The most recent person that I dated, the only reason he even knew was because we ran into the guy. I got freaked out, and then I started acting completely different, he didn’t know why. And so I had to explain it to him.

In this case, she did not warn the partner before she ran into her assailant, but after the incident, she knew that she needed to warn him what she had been through in order to prevent that from happening again.

Minimization

We found this emergent strategy involved talking about the rape very briefly or infrequently. Minimization could sound closely related to keeping the rape in the private domain, which is a coping strategy from French (2003) and a framing strategy from Clair (1993) that was used to sequester sexual harassment. However, we propose that this strategy is different from keeping rape talk in the private domain, because the rape is discussed – albeit in small amounts. Minimization keeps the details about the rape sequestered and keeps rape talk from happening frequently in the romantic relationship; often because the woman feels that her partner is uncomfortable with the discussion, or does not know how to react.

Alexis wrote in a critical incident report that she “did not go into great detail saying all the physical things that happened.” Instead she “told him only what was necessary.” When talking about her rape to a romantic partner, Elle told her story by using a condensed version. Elle said in an interview:

I was just like, ‘We can talk about this more if you want to, but I don’t really want to talk about it a lot. But here is the basic shortened version.’ And he didn’t want to hear more than that because he knew he’d get really mad, and really angry about it You just tell him ‘Hey, things happened, and it wasn’t good.’

Elle mentioned the rape to her partner, but shared as little as possible. She felt that explaining in greater detail would be uncomfortable for him, so she kept the trauma of her story to a minimum. In her interview, Tara also described sharing very few detail about her rape to a boyfriend for that same reason. She said: “I felt like he was uncomfortable and I felt ‘he knew this, so there wasn’t any need . . . if he wanted to ask me about it again sometime then he would.’”

Tara disclosed that she not only told her partners very few details about the rape, but she also avoided communicating verbally about it frequently, or mentioning the assault after the initial conversation. She said:

It's just one of those things – like there's nothing more I could tell him . . . I don't know what kind of response I would be looking for, why bring it up? I don't know what they would say to me. . . . nothing more would come from the conversation.

Elle mentioned during an interview that she also did not talk about the rape very often in the relationship. She said: “We tried not to talk about it too much.” She noted that this was partially due to how her partner would react: “He never really wanted to talk about it whenever I would bring it up.” By minimizing communication about the rape, Elle perpetuated the taboo that rape should not be talked about in a romantic relationship and that the partner of a rape survivor needs to be protected.

In the support group, Zoramina described not knowing how often to talk about rape in a romantic relationship. She said she considers it a constant conflict because the response she receives is typically silence. Melissa shared that she found relief in talking to her current partner frequently about the rape, but he advised her never to tell about the rape in future relationships because the discussion had made him uncomfortable. Melissa's case emphasized how important the partner's response to communication can be in sequestering future discussion about the rape. Such a negative response to talking about her experience frequently could certainly discourage her from sharing frequently in the future. It is interesting to note how the partner can play a large role in the decision to sequester talk about rape in a romantic relationship; the communicative strategies that women use can be to sequester their own talk, but our data indicated that the partner's response is a factor that impacts future talk about rape in current and future relationships.

Discussion and Implications

This study serves to strengthen the relationship between literature in communication and psychological coping strategies. The framing strategies that we observed through data analysis, both inductive and deductive, provide interesting implications for future research and the extension of French's (2003) work. First, we found evidence for many of French's coping strategies including an emergent theme, meta-narrative. Second, we noted four emergent strategies through data analysis that addressed communication in romantic relationships about rape. As was the case with many of French's strategies, three of these framing strategies were used for coping, rather than sequestering communication about rape between romantic partners. The fourth framing strategy was used to sequester communication about rape between partners.

Our results can be useful for therapists who counsel rape survivors. In terms of practical application through social support and therapy, it is important to consider how rape survivors utilize these framing strategies in their coping processes. A lack of understanding of these communicative strategies can be harmful; perpetuating silence, rape myths, and blame. Also, therapists need to be more aware of the need for survivors to be open to receiving support from romantic partners and social networks. Unfortunately, as we learned from our participants, most

survivors of rape do not have enough social or emotional support in their daily lives. Therapists can better understand the coping process of rape survivors by understanding the way they use framing strategies in romantic relationships in order to cope. This research could be particularly useful in couples' therapy, in which the woman is a survivor of rape. The understanding of how rape survivors communicate is the beginning of understanding why and how the romantic partner can be supportive.

Limitations of the study

The goal of our research was qualitative in nature; therefore, the first and most evident limitation is the size of the participant sample. We interviewed and observed a group of seven women. Although this provides a rich understanding of each of these women's experiences, we cannot generalize our results to represent all rape survivors. Yet, the value of the in-depth nature of the case study is that *these* women's voices can be accurately heard.

Another potential limitation could lie in the method for data collection. In participant observation, the author who joined the support group remained anonymous in revealing her identity as a researcher. This is a decision we struggled with together as a research team. Crystal Lane thought about the ethical and pragmatic implications of revealing or not revealing herself to the support group. She decided to not reveal herself, so that she could gather the most accurate, uninhibited data possible from the women, and by putting her own name into the study, she hoped she would be lending them her voice, rather than forcing a voice on them or trying to interpret a voice she did not understand. Therefore, field notes for the participant observation were written after each group meeting. This method may have resulted in recall error of specific details, on the part of the researcher.

Two of the three authors within this study were able to build rapport with the participants because they are rape survivors. Although we view our survivor status as an advantage because of the unique insight it provides, this could be considered a source of bias for interpretation of our data by empiricists. It could also be perceived as strength by feminist researchers, because we have made our biases forthright in our paper.

Suggestions for future research

Future research in this area should explore how rape survivors' social networks of family and friends can be significant and parallel to relationships with romantic partners. Research regarding framing strategies used with romantic partners could also be compared and contrasted to the framing strategies used within rape survivors' social networks. Further research could focus on how communication aids in the development or the dissolution of romantic relationships when talking about rape survivors' experiences. To further extend this association, research could discuss how romantic partners respond to the different framing strategies and how this helps or hinders the survivors coping with their assaults. This would provide insight into how the reaction to disclosure impacts the likelihood of continued discourse with future romantic partners. Once the framing strategies are examined in greater depth, research should elaborate on our emergent strategies to substantiate their validity.

Endnotes

1. The rationale behind this decision was to encourage a more open discussion than may have been possible had respondents been aware that the researcher was observing, as well as participating. Names and personal details of participants have been changed, in order to maintain privacy and anonymity.
2. Although the paper was offered to all participants, none of them requested to see it.
3. Positivity, simple misunderstanding, and accepting dominant interests were French (2003) strategies that were found in our study concerning talk about rape, but not within the context of romantic relationship communication about rape. Thus, although they supported French's study, they did not speak directly to our research questions and were not included in the description of our results.

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Appendix A Interview Protocol

1. How would you define rape, based on your experience?
2. Tell me in your own words what happened, including anything related to the assault that is important that has happened since. How did you come to terms with it or acknowledge it as rape?
3. How do you assign blame for what happened? How has this changed over time? What factors have caused change?
4. How does being a survivor of sexual assault affect your attitude or approach to dating?
5. How do you feel about having a sexual relationship with a romantic partner?
6. With whom have you discussed the rape? How often have you talked about it with someone you have dated since the rape?
7. How did you approach the topic? Describe how you talked about it. What kinds of things did you talk about? How in-depth?
8. How did he respond? How does this make you feel?

9. How did communication about the rape affect the relationship?
10. (*If they talk about it*) How does talking about the rape with a romantic partner help you cope with what happened?
11. (*If they don't talk about it*) What would make you feel comfortable enough to talk about the rape with a romantic partner? What makes you feel uncomfortable talking about it?

Appendix B Critical Incident Report

Thank you so much for your willingness to share about your experience. In order to ensure that your responses will be kept completely confidential, we ask that you do not include your name on this form. Please answer the following questions using the space below. If you need additional room, you may write on the back.

Through our research, we hope to better understand rape survivor's communication. The results of our study will be available upon request.

-
1. Describe your assault experience from the beginning, including important events afterwards.
 2. With whom have you discussed the rape? How often have you talked about it with someone you have dated since the rape?
 3. If you have not talked about the rape, describe what would make you feel comfortable talking about it with a partner. Describe what makes you feel uncomfortable talking about it with a partner.
 4. If you have talked about the rape with a partner, describe an incident when the two of you had this discussion.
 - a. How did you approach the topic with the partner? Describe how you talked about it. What kinds of things did you talk about, and how in-depth was the discussion?
 - b. How does talking about the rape with a romantic partner help you cope with what happened or deal with the situation?
 - c. How did your partner respond? How did this make you feel?
 - d. How did your communication about the rape affect the relationship?
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Thank you again for your participation and your time. If you would like to view the results of the study, feel free to contact Crystal Lane Swift, Michelle Prieb, or Sara Overbagh.