ABSTRACT

THE PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES IN SHARING ONE’S PAST: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISCLOSING CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE TO A ROMANTIC PARTNER

by Darren Michael Del Castillo

This qualitative study sought an enriched understanding of the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) in adulthood by interviewing seven women about their experiences of disclosing past CSA to their romantic partners. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) was used to better understand the women’s personal perceptions of these experiences of disclosing and how they had made meaning of them in their lived experience. In the analysis of the interview transcripts, 13 themes emerged which were grouped into three domains: (a) Struggling in Private about Disclosure; (b) The Experience of Disclosing; and (c) The Aftereffects of Disclosure. These findings build on extant research concerning the long-term impact of CSA by providing a descriptive understanding of how women’s process of disclosing to a romantic partner presents a unique context for negotiating meaning concerning aspects of identity, sexuality, intimacy, and recovery from past sexual abuse.
THE PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES IN SHARING ONE’S PAST: UNDERSTANDING THE
EXPERIENCE OF DISCLOSING CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE TO A ROMANTIC
PARTNER

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Disclosing childhood sexual abuse (CSA) can often present a complex challenge, not only for the child who discloses (Alaggia, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Nagel, Putnam, Noll, & Trickett, 1997; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005), but also for the adult in later stages of his or her life (Bonanno, et al. 2002; Bonanno, Noll, Putnam, O’Neill, & Trickett, 2003; Davies & Frawley, 1994; Donalek, 2001; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004, 2005; McNulty & Wardle, 1994; Ullman, 2003). Research concerning the process of disclosing CSA in adulthood has suggested the importance of specifying who the person discloses to—that is, a partner, therapist, parent, or friend—in shaping this experience as well as its impact (Anderson-Jacob & McCarthy-Veach, 2005; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). In this study, we focused on 7 women’s experiences of disclosing CSA to their romantic partners, and utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999), an idiographic, qualitative approach concerned with participants’ personal perception of an event or experience to better understand the significance such disclosure experiences had for these women. We felt there was a need for further understanding concerning the specific challenges that CSA disclosure may present in romantic relationships and that an exploratory approach would be appropriate given the lack of focused research on this topic.

To provide a context for understanding the multiple perspectives from which this phenomenon can be observed, the following domains are briefly discussed and include: general conceptions of disclosure; traumagenic dynamics of CSA and their impact on CSA disclosure; children’s CSA disclosures; CSA disclosures in adulthood; and, what is known, to date, about the process of disclosing CSA to romantic partners.

General Conceptions of Disclosure

Conventional wisdom dictates that there is much to gain from getting things off your chest. The allure of “reality” television in contemporary culture indicates this appeal, and the ease with which some are willing to share detailed aspects of their private lives. In addition, ever since Freud, self-disclosure in psychotherapy has been viewed as a sometimes difficult, though essential, aspect of the healing process (Thompson, 2001). Contemporary psychotherapeutic literature has also indicated the therapeutic effects of disclosing traumatic events (Foa & Rothbaum, 1992; Pennebaker, 1995). For instance, in Foa and Rothbaum’s (1992) study, rape
survivors are taught to tell their traumatic story because “a major factor that prevents recovery is avoidance of situations, memories, thoughts, and feelings” (p.145) associated with the past trauma. Research has also characterized the process of mutual disclosure in dyadic relationships outside the context of psychotherapy, and indicated its importance in promoting intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). However, some authors have suggested the importance of understanding the undesirable self-images that the person disclosing can be subject to and warn against promoting an overly optimistic picture of disclosure both within and outside of psychotherapy (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kelly, 1998, 2000).

In disclosing CSA in adulthood, the variable outcomes described above may be particularly salient for the person who discloses. The above functions of self-disclosure (Foa & Rothbaum, 1992; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998) may have important implications for women who have experienced CSA, especially as they begin to engage in consensual, sexual relations. In this new relational context, they may wish to recover from the intrusion of thoughts and feelings associated with past sexual abuse (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994). They may also long for acceptance and validation in their romantic relationships (Phillips & Daniluk, 2004). However, the high frequency of negative disclosure experiences indicated in research on adult disclosures (Donalek, 2001; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004, 2005; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; McNulty & Wardle, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Ullman, 2003) indicates the importance of better understanding this disclosure process in romantic relationships. One approach to examining this problem is to explore the person’s subjective sense of recovery at the time of disclosure. Therefore, the next section will explore how the long-term impact of CSA may play out through the experience of disclosing CSA in adulthood.

**Traumagenic Dynamics of CSA and Their Impact on Disclosure**

Finkelhor and Browne (1985) provided a broad conceptualization of the long-term impact of CSA based on “traumagenic dynamics.” These dynamics include traumatic sexualization, betrayal, stigmatization, and powerlessness. The authors posit that the four dynamics alone are not unique to CSA; however, in combination they mark the fundamental nature of this trauma. In addition, the relative impact of each of the four dynamics on an individual is dependent on both psychological and contextual factors. Several studies have identified, for example, the impact of stigmatization on the development of friendship and romantic relationships (Feiring, Rosenthal,
& Taska, 2000), the impact of powerlessness and stigmatization on women’s psychological distress (Kallstrom-Fuqua, Weston, & Marshall, 2004), the impact of betrayal on survivors’ conception of interpersonal relationships (Liem, O’Toole, and James, 1996), and also the negative impact of traumatic sexualization on the development of sexuality (Noll, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003).

Such dynamics may also influence CSA disclosure. For instance, when a person discloses CSA, he or she may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of stigmatization, and its accompanying feelings of shame (see Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1996). In this sense, the past trauma of sexual abuse is not past at all and may register in the present through the feelings of shame that disclosure evokes. In fact, Bonanno, et al. (2002) found that by asking documented CSA survivors to report their most distressing experience, those who did not disclose CSA (41%) were inhibited in doing so by feelings of shame. Thus, shame may play an important role in the decision to disclose CSA, making some who have been sexually abused avoidant of disclosure. In some cases, such avoidance might serve as an appropriate coping measure as any adverse reaction to disclosure would likely exacerbate any feelings of shame the person may already have when disclosing. However, in other cases, avoidance of disclosure could prevent the possibility of social support. Such a double bind may be particularly complex when considering the effects of stigmatization and their influence in the context of a romantic relationship.

Another aspect of the Bonanno et al.’s (2002) study cited above also has implications regarding the traumagenic dynamics of CSA and their potential influence on disclosure. In particular, Bonanno et al.’s (2002) study differentiated two discrete affective phenomena in their study that could reflect different traumagenic dynamics. That is, while the non-disclosing group showed evidence of shame, the disclosing group (59%) showed greater evidence of disgust. Such a difference in those participants who showed evidence of disgust was explained by the fact that these participants accessed the negative, traumatic memories of sexual abuse more readily than the non-disclosing group.

Related to Bonanno et al.’s (2002) study as outlined above, I would suggest that such findings have implications not only for shame and its relation to stigmatization, but also for how disgust may relate to the traumagenic dynamic of traumatic sexualization (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). While this dynamic has been theorized to function as the source of sexual preoccupation,
revulsion, aversion, or ambivalence that is associated with the sexual abuse survivor’s own sexuality as a result of CSA (Noll, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003), it is likely complexly related to disclosure experiences as well. For instance, CSA disclosure could occur in response to unanticipated, distressing affect associated with a sexual encounter. Or, the disclosure could occur as a more deliberate act prior to engaging sexually. In these different scenarios, the person’s sexuality becomes an important influence on the way in which the person talks about his or her past sexual abuse making the quality of the disclosure experience a reflection of the person’s sexuality. The limitation of Bonanno’s et al.’s study is that it does not situate the feelings of shame and disgust they identify with disclosure within the real life contexts of women who have experienced CSA. Such studies are useful for precisely identifying the affective states that may accompany CSA disclosure, though to understand the significance of CSA disclosure in a romantic relationship, it is necessary to consider the contextual aspects of this phenomenon.

In this regard, Finkelhor and Browne (1985) emphasize that the traumagenic dynamics do not derive only from the act of CSA. They are also influenced by the social context in which CSA takes place. To understand CSA disclosure, it is important to understand the conditions in the environment that encourage or prohibit disclosure. Such a focus may be particularly relevant when children disclose CSA. In addition, the first reaction received to disclosure, which may take place in childhood, is often considered an important one (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). One might further speculate that the child’s disclosure (or nondisclosure) of CSA may be an important marker for later CSA disclosures in adulthood. Therefore, the next section will review children’s disclosures of CSA.

The Social Context of Children's Disclosures of Sexual Abuse

The complex experience of disclosing CSA sometimes begins in childhood. Disclosing CSA in childhood is particularly fraught with risks, which may be one reason why approximately only a third of CSA victims disclose in childhood (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994). Such a minority of disclosed cases of sexual abuse is somewhat understandable when considering the potentially disastrous consequences of disclosure. For instance, some studies have indicated the child’s fear that disclosure will result in dissolution of the family (Nagel, Putnam, Noll, & Trickett, 1997; Sauzier, 1989). The perpetrator
of CSA may utilize such fears to enforce the silence surrounding CSA, thereby further complicating the trauma of sexual violation (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Ullman, 2003).

Although children’s CSA disclosures are often distressful because of the consequences noted above, the severity of the abuse has also been found to influence the decision to disclose (Sauzier, 1989; Ullman, 2003). For instance, Sauzier (1989) found that most non-disclosing children experienced abuse at opposing ends of the continuum: what is commonly considered “minor” (e.g., exhibitionism) or “severe” (e.g., intercourse) forms of CSA. Sauzier suggests that children who received “minor” abuse may not feel troubled enough to tell, while those that experienced severe abuse may realize the potential effects of telling and not disclose, which may make this group of victims particularly vulnerable. Such varying severity of abuse may, as well, influence later CSA disclosures in adulthood (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005).

Research has also investigated children’s CSA disclosure process (Alaggia, 2004; Nagel, Putnam, Noll & Trickett, 1997; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Sauzier, 1989; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). Lamb & Edgar-Smith (1994) described the difference between children’s “direct” and “indirect” CSA disclosures, which is similar to Nagel, Putnam, Noll, and Trickett’s (1997) differentiation between “accidental” and “purposeful” disclosure. In both studies, those disclosures that were more direct and purposeful (e.g., the child tells a non-abusing adult or caretaker that they are being sexually abused) had a more negative outcome than those wherein the abuse was discovered without the child having to tell (e.g., a non-abusing caretaker notices a change in the child’s behavior, inquires with the child, and only then does the child disclose the abuse).

Allagia’s (2004) qualitative study goes beyond descriptions of the process only as direct or indirect by providing the following additional descriptors of children’s CSA disclosures: elicited/prompted, behavioral, purposefully withheld, or triggered. These additional descriptors indicate that children may have a number of reasons for disclosure or nondisclosure. They also indicate the specific role the environment may play in the CSA disclosure process. For example, the author defines behavioral disclosure as “attempts to tell through behavior, non-verbal behavior, or indirect verbal hints” (p. 1221). In the instance of behavioral disclosure, the child may wish a parent or other caretaker would respond to CSA without the child having to make it verbally known that abuse is occurring. This characterization of CSA disclosure extends the meaning of direct versus indirect disclosures and reveals the interpersonal meaning of children’s
CSA disclosures. This interpersonal meaning may not be confined to childhood, however. As Allagia suggests, “regardless of whether disclosure happens in childhood, adolescence or adulthood, this is a momentous act” (p.1224).

Staller & Nelson-Gardell’s (2005) qualitative study also investigates the “momentous act” from the perspective of children’s disclosures, yet has relevance for disclosures throughout adolescence and adulthood as well. The authors indicate a sense of children’s implicit logic when they disclose. Incorporating stage-based (Summit, 1983) and theoretical perspectives (e.g., social exchange and social cognitive theories) in understanding CSA disclosure, they posit a model of an unfolding CSA disclosure process wherein children experience a pre-disclosure phase of attempting to make sense of their victimization; a confidant selection-reaction phase involving finding the right person with whom to disclose; and, a consequences phase that concerns children’s subsequent decisions about disclosure as represented by their responses to the various feedback they receive to their disclosures. In this way, the model provides understanding of the disclosure process from the child’s perspective. Such a model provides practical implications for CSA disclosures beyond childhood as well insofar as it emphasizes the perspective of the person disclosing and how this perspective evolves in relation to the specific circumstances that are part of the interactional context in which the person discloses.

CSA Disclosures Beyond Childhood

The “momentous act” that CSA disclosure represents may be influenced by a number of new factors as the person transitions into adolescence and adulthood. Some may choose to disclose for the first time or again at later periods in their life, when CSA disclosure presents new challenges with peer groups or romantic partners (Feiring, Rosenthal, & Taska, 2000). For the adolescent, these challenges may involve identity formation; for the adult, intimacy issues may be more salient. Either of these developmental issues may be impacted by a history of CSA, and the importance the survivor ascribes to making this history known in these new interpersonal contexts (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). Indeed, several studies have indicated that CSA disclosure remains a complex experience throughout the life span (Donalek, 2001; Everill & Waller, 1994; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; McNulty & Wardle, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Ullman, 2003).
Research on adult CSA disclosure has often focused on the response from the recipient of CSA disclosure (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Everill & Waller, 1994; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004, 2005; Waller & Ruddock, 1993), and how this can lead to increased symptomatology for the person disclosing. For example, Waller and Ruddock (1993) found that only 2 of the 27 women in their clinical sample reported a positive response to such disclosures; 15 reported a lack of response, while 10 reported a negative, hostile response, and both of these type of responses led to increased symptoms. However, a subsequent study of non-clinical, female undergraduates reported relatively fewer adverse responses (7 out of 34) to their CSA disclosures (Everill & Waller, 1994). In Lamb & Edgar-Smith’s (1994) study, many participants reported receiving “helpful” responses to their CSA disclosures. Such responses were deemed “helpful” when listeners responded as follows: (1) Abuse was not fault of participant; (2) said the perpetrator was sick. Or the listeners non-verbally (3) showed concern for participant. These were contrasted with responses when listeners indicated the following: (1) Did not believe participant; (2) said participant was blowing it out of proportion; (3) asked the participant, “what did you do to provoke it?” However, these contrasting responses did not mediate outcome. In the most recent study assessing the impact of disclosure on symptomatology (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005), it was found that disclosure characteristics (i.e., how the recipient of the disclosure responded) were more important than abuse characteristics in predicting the long-term consequences of CSA in adulthood.

By focusing on responses to CSA disclosure in adulthood, the studies above indicate the complex, though sometimes contradictory, results found when the relationship between disclosure and the long-term consequences of CSA are examined; however, one limitation involves their exclusive use of symptomatology as an outcome measure. As some research has emphasized (DiLillo, 2001; DiLillo & Long, 1999), the long-term consequences of CSA also need to be conceptualized as involving their impact on interpersonal functioning (i.e., in parenting; in couple relationships; in friendships). For this reason, more detailed descriptions of the disclosure process are needed that situate understanding of the phenomenon in the interactional context they occur.
Toward a Descriptive Account of the Disclosure Process

Donalek’s (2001) study of adult survivors’ first incest disclosures is one such example, and provides a phenomenological understanding of such disclosures. By interviewing women about their unique experiences of disclosure, it became evident that disclosure was a significant event, sometimes remembered several years after disclosing. Furthermore, disclosure encompassed much more than a verbal exchange. Participants would describe being exquisitely aware of the recipient’s response to the disclosure, often vigilantly monitoring the interaction for the other’s response, sometimes feeling that too much was said; other times, not enough. In this regard, closure was often not an outcome after the person had disclosed. Instead participants were often left with a sense of loss, confusion, and anxiety following disclosure. Such difficulty in encapsulating the incest experience in a way that might provide relief was captured in Donalek’s essential description of the phenomenon that emerged out of the participants’ narratives: “several participants emphasized that much of the incest burden had to do with their futile attempts to make sense of something as irrational as incest without support from others or the opportunity to test perceptions” (p.588). Thus, participants were often left with an experience that was isolating, as the many feelings evoked during disclosure were sometimes unable to be made sense of between the recipient of the disclosure and the person disclosing.

McNulty & Wardle’s (1994) study of CSA disclosure has similar implications for the problematic experience that many women may face when they disclose. Indeed, they underscore how disclosing CSA may be the primary source of distress for many adult women who have been sexually abused in childhood. Part of this problematic experience may involve the distress that many of those in Donalek’s (2001) study described in terms of not yet having a coherent framework in which to place the distressing traumatic experience of sexual abuse; however, many such survivors of sexual abuse still feel compelled to disclose. In some cases, such a process becomes problematic in that during distress the CSA disclosure may lack narrative coherence and can make the person disclosing vulnerable to a negative response (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen, & Harney, 2000). Based on their model, McNulty and Wardle (1994) suggested that there should be greater awareness of the potential for negative responses from CSA disclosures, especially among psychotherapists who work with CSA survivors. Despite
increased public awareness of CSA, the response to such disclosures by many in our culture is often not beneficial for the one who discloses.

In sum, CSA disclosure is a complex experience that may be an important aspect of the CSA survivor’s long-term recovery. The dynamics of CSA trauma may have a profound impact on the survivor’s identity and can make it unclear if and when CSA disclosure should occur. While CSA disclosure can elicit social support, it may also result in the survivor’s further isolation (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Ullman, 2003). As a result of these contrasting outcomes, and because of the need for more descriptive accounts of the phenomenon of CSA disclosure, some research has aimed to ground the understanding of CSA disclosure more directly within women’s lived experiences (Alaggia, 2004; Donalek, 2001; McNulty & Wardle, 1994). The present research furthers this aim.

CSA Disclosure to Romantic Partners

To date, research on CSA disclosure has not focused enough on the specific role that the recipient of disclosure plays in shaping the survivor’s experience of CSA disclosure. As alluded to earlier, it is likely that disclosing to a romantic partner is different than disclosing to a family member, to a therapist, or to a friend. A few studies have attempted to address this issue. Nereo, Farber, and Hinton’s (2002) study differentiated intimate partners and strangers as targets of CSA survivors’ self-disclosures; however, their study did not concern CSA disclosures per se. Jonzon and Lindblad’s (2004) study indicated that romantic partners were the second most common recipients of CSA disclosure in adulthood, though compared to friends (91%) and therapists (85%) they were the least likely to respond positively (65%). While this latter finding is intriguing in itself, a subsequent study by the same authors (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005) presents an even more relevant finding that speaks to the need for the current research: “the most powerful variable related to adult health and fewer symptoms was the presence of a [romantic] partner with a positive attitude at disclosure” (p. 662). Identifying in greater detail what a “positive attitude” is constituted by, as well as what constitutes more negative attitudes, would provide richer understanding of this phenomenon, which is one impetus for the current study.

Another aspect of CSA disclosures in romantic relationships that is insufficiently understood is the interpersonal process that takes place during such disclosures. CSA survivors
likely choose romantic partners to disclose to for a particular purpose. Indeed, research on self-disclosure indicates that it is a goal-oriented behavior (Omarzu, 2000). Within the CSA disclosure literature, there are some indications that those who disclose often do so to create a sense of safety, and to further feelings of intimacy within the romantic relationship (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994). However, the measures used in the two studies mentioned do not indicate whether CSA disclosure was successful in creating safety, or increasing feelings of intimacy. That is, very little is known about what happened in the romantic relationship after the disclosure occurred. There is then a need for descriptive research that can more readily identify the process of disclosure involving the thoughts, feelings, and conflicts that may attend women’s experience when and after they disclose CSA in their romantic relationships.

**Aims and Purposes of the Current Study**

The objective of this research project is to address the apparent gaps in the literature by providing a descriptive account of women’s experiences of disclosing CSA to romantic partners. To do so, I took a phenomenological approach that sought rich descriptions from women’s own voices. My aim is to provide the reader an “insider’s perspective” that gets close to participants’ personal worlds (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) with the intent of providing empathy for a potentially significant experience many women may face who have been sexually abused. In this regard, I attempt to convey plausible insights that would better enable the reader to understand participants’ experiences of disclosing to romantic partners, as well as the meaning-making processes involved in making sense of such experiences. However, as Smith (1999) suggests, access to participants’ worlds “depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher’s own conceptions and indeed these are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity” (p.219). Thus, in conveying this “double hermeneutic,” an attempt will be made to account for my own interpretive assumptions as these influenced my understanding of the phenomenon.

My second aim was to expand conceptualizations of how women disclose CSA to romantic partners. Rather than inquiring only into why participants disclosed or how romantic partners responded, which is more common in quantitative approaches that have categorized reasons for and responses to CSA disclosure (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind,
1994), I sought an expanded conceptualization by asking participants’ what disclosure was like for them within and across the romantic relationships in which they disclosed. In this way, my aim is to provide a better understanding of how participants’ thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their past sexual abuse arise in an interpersonal context that I argue can represent a unique site for negotiating new meanings concerning personal identity, intimacy, sexuality, and ongoing recovery from past sexual abuse. Such an expanded conceptualization also has practical implications. Prior research has indicated the impact that CSA can have on women’s romantic relationships (DiLillo & Long, 1999; Phillips & Daniluk, 2004), and has suggested that further understanding is needed concerning the role CSA disclosure may have in the formation of romantic relationships (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). Women seeking psychological assistance related to past sexual abuse may have concerns related to if, how, or when to disclose CSA to a romantic partner. The proposed study can offer insights that may inform such concerns.

Method

Participants

The participants were seven women who reported experiences of childhood sexual abuse, and who also reported having disclosed this experience to at least one romantic partner. Participants were recruited through a variety of sources including flyers, brief presentations concerning the research, and snowballing procedures wherein one participant notifies other potentially interested participants. After being unable to initially recruit participants in the Cincinnati area, I contacted a colleague and friend in Southern California who provided names of six potential participants. Out of this group, I recruited three participants. My brother also identified a person willing to participate. Subsequently, a fellow graduate student at Miami University provided contacts through an agency in the greater Cincinnati area that serves survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Three participants were recruited from this facility.

The seven participants for the study were five Caucasian and two Hispanic women; all reported a heterosexual orientation. Their ages ranged from 20 to 45, with a mean of 34. All seven of the women had sought psychotherapy at some point in their lives for concerns related to past sexual abuse; three were currently undergoing psychotherapeutic treatment. Additional information pertaining to their abuse and disclosure history is summarized below. Participants’
are described in the order they were interviewed. Pseudonyms are used to preserve participants’
confidentiality.

Debby was a married 44-year-old Caucasian woman who had worked as a
psychotherapist. She was in her second marriage. Debby reported six to seven separate
sexual abuse experiences that occurred between the ages of four and eleven. She listed
three of the six to seven abusers; these included a neighbor, a stranger, as well as her
father (although she indicated she is unsure whether the incident with her father
occurred). She listed sexual activities for three of the six to seven abuse experiences,
which involved touching and oral sex. Two of these incidents occurred one time, and the
incident with her neighbor occurred a few times. She disclosed her sexual abuse
experiences to four romantic partners starting around the age of 32. She also disclosed to
separate romantic partners when she was 34, 36, and 42 years old.

Marie was a single, 30-year-old Hispanic woman who worked as a make-up artist. Marie
reported two separate sexual abuse experiences which occurred when she was four and
five-years old. Each of these occurred a few times and stopped at the same age in which
they started. The abusers were two separate female family friends. She reported that
touching and digital genital penetration occurred during these abuse incidents. She first
disclosed her sexual abuse experiences to a romantic partner when she was 16-years-old.
Marie also disclosed to two other romantic partners when she was 25 and 30-years-old.

Roberta was a single, 34-year-old Hispanic woman engaged to be married, and was
employed as a social worker. She reported one sexual abuse experience that occurred
occasionally when she was nine-years-old. The abuser was her grandfather. Roberta
reported that these incidents involved vaginal touching. She first disclosed to a romantic
partner when she was 20-years-old. She also disclosed to four different romantic partners
when she was 25, 27, 29 and 32-years-old.

Julie was a single, 31-year-old Caucasian woman who was employed as a social worker.
She reported two separate sexual abuse experiences. One started when she was four-
years-old, occurred frequently, and lasted until she was seven-years-old. The abuse
incidents were perpetrated by a neighbor and involved touching, digital penetration of
genitals, oral sex, and the viewing of pornographic materials. The second abuse incident
started when Julie was ten-years-old, occurred a few times, and stopped at the same age
in which they started. The abuse incidents were perpetrated by a neighbor and involved
touching, digital genital penetration, and intercourse. Julie first disclosed to a romantic
partner when she was 20-years-old. She also disclosed to one other romantic partner
when she was 28-years-old.

Shawna was a single, 20-year-old Caucasian woman who was a student. She reported one
sexual abuse experience involving her father that lasted from “birth to 15-years-old.” She
reported that the experience involved touching, digital genital penetration, masturbation,
and intercourse. She first disclosed to a romantic partner when she was 15-years-old.
Shawna also disclosed to one other romantic partner when she was 16-years-old.
Megan was a married, 33-year-old Caucasian woman who worked as a registered nurse. She reported two separate sexual abuse experiences, one of which she indicates “maybe” occurred. The first experience, the one that “maybe” occurred, started when she was three to five years old, happened one time, and she is unsure whom the abuser might have been. The second experience started when she was nine-years-old, happened a few times, and was perpetrated by a family friend. The sexual activities involved touching, digital genital penetration, and attempted intercourse. Megan first disclosed to a romantic partner when she was 18-years-old. She also disclosed to three other separate romantic partners; one when she was 19-years-old, and two others when she was 23-years-old.

Janice was a married, 45-year-old Caucasian woman who worked as a social worker. She reported one sexual abuse experience that occurred from the time she was 15 to 18-years old. The abuser was Janice’s female minister. The sexual activities occurred frequently and involved kissing, touching, masturbation, and digital genital penetration; she also indicates that the abuse was “very aggressive bordering on violent features to all abuse.” Janice disclosed to one romantic partner, her husband, for the first time when she was 32-years old.

Procedure

Before beginning the study, the participants in California were contacted by telephone and given a brief description of the study. In Ohio, I had spoken with a psychotherapist who then spoke with three of her clients who would agree to participate in the study. In these interviews, the therapist of the three participants was present. In meeting with the participants, I again provided additional descriptions of the purpose of the research. Participants were then given an opportunity to ask any questions concerning their participation.

Given the possibility of women’s discomfort in discussing this sensitive topic, the study presented special ethical considerations. As Donalek (2001) suggested in her qualitative research on incest disclosure, “the interview process itself has the potential to create power inequalities and symbolically replicate the abuse” (p.577). As a male researcher, I was particularly aware of this possibility. Certain precautions were thus taken to prevent any potential adverse consequences both during and subsequent to the interview. First, participants were provided informed consent concerning the procedures involved in the research process and were made aware that extracts from the interview would be used in writing up the study. They were also made aware that they could terminate their participation at any time. During the interview, I also tried to be sensitive to participants’ potential discomfort by being supportive and empathic. Counseling resources were also made available. In addition, participants were given the option of speaking with my advisor, Dr. Margaret O’Dougherty Wright, a licensed clinical psychologist.
who has expertise in treating the long-term effects of child sexual abuse, to discuss any concerns related to their participation.

After obtaining participants’ consent, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that assessed demographic information and asked yes/no type questions concerning their sexual abuse and disclosure history that were included in the descriptions of participant characteristics, but were not part of the subsequent analyses. Upon receiving participants’ permission to tape record the interview, I began by asking participants how the past sexual abuse they experienced had come up for them in their romantic relationships. Prior to the interview, I also established a set of interview prompts, that concerned the following: a) participants’ reasons or purposes for disclosing; b) how it felt to talk about their past sexual abuse; c) how they felt their partner responded; d) differences in disclosure experiences across relationships; d) times when participants’ chose not to disclose. Almost invariably, participants’ accounts touched on a number of the prompts I had developed and I felt little need to rely on a specific set or ordering of questions based on the prompts. Rather the prompts were occasionally used to maintain focus on the research question. The interview was thus relatively unstructured and I would follow the participants’ leads in terms of what seemed particularly meaningful for them in exploring the topic. In keeping with a phenomenological approach to the research question, I attempted to get a sense of what disclosure was like for participants at an experiential level keeping my questions open-ended and conversational (Stiles, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1989). In the model of conversational interviews employed in this study, and explicated by Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick (1998), “the agenda for each interview is established interactively. A recursive process is used in which the researcher’s questions build on responses to previous questions…and stories told by other participants” (p. 64). My own careful listening and reflective understanding of the participant’s verbal and non-verbal communication thus became an important part of the research process (Stiles, 1993). All 7 participants completed the interview, which lasted from 40-90 minutes, and were paid $50 for their participation.

Data Analysis

To prepare the interview data for analysis, an undergraduate assistant transcribed the interviews verbatim. My research advisor, an undergraduate research assistant, and I listened to the audio recordings of each interview and met for approximately ten weeks in 90 minute
sessions to share our interpretive understanding of the interviews. These meetings, as well as multiple re-readings of the interviews, provided an initial immersion in the data and were the basis for our preliminary interpretations of the participants’ accounts. The research sessions were audio taped for later reference and extensive note taking was done. During these meetings we began to extract themes from the interviews and discussed various perspectives on the women’s stories.

In the next step of the analysis, I again re-listened and re-read each transcript multiple times. I then summarized each interview in a document, attempting to describe their most salient features. I wanted to first take up in an explicit way the content of the specific case before analyzing the more general phenomenon across cases (Rosenwald, 1988). In these documents, I selected evocative words, phrases, patterns, and passages from the interview transcripts, which corresponded to the themes that seemed, to me, significant and essential in terms of representing the participant’s narrative. I also included tentative interpretations based on the interview as a whole and included these in my write-up of the summaries. Finally, I would check my own process of interpretation against my research advisor’s to see wherein I was missing something, if we were both observing similar patterns, and both agreeing on what seemed to be the essential features of each interview. These summary documents of the interviews served as the basis for the subsequent analysis. At the end of the thesis, I have included an appendices that includes these summary documents and which can be used as a reference for a more in-depth understanding of each participant’s story.

Next, I adopted a qualitative procedure for analyzing interview transcripts based on detailed accounts of participants experiences, referred to as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996). The aim of IPA is to produce a rich, in-depth account of the participant’s view of the topic under consideration. IPA provides a systematic framework for exploring the meaning participants attribute to their experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). In one sense, IPA is phenomenological in its concern with the individual’s personal perception of an event or experience, although it also has roots in symbolic interactionism in conveying how meaning is made from social interaction. For these reasons, we felt it offered a particularly suitable approach for understanding women’s experiences of disclosing to romantic partners. Furthermore, IPA recognizes that meaning is constructed within the interaction between the participants’ accounts and the researcher’s interpretive framework. This ‘double
hermeneutic’ takes place not only during the interview but also during data analysis and interpretation.

IPA analysis is an iterative process and involves examining and revisiting the interview data at all stages of analysis in a step-by-step process. Thus, I engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts, noting the key phrases that appeared to elucidate participants’ thought processes in considering the phenomenon. I then identified significant statements on the left side of the interview transcript. In this process, coding emerges from the interview text. After completing this process, I identified emerging themes on the right side of the transcript. By listing the themes in chronological order, it is possible to document where in each transcript such themes can be found and thus, this analytic procedure allows for transparency in the analysis of qualitative data, as recommended by Smith (1996). Connections between themes are then noted and clustered together in superordinate concepts. This same analytical process was then applied to all the remaining interviews. The outcome of the analysis yields a list of themes and superordinate concepts within each case, as well as a list across cases. Next, the themes from the individual interviews from all transcripts were examined and an attempt was made to identify patterns and formulate meanings from these groupings in order to produce a final set of over-arching themes. These themes were then checked against the original transcripts in an ongoing iterative process that extended into the write-up.

The approach taken in this study involves an emphasis on both shared experience across participants as well as the uniqueness of each woman’s account. Thus, while identifying commonalities across the interview data does occur, important, specific individual insights and experiences can also be retained to allow greater depth of understanding of the complex themes and underlying processes in each case. Upon completing my initial write-up of the summaries and identification of the various themes across cases, I then presented all the accompanying process notes to my research advisor, who served as an auditor of this process. She reassessed the relationship between the interview data, the themes, and the super-ordinate constructs extracted. Subsequent meetings expanded, elaborated, and modified these themes.

The qualitative approach taken in this study acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of the research process. Consequently, alternative criteria for gauging the validity of such research have been established (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Smith, 1996; Stiles, 1993). For instance, Stiles (1993) noted the importance of making transparent one’s interpretive
assumptions, often referred to as forestructure. One component of forestructure can involve the personal experiences of the researcher. In this regard, my own involvement with the phenomenon is part of the forestructure I bring to the research. That is, because of my own experience of having had a romantic partner who disclosed her past sexual abuse to me, I went into the research process with particular expectations concerning the phenomenon. One of these involved the expectation that the various participants would provide emotionally evocative accounts of how their experiences of disclosure were important to them. In some interviews, this was the case. In others, I learned that the emotionality of such experiences faded or was never present to begin with. Thus, I attempted to stay open to what I was finding by an ongoing process of bracketing my various expectations concerning participants’ descriptions of the phenomenon.

In other instances, I felt my personal experience was helpful in being able to conceptualize and understand participants’ experiences. For instance, I perceived that CSA disclosure was not only a one-time verbal exchange involving a conveying of private information that once disclosed never surfaced again; rather, disclosure was also ongoing as emerging awareness and insight into the meaning of her abuse was reflected in my partner’s changing ways of talking about that same experience. Thus, in addition to questions that I found more commonly arising in the literature concerning the CSA disclosure experience—that is, a focus on initial disclosures descriptions of the recipient’s response to such disclosures, thoughts and feelings participants had in relation to disclosing, the importance of timing their disclosures (Donalek, 2001; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1995; Roesler & Wind, 1995), —I was also interested in the changing significance participants’ attributed to their disclosures across time and/or with different romantic partners. I felt understanding of these questions would provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. These evolving understandings had an influence on both what I brought to the interview process as well as how I engaged the process of analyzing the transcripts.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) indicate further evaluative criteria involving the trustworthiness of data concerned with individuals’ personal experiences; that is, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Transferability refers to the extent to which findings are relevant outside of the particular research context in which they are derived. The research consumer will inevitably be the judge of this criterion; however, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that thick descriptions, defined by Denzin (2001) as “deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences,” may
be the essential medium through which transferability is established. Providing verbatim quotations is one way of establishing that the findings resonate with the reader as reflective of participants’ experiences (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). The research consumer may then judge whether such descriptions are useful and persuasive in generating understanding of the phenomenon.

Dependability and confirmability are similar to the concept of reliability and objectivity in quantitative research. Dependability requires careful documentation of the research process, and the ability to demonstrate adherence to the particular method employed for the study. Confirmability is “concerned with assuring that data, interpretations, and outcomes of inquiries are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the evaluator and are not simply figments of the evaluator’s imagination” (p. 243). Although my own subjective biases will inevitably influence my process of interpretation—indeed, it would be impossible to replicate the findings of this project by another researcher—however, through maintaining the tapes, transcripts, memos, and all other sources of data, the basis of my findings could be obtained outside the research context in which they took place.

Results

Participants were asked, “How has your past sexual abuse come up in your romantic relationships?” and were encouraged to explore this question in whatever way seemed relevant to them. A pattern of themes emerged across the seven women’s accounts, which conveyed the multifaceted nature of their disclosure process to their various romantic partners. In total, our analysis produced 13 themes, which we have organized according to three phases of the disclosure process. This emergent conceptualization was consistent with a previous model of children’s CSA disclosure process that conveyed the dynamic relationship between the child’s perspective, the adult world, and the consequences of disclosure as unfolding in discrete phases (Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). Similarly, we identified 3 overarching phases to aid in our conceptualization. The phases were as follows: 1) Struggling in Private about Disclosure; 2) The Experience of Disclosing, and; 3) The Aftereffects of Disclosure. Although participants accounts suggest overlap of the 3 phases identified, the phases do organize features of the 7 women’s experiences in terms of a before, during, and after phase when they would disclose.
CSA to their romantic partners. The constitutive themes and each phase are summarized in Table 1 below.
**Table 1**  
*Constituent Themes Across Phases of the Disclosure Process*

<table>
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<th>Phase and Theme</th>
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<td><strong>I. Struggling in Private About Disclosure</strong></td>
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<td>1. Significance of Past Abuse to One’s Identity</td>
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<td>2. Traumatic Intrusions</td>
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<td><strong>III. The Aftereffects of Disclosure</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Partner’s Response as a Mirroring of Abuse Dynamics</td>
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In brief, phase 1 (Struggling in Private about Disclosure) describes the various thoughts, fears, beliefs, and predictions participants had concerning what the disclosure would mean in the context of their romantic relationship. The different ways participants disclosed and their experience of the disclosure constituted phase 2 (The Experience of Disclosure). In phase 3 (The Aftereffects of Disclosure), participants’ described their own and their romantic partners’ attempts to assimilate the disclosure, and thus the meaning of the participant’s past sexual abuse in the context of their romantic relationship.

Phase I: Struggling in Private about Disclosure

Participants brought several issues, concerns, and beliefs to bear on the act of disclosure. Some were related to the particular conflicts they experienced concerning their past sexual abuse. This section provides a framework for understanding the private meanings participants’ described as influencing their experiences of disclosure. Although the verbal act of disclosing is in many ways an interpersonal exchange, participants indicated several underlying influences on their disclosure experiences that reflected a more intrapersonal process prior to disclosure.

Theme 1: Significance of Past Abuse to One’s Identity. The significance of participants’ experiences of disclosure seemed to revolve around the tacit yet important question that they had asked themselves at various points in their lives: “How important is my past CSA to who I am?” They would then reflect on how their answer to this question changed, and how this impacted their changing disclosure process. However, for some participants, at certain points in their lives, especially when they were initially uncovering the impact of the abuse in their lives, the past abuse could have an all-consuming influence on their identity.

It was everything about who I was at that point. It was just so, so overwhelming and I was just so filled with rage and to the point where I think it was dangerous… I was either in pain or I was enraged and it just went on for months and months and months. And so it was all about who I was, so I think there wasn’t any way to avoid it, you know, he had to know what that was about (Debby).

Often, these same participants would later describe how this sense of the intensity of the past abuse as a dominant influence on their identities changed. Roberta describes this change, and how it impacted disclosure:

I also think because I was able to dissociate from the responsibility of it all, I presented it differently. I wasn’t shameful about it, because it was out of my control (Roberta).
Roberta further explains that whereas once there was much emotional intensity in disclosing—often her disclosures would lead to “blow ups” in her relationships—she notices that in gradually recovering from the impact of the past abuse in her life, which she attributes to experiences in psychotherapy, the intensity around disclosure has also changed making the experience less important in terms of conveying a central part of who she is to her romantic partner.

Conversely, Megan’s account did not directly convey the aforementioned sense of changing significance in terms of identity that Roberta and Debby described. In some respects, Megan conveys that her disclosure experiences never had the emotional intensity that these other participants described. Rather than a dynamic process of change around disclosure, her descriptions were more static compared to other participants. In this regard, such divergence provides an important account.

Well, I don’t think it had anything to do with the spouse or romantic partner. I think I’m detached from it (Megan).

In one passage, she conveys some of the reasons for this difference.

You know, I shouldered everything; I shouldered the physical burden of caring for the house, the financial burden of caring in the house, and the emotional burden of taking care of my family… because he had a long history of problems. So, I was sort of the rock foundation of the family. Well, in therapy he’s beginning to come out of some of that and wanting to take on the responsibility of the family burden and umm in my therapy I’ve pretty much fallen apart, so I’ve needed to depend on him more, so there’s been a shift. A big shift in our marriage, which has made us talk about this a whole lot more than we ever had (Megan).

In this way, changing roles in Megan’s marriage have shifted the way she has talked about the past abuse. But, unlike other participants who described how the past abuse became a central part of their identities at some point in their lives that was then often conveyed through disclosing to their romantic partners, Megan’s descriptions also conveys the opposite pattern where participants attempted to deny or at least conceal the potential ways the past abuse would be conveyed in their sense of who they were when they were with their romantic partners.

In contrast to Megan and the other participants, Janice describes how she feels the impact of the abuse has had a more constant influence on her identity.

It’s not like something you just get over and it goes away, it’s lingering around us in our home, in between us, in me, to different degrees at different times, so it’s not gonna ever
be not there, I don’t think…it lessens and it has gotten better, but it’s always an impact…its like something that is always going to be a part of me and therefore us. It’s just weird to think therapy would finish it…it’s a part of my history. Umm will always be a part of my history. I understand that more all the time (Janice).

This sense that Janice describes of “lingering” indicates her sense of the lack of closure around the impact of her past sexual abuse in her marriage. In this way, Janice conveys that the initial disclosure did not settle the matter; rather, she feels that the impact goes on exerting itself, which reflects how she feels the past abuse has impacted her identity as well as how the disclosure is experienced in her marriage.

As Janice, Debby, Roberta, and Megan indicate, there can be a number of ways one’s identity is impacted by past sexual abuse, which, in turn leads to a number of ways that disclosure occurs with romantic partners.

**Theme 2: Traumatic Intrusions.** Participants often described how they were impacted by their past sexual abuse in becoming sexually involved with a romantic partner and how this sometimes led to private struggles about whether to disclose such reactions. Sometimes participants experienced flashbacks and dissociated in sexual encounters or had reactions to other stimuli related to their past abuse. In first becoming intimate with a romantic partner, Marie links such a reaction to the effects of her past sexual abuse and how this led to her first disclosure experience with a romantic partner.

The very first time was when I was 16 and I had a boyfriend for 4 ½ years. When we would start to become intimate, I would, what I thought was hallucinating, like I would see these pictures in my head of when I was little…it would be like these really intense situations and I would have to stop in the moment and I would just start crying (Marie).

Julie described a similar scenario. However, for Julie concrete reminders in the present brought on a traumatic intrusion from the past.

When I could smell the beer on his breath, it instantly sent me into feeling really uncomfortable because when I was real young, like 4 to 7 years old, the man who molested me drank beer, and so that smell of the beer on the breath took me back within an instant to that, and I felt really uncomfortable and I remember just saying, “Just please stop, just stop, stop, stop” (Julie).

In both situations, Julie and Marie describe how their triggered memories of the past
sexual abuse led to the request to stop the sexual activities in which they were involved. The experience of feeling triggered, initially a private experience, then prompted questions from their partner that led to an unfolding process of disclosure.

Roberta also described feeling vulnerable and how this led to disclosure. Although her experience did not have the intensity that Marie and Julie described, she still felt a pressure to disclose that arose out of a traumatic intrusion from the past. She describes the incident in the context of hearing a book report concerning childhood sexual abuse:

It was about like this really horrific sexual abuse and I got up and walked out of the room. It really affected me. And so umm I didn’t go back until he was done, I didn’t want to hear it. And so, he had asked me, “what was that all about?” I’m like no, you know, I tried to blow it off, I didn’t really want to acknowledge that I had any problem with that. I’m like, “I just don’t want to hear that stuff,” and then I told him… (Roberta)

As a result of the ways they would get triggered in the context of their romantic relationships, participants often attempted to conceal their experience from their romantic partner. Sometimes the sense of vulnerability was particularly intense and disclosure became unavoidable. In these situations, participants were often triggered to disclose and thus often felt they were not choosing to disclose.

Theme 3: Fear of Disclosure. Participants described several fears of disclosure that they struggled with and how these became underlying influences on their disclosure process. One set of fears evolved out of the adverse responses that had resulted from many participants past experiences of disclosure. Many had been rejected, abandoned, objectified, disbelieved and misunderstood during their disclosures to past romantic partners as well as family members and these outcomes led to ongoing fears about disclosure. Shawna describes such fears as they concern disclosure to her romantic partner.

That was a big fear, of how he was going to respond. I’m always afraid of people getting scared off when they know…because I was still in the middle of being abandoned by my family during the trial, so I was very afraid of another person abandoning me (Shawna).

Many participants also believed that their disclosure and the meaning it conveyed could not be assimilated in the context of their romantic relationship. Participants thus feared rejection from romantic partners. Roberta describes this fear after her first romantic partner was rejecting of her disclosure:

It was extremely rejecting because I trusted him…he was my first serious boyfriend and I was telling him something that I had never told a man before…this was someone that I
was intimate with...so my initial reaction was just to shut down...I think the shame came back again, like “oh my gosh, see, I can’t even talk about it…” So, when it came to my second serious boyfriend, I was nervous about telling him (Roberta).

Other participants, like Janice and Julie, feared disclosing to their romantic partners because of the multiple layers of meaning entangled in disclosing. For Janice, this involved certain characteristics of her past abuse:

People don’t know what to say when you say you’re sexually abused and my experience is they really don’t know what to say when you say you were sexually abused by a woman. And they don’t know what to say when you’re sexually abused by a woman who is a minister (Janice).

Julie similarly described the fear she had of romantic partners not accepting her because of the complicated explanation that she feared would ensue in disclosing the past abuse to a romantic partner. As she explains, her disclosure would involve not only revealing that she was sexually abused as a child, but also that because of the abuse she contracted an STD.

The reason that it is so confusing now is that I had not been diagnosed with the STD until just a couple of years ago so the relationships that I’ve had in the last couple of years with different men have not gotten to the level that I felt I’ve wanted to disclose...there is a fear of rejection in that, you know? And I mean there’s a fear of rejection about having sexual abuse in the past anyways, and then to have this life long consequence of it too. Umm some people don’t want to have that in their life or have that be an issue, and so you know, its added sensitivity (Julie).

Theme 4: Choosing Not to Disclose. Participants described the complex circumstances involved in their process of choosing not to disclose to some romantic partners. Although Marie had experienced a positive disclosure experience with a romantic partner when she was 16, she describes her decision not to disclose in a subsequent relationship at 21.

I didn’t really have a friendship with this person; it just started more on a physical basis and this person wasn’t in the mindset to try to understand or even want to hear it. I don’t believe I ever even shared that with him...it was my own thing to deal with and I wasn’t really sharing with him, so he didn’t have an idea...he wasn’t the type of person that would be willing to listen or take it into consideration (Marie).

In contrast to feelings she had with her earlier partner—ones that involved feeling understood, validated, and accepted after disclosing—Marie’s subsequent decision to become involved with an insensitive partner that she construes as unable to hear her story is puzzling to her. She explains that she felt like she was “replaying a role” wherein disclosure became
prohibitive. From Marie’s perspective, this situation reflected one from her childhood when her mother refused to acknowledge that she was abused.

For many participants, disclosing past sexual abuse to romantic partners was the exception rather than the rule. Participants described becoming sexually involved with some romantic partners and the issue of the past sexual abuse was never disclosed. Debby describes her own process of disclosure across different situations with intimate partners.

In that period of time, you know, I must have had at least 20 sexual partners…and I didn’t disclose it to everybody. So, there was a certain level of intimacy. It wasn’t about sexual intimacy because I could do that easily. But a certain level of emotional intimacy in a sense that this relationship was significant, that I felt like I had to say something… “If you are just going to use me for a month of two, I don’t need to tell you” (Debby).

Julie expressed a similar approach in dating relationships that influenced her decision to disclose. In the passage that follows, she describes her internal struggles around control and how these influenced one particular disclosure experience when she was 28.

I mean I had been intimate with other men, but it was not in the same way. Like with this man, he was actually the first man that I was as sexually intimate with and was in a relationship with. Because I had had those other experiences with men outside a relationship, but to be emotionally tied and also sexually tied was new. Whereas engaging physically with these other men in the interim who were just my dating partners didn’t even come up because I think I felt more in control. I felt more in control of my feelings because I knew I wasn’t really investing in that person (Julie).

Thus, Julie’s reflections convey a complex process whereby disclosure left her feeling out of control in some way and the majority of the time it became easier to avoid the risk that often went with disclosure. It was only when participants’ felt the relationship was important enough that they began considering the risk of disclosing, though the process of determining when it became important enough was often unclear.

In other situations, participants’ described their process of actively concealing certain aspects of their abuse history. For Debby, this decision not to disclose related to both her own fear of the consequences of disclosure as well as her own lack of clarity regarding a particular abuse situation.

One of my perpetrators was my father and, while that came up in therapy, I’ve never really come to completely accept that he was; and I have some doubts as to whether he did molest me. And so, for example, in this last relationship, my husband does not know that my father may have been a perpetrator so I made that the first relationship where I chose not to disclose that (Debby).
This process of concealing important aspects of her abuse history contrasts with how Debby had previously disclosed. Whereas she had once felt unable to set limits around the details of her past abuse, with her most recent partner there are many aspects of her abuse history that remain concealed; so much so, that she reflects in the interview on the potential hazard of keeping a “secret” though the feared consequences of revealing it are apparently more problematic.

Phase II: The Experience of Disclosing

Participants’ descriptions of their disclosure experiences were highly varied, both within and across romantic relationships. Disclosing could sometimes be described as a deliberate act with a rehearsed logic; other times participants described their process of disclosing as triggered, as out of their control, or otherwise unexpected. Participants also frequently provided a sense of how their disclosure experiences were meaningful exchanges where they felt their identities as well as a continued relationship were at stake. This section will highlight the various themes that reflected participants’ experiences in disclosing.

Theme 5: Stigmatization in Disclosure. Most participants described the various ways being sexually abused led to feeling stigmatized. In disclosing to a romantic partner, this sense of stigmatization was often re-evoked. Both Debby and Julie used particularly evocative language to describe their feelings in this regard.

And so in getting to know my partner, I felt like I wanted, or I felt like they needed to know that, I think that was more it, not so much that I wanted them to know, but I felt like they needed to know. It was kind of like, you know, putting on the warning label: “warning: this, you know, is all a little defective and let me tell you why. I’m a little bit screwed up” (Debby).

Julie describes the same sense of feeling stigmatized when she disclosed. Thus, an important component of the experience of disclosing was revealing the feelings associated with stigmatization.

I think part of it was probably me wanting to expose the fact that I didn’t feel like a perfect package, to wonder what he would do with it (Julie).

Participants, like Julie, thus feared that the romantic partner might not accept them even though they felt compelled to disclose. This double-bind that many participants experienced was
a powerful force for feelings of shame during the act of disclosing. That is, the desire to be known often became complicated by and led to feeling exposed.

For Roberta, her sense of feeling stigmatized by her past abuse was entangled with feeling that her past abuse had sexualized many of her experiences in her early 20’s. Under the duress of disclosing to one partner, she describes how these two parts of her experience became intertwined.

Anything that had to do with my sexuality was just thrown out on the table and totally revealed to him. And it wasn’t anything I was proud of…(Roberta)

Thus, the shame Roberta felt concerning her past sexualization in romantic relationships also evoked the shame she felt in terms of her past abuse.

Shawna also describes how she has had to struggle with feelings of shame related to being sexually abused and how this influenced disclosure.

It’s not shameful except for the perpetrator…it’s okay to talk about it with him. Sometimes I lapse into not wanting to talk about it because I’m so ashamed, and I know that that’s some distorted thinking (Shawna).

Here Shawna’s vacillation between it being okay to disclose and not wanting to disclose indicates the affective component of shame that she tries to cope with by cognitively re-framing her experiences of shame. As many participants indicated, feeling stigmatized in disclosure frequently accompanied their experiences.

Theme 6: Disclosure as an Explanation. Disclosure often took place as a sometimes-urgent attempt to explain what participants considered odd behavior. Sometimes participants felt that they behaved in ways that left their partner with unanswered questions. For Marie, disclosure functioned to resolve this ambiguity when she was concerned about her partner’s reaction to her various signs of being adversely impacted when they would become sexual.

Because my odd behavior, you know, there was no definition for it; there was no explanation, so when I finally started figuring everything out and putting 2 and 2 together, there was an urgency because I didn’t want him to feel like it was him or something he was doing…So there was a sense of urgency for me to tell him just so that he would know where I was coming from (Marie).

Participants also sometimes felt their romantic partner would perceive something damaged in them, even prior to their having disclosed the past abuse. However, their descriptions
of how their partners arrived at this perception were often unclear. Debby’s story provides a sense of the explanatory process that arose out of the feelings involved in this perception.

They would see that, they would already see that, or sense that, or know that somehow, and so that was a way of sort of putting it into context, “well, this is why I am the way I am.” I think I always went into it feeling like I wasn’t the freshest piece of fruit and that somehow I needed to offer some explanation for that (Debby).

In disclosing to one of her romantic partners, Roberta’s disclosure took the form of an explanation when she and her partner were in the middle of a conflict concerning her past sexualized behavior. At this point in her life, the insights she had gained from therapy provided an explanatory framework for her behavior and she attempted to convey this insight through disclosing.

For so long I had minimized it. So, it was really hard for me to see how much it played out in my life. Like just the messages and all of that and I just didn’t associate the two… With him, I remember just explaining, “okay, I’m f***ed up in this area and I think this is why” (Roberta).

Theme 7: Control/Loss of Control in Disclosing. One salient characteristic of many participants’ descriptions of their disclosure process involved the dichotomy between control and loss of control. In many instances, their narratives conveyed how they sometimes felt flooded by affect concerning the past abuse and how this experience was disclosed to their partner. In these scenarios participants had no coherent framework in which to situate their feelings of having been abused. However, participants also conveyed an opposite sense of tight control over their feelings and how this impacted their disclosure process. In this sense, the theme of control appeared throughout all the participants’ stories. For Megan, this theme of control played out in the way she would disclose her past abuse.

Well, I would tell my story like it was something factual, like it was something I had seen on TV (Megan).

Throughout much of Megan’s story this same description of being detached in disclosure recurs. In a later passage, she relates this to the importance of maintaining control.

I’m very much in control. I try to stay very in control of myself, I try to stay in control of the way things are going…I’ve always tried to be somewhat invincible…to protect myself by not feeling about things (Megan).
Thus, disclosure was often something factual, something she felt removed from, like something she had seen on TV. One divergence from this sense of the disclosure as detached occurred when Megan felt emotionally involved during a sexual experience with her husband.

When we first started, when we first actually started being intimate umm, sexually intimate, I told. At one point I actually cried because it was the first time that it didn’t hurt… I guess it was probably one of the first times I felt emotionally involved with it (Megan).

Megan’s sudden awareness of a felt sense of connection with her body was an experience that led to increasing intimacy and suspended the sense of control that was usually a part of her disclosure experiences. In this way, her changing emotional experience of sexuality represented a kind of disclosure to her husband, as well as to her self, of her changing relation to the past abuse.

In contrast to Megan’s more characteristic description of disclosure as tightly controlled, Debby conveyed the loss of control that was intrinsic to her disclosures to romantic partners, especially when she first began uncovering her past abuse at the beginning of her recovery.

It was just flooding, completely flooding, so I didn’t have any, it wasn’t a choice…I mean it was, it was just like vomiting it up all over the place…So yeah, I mean the whole disclosure, I think it was just all over the place…it wasn’t a choice with him, I think that was the most remarkable thing. After that was when I started to have to think about it and how to put it into some sort of framework for how I wanted it to be. I had to make a decision about what and how much to share (Debby).

Other participants also described a process wherein they developed an implicit logic of how to disclose the past abuse. Marie, who like Debby, also became flooded by affect in one particular disclosure experience, described a process of gradually constructing a framework in which she could safely disclose her past abuse. Like others, Marie provides the sense of increased cognitive control over the disclosure process.

There always was kind of in your head, you are kind of practicing the speech a little bit, “how am I gonna say this so it doesn’t freak ‘em out too much?” I would just kind of go over the surface and be like, “okay, well, you know in my past this happened,” and just kind of give a rough outline, you know, of what happened (Marie).

For Julie, the struggle between control and loss of control was ongoing. It was not only in the initial disclosure that she felt she lacked control, but also in the various non-verbal signs of disclosure that she attempted but was unable to conceal from her partner.
A lot of times, whenever I was just trying to be in the moment, and even though I wasn’t, if I wasn’t emotionally present, because I was too much in my head trying to figure out why I was feeling weird or whatever, you know, something had switched for me, but I hadn’t said anything about it. *He could sense it.* And so often times he would just ask me, you know, to look at him. And it was hard to look at him in the moments that I wasn’t being 100% authentic, in the moment (Julie).

Thus, even though Julie attempted to maintain control in terms of not conveying her distress to her romantic partner, still this distress was disclosed. Similarly, the majority of participants conveyed this ongoing struggle between feeling out of control in disclosing as well as their various attempts to feel in control while disclosing. As is indicated, there was a wide spectrum of types of disclosure based on participants’ sense of control that extended from disclosure as vomiting to disclosure as detached.

*Theme 8: Timing Disclosure.* Participants described several ways they developed a sense of how to time their disclosures. In this regard, Marie described a kind of internal barometer for when she felt she should disclose.

I think it’s a point where you start to kind of trust the other individual and you are sharing things about your life that are on a deeper level. I think that’s usually when it would come out. Or when the other person would disclose something about their life that was pretty personal, you are on that level. So, you think, okay, you know, and you kind of gauge, you kind of can know the kind of people that will handle it like and process it and not run because that was always a fear is if I tell them, they are going to be overwhelmed and they’re not gonna want to be with me anymore (Marie).

Thus, participants would assess if the partner could “handle” the disclosure. In some instances, this sense of timing was off.

It was difficult because I wasn’t even in my right frame of mind really, you know, I was intoxicated. So not the proper setting to be talking about anything of substance, especially something like that (Julie).

Later Julie further elaborates on her sense of the disclosure being poorly timed.

I mean we had only been dating a month and then here’s this red flag about this chic that’s just out of control or something. I mean just putting myself in his shoes; after only a date, or after only a month of dating this woman, and here’s this heavy issue of this past sexual abuse and how I have or haven’t healed from that (Julie).

Much of this concern with the timing of their disclosures involved participants’ fear of how their partners would respond. In this regard, Shawna attempted to only gradually disclose because of this fear.
Yeah, his response was kind of what kept me from laying it all out, right at the beginning, you know bits and pieces over the years. I probably still haven’t told him everything (Shawna).

Like Shawna, participants’ often felt the disclosure, if poorly timed, would not be contained. Participants’ disclosure experiences were thus influenced by this internal sense of how well such disclosures were timed.

**Theme 9: A Changing Sense of Vigilance in Disclosing.** Several participants reflected on their process of becoming hyper-vigilant and watchful during the act of disclosing, and how this sense of vigilance changed over time. Debby relates this former sense of vigilance to self-presentational concerns, and then reflects on how this changed in her most recent disclosure experience.

So, it’s like this big set up, you know, we’d sit on the couch and everything would be just right and you know, and I’d say, “I have this thing I have to tell you. I was sexually abused” and I’d be reading, you know, watching for their reaction and all this stuff…So, yeah, I think I wanted to see, how it was going to change, color the way they saw me. It was like I was intently watching them to see how they were seeing me. And in this relationship I didn’t feel like I needed to make the pronouncement (Debby).

Consistent with Debby’s description, other participants also conveyed how this vigilance when disclosing changed. Whereas participants had once attributed much significance to disclosing and became vigilant about how the disclosure played out, in later disclosures this vigilance seemed to dissipate. Participants thus became more self-confident in disclosing and conveyed that the meaning of the abuse was already decided in advance, and would not be disruptive to their relationships. In disclosing to her fiancé, Roberta describes this shift.

It wasn’t so much, “Oh, you know, *I have to tell him what happened to me*” (Roberta).

In describing this shift, Roberta’s voice changes to mimic the former intensity she felt during disclosure. In many of her past disclosures, Roberta’s identity was at stake. She would frequently contend with feelings of shame and describe her concerns about how the romantic partner viewed her during disclosure. However, with her fiancé, relatively less importance was attributed to her past abuse. Instead, the meaning of the disclosure had more of a purpose in conveying to her partner how they need to be aware of the problem of childhood sexual abuse when they have children.

Similarly, Marie describes how she is much less vigilant now in disclosing and how this is a reflection of her recovery process.
Now that I’m older and I’ve worked more through it, it’s not so much of an issue as it once was. I think it’s the way that I handle it too, kind of like on a lighter note, you know, not so like deep, like “oh, this happened or whatever” (Marie).

Phase III: The Aftereffects of Disclosure

This phase of the disclosure process conveys the meanings participants’ disclosure experiences held for them after they had disclosed. These meanings were influenced by how romantic partners responded to participants’ disclosures, and how such responses impacted participants. Partners’ responses could be categorized as negative, neutral, and positive. Each of these types of responses had implications for how the participant and romantic partner were able to integrate the participants’ past abuse into the context of the romantic relationship. Sometimes, especially when participants received negative responses, no such integration was described. Other times the disclosure may have been accepted but still there seemed little meaningful integration in the relationship. In receiving more positive responses to their disclosures, participants described how this was an important source of healing in their overall recovery. However, it was not only the participant that was impacted by disclosing. Participants also described their perception of how the romantic partner was impacted and how this too influenced the relationship. In this section, I describe the various emergent themes that speak to these various aspects of the aftereffects of disclosure.

Theme 10: Partner’s Response as a Mirroring of Abuse Dynamics. Most participants described, at least at one point in their narrative, the unsettling feeling of a partner’s response to their disclosure as a mirroring of the conflicts they had concerning their past abuse. Such adverse mirroring responses seemed to impact participants in several ways. One example involved how the aftereffects of disclosure could function to recapitulate features of the original abuse situation. Debby’s account shows most directly how this sometimes played out. Whereas the partner she refers to had primarily responded in a positive way to her various disclosures, it is evident that in one exchange his response functioned very differently.

D: I told him something, a memory that had come up in therapy, and he called me “little girl” and wanted to have sex with me right there in his office. And I was really offended because I was in a vulnerable place and I felt like I was being abused again. And so, I never really experienced that with anybody else, but I think that it made me cautious what those images were doing for them...for him, it was clear to me what he was doing with them...he was sexualizing me as a little kid being abused.
For other participants, like Julie, it is evident that some adverse mirroring responses can both recapitulate dynamics related to the abuse, as well as influence Julie’s tendencies to cope in maladaptive ways in response to the abuse. In the description of one partner’s response, she describes how after she had disclosed her partner responded by taking a stance much like one she had formerly perceived in herself. That is, he colluded with her desire to desensitize from the effects of her past abuse when they were involved in sexual activities.

That was my mind set: “If I can just stick it out long enough, then I won’t feel this way any more…” With this boyfriend at 28 years old, I’m right back to where I was in high school; but with a partner saying “yeah, yeah, yeah, let’s do that, let’s do this whole desensitization thing and it’s not going to feel as bad to you anymore…” And he was still getting what he wanted in the process (Julie).

Oh I see. So it was like a voice from the past, but your past voice? (Interviewer)

My past voice…that was being validated (Julie).

Although Julie had previously disclosed her discomfort in becoming sexual, she felt that both she and her partner were unable to address this issue in the relationship in an effective way wherein she might feel safe and understood. Instead, her own maladaptive tendency to desensitize was perceived in her insensitive partner. In addition, when she explains that, “he was still getting what he wanted in the process,” Julie conveys that his attempts to desensitize were somewhat coercive and in this sense his response recapitulated elements of her original abuse situation.

Janice described a similar process of feeling unable to speak back when confronted with an adverse mirroring response after disclosing to her husband.

His initial reaction was, “well, you remained in that so you must have liked it…” I didn’t feel that was my experience at all…this was prior to any therapy or anything, and I was really confused about why I did stay in that relationship. I mean I wasn’t three years old…so it wasn’t like I was captive, I could have left…I felt like I had a lot of options…and him saying that made me feel like it was my fault more than I already did (Janice).

For Roberta, one partner’s response was not perceived as negatively as those described above by Debby, Julie, Shawna, and Janice. As compared to another partner of Roberta’s who had been rejecting of her disclosure, the partner’s response described below was not in any sense as negative or adverse. However, even in more neutral responses it becomes evident that the partner’s response can mirror a tendency to cope with the past abuse in maladaptive ways.
The second one, he was just more like, “oh gosh, I’m sorry that happened to you.” That was really it; I don’t think he really knew what to do with any of it (Roberta).

How did you feel that he didn’t know what to do with any of it? (Interviewer)

It didn’t feel so rejecting to me…I told him and I just kind of went back to the minimizing of it all (Roberta).

In this regard, Roberta’s partner’s response was not hurtful in the sense of exacerbating the feelings she already felt about the past abuse. Rather, his response reflected the status quo in terms of how she was coping with the impact of her past abuse. However, later on with a different romantic partner, as Roberta was changing through her experiences in psychotherapy, she conveys the collision between the messages she was receiving in therapy versus those she received from her romantic partner.

I’m going to therapy with somebody I don’t have an intimate relationship with; so, I’m kind of like uncovering all of these things and feeling like, “Oh gosh, thank God you are telling me that, that feels good, I don’t have anything to be shameful of;” yet, I’m in this relationship and I’m with somebody that supposedly cares about me and we’re intimate and we’re you know its like a more real relationship and he’s like, “No, she’s got it all wrong, you do have something to be shameful of” (Roberta)

So you had really mixed messages when all of this stuff was coming up for you? (Interviewer)

Very. Oh my gosh, it was horrible (Roberta).

It sounds really confusing (Interviewer).

It was very… I can tell that my therapist wanted me to just get it, that it wasn’t my fault, my sexuality had a lot to do with that…I finally got to a point where I could accept that thought and attitude and then it was totally shut down by somebody that supposedly cared about me you know in the real world…(Roberta).

In this way, the messages she was receiving from her partner recapitulated the sense of responsibility, guilt, and shame Roberta felt associated with the abuse.

As all but one participant indicated, there were several ways the aftereffects of disclosure were such that they re-evoked a number of the conflicts and internalized messages they experienced in relation to the past abuse.

Theme 11: Perceiving Mismatch Between One’s Own and Partner’s Construal of Abuse.

All but one participant provided several examples of their perception after disclosing that one or
more of their partners misunderstood the meaning the past abuse had for them. In this regard, there was a mismatch between the participants’ experience and the partners’ understanding of it that reflected, from the participant’s point of view, a lack of empathy from the partner.

He was surprised, not shocked, but didn’t really know what to say. He asked, “if my perpetrator would die…would it make it all better…would it be better for you if he was dead?” I don’t know where he was taking that, but I had to explain to him that, “he’s really not in my life right now, it’s the effect he’s had on my beliefs.” It’s not that he’s alive. I’d like him to be dead; that would be wonderful. But it’s not his presence in the world that screws me up (Shawna).

For Janice, there is a sense of resignation when she reflects on the mismatch in understanding between her and her romantic partner around the past abuse. This perception leaves her feeling isolated, as she describes below.

I don’t think he wants to…really be there, I mean really be there. He listens, you know, and maybe nobody can really be there; we’ve talked about that before…its something that you’ve experienced yourself; nobody can really identify with that (Janice).

In a similar way, several participants described a gap in understanding between them and their partners around the meaning of the abuse. In Janice’s case, as illustrated throughout her narrative, this mismatch in understanding went beyond the initial disclosure and influenced many aspects of the relationship with her husband.

Other participants, like Marie, would more readily address this mismatch. In the passage below, she describes her process of explaining her perspective after disclosing so as to avoid being perceived as a “victim.”

They think that maybe I need to be helped in some way…when I have to correct them and be like, “oh, no, no, no, you know, I’ve gone to counseling and I’ve done my work and I’ve moved past it…” I think initially, for some people, it was like they’d see me a little more weak than I really was (Marie).

Roberta’s expression of this theme in reflecting on her various partners responses—“he didn’t know what to do with it”—captures many participants sentiments about their partners responses. Several conveyed that most of the time their partners were unprepared for their disclosure and indicate a response that though not always negative, was often out of tune with what participants expected and oftentimes needed from their partners.

Theme 12: Impact of Disclosure on Sexual Relationship. All 7 participants described how the past abuse they experienced had impacted their developing sexuality. This impact was also
signified in their disclosure process, which had a further impact in their relationship. In particular, they would describe how their partners were impacted by their disclosures.

Well, when he has asked me if I would be interested in any kind of sexual activity, he asks in a very questioning way. He just obviously has a tendency to even ask. For the most part he doesn’t even ask. I feel like I have to be the one to initiate (Megan).

Megan links her husband’s hesitation in sexual activities partly to his depression, but also conveys how her disclosure has impacted his hesitance.

I kept telling him over and over again we weren’t going to do certain things and he kept saying, “Are you feeling threatened, like I’m going to push for that?” (Megan)

As Megan explains, setting limits around sexual activities—and such limits were often set in the context of her various disclosures—may have influenced her husband’s feelings about becoming sexual.

For Janice, the disclosure of the past abuse had a number of consequences that influenced her husband’s perception and which had an impact on their relationship. She indicates that after disclosing it left him with a sense of “intrigue” about what happened when she was abused. This intrigue has also led to his ongoing questions concerning her feelings about her female friends as well as her own sexuality.

I think that he had a little bit of intrigue, honestly, because it sounds really bad, I know, but, he has made comments on occasion about lesbians, “are you a lesbian, do you think you might be a lesbian?” (Janice)

However, such questions from Janice’s spouse are not the only way her disclosure has impacted their relationship. She also describes other specific impacts on their relationship related to the disclosure of her abuse.

He has suffered too in that she stole things from our marriage, from our sexual relationship. So he knows those things because of flashes that happen in sex or things that I cannot tolerate or nightmares that I have…As far as him suffering from this too, aspects of our sex life have suffered because of it, so he’s suffered in that way (Janice).

After being called “little girl” after one particularly adverse disclosure experience, Debby
described the fears she had of how images associated with her past sexual abuse might infiltrate her current sexual encounters. She also described how she attempted to modulate this impact by limiting her disclosures.

I didn’t know what it was doing for the other guys and I thought more often it would be kind of an icky turnoff…it was this relationship that I’m in now that I, for the first time, decided that I just wanted to make sure he didn’t have any specific images that he carried around with him of me and what happened…I still felt like he needed, and deserved to know that that had happened in my life, but without the pictures that went with it (Debby).

Theme 13: Mutuality in Disclosure. The majority of participants described various ways their disclosures had been positive for them and this invariably involved some sense of mutuality in the process of disclosure. Both Debby and Marie identified the first romantic partner to whom they disclosed as special in the sense of helping them feel understood and supported despite the fact that they were just beginning to unravel the meaning of the abuse. In both cases, they describe that their partners had some basis for understanding their disclosure. For Marie, this involved her partner having had a past of sexual abuse, which made her feel that “it was almost like he knew before I knew.” This helped Marie to feel safe in disclosing.

He was just so understanding and never aggressive or pushing…I didn’t feel so by myself…I felt like someone understood. I mean as much as my sister knew about what happened to me, it never happened to her. With him, it was like, “oh gosh, okay, so I’m not so alone, like someone understands the feelings that come along with this…” (Marie).

Debby describes a similar sense of mutuality with the first romantic to whom she disclosed. He had had “his own kind of issues” and “was in therapy too,” which made disclosure safe.

He was the first person I ever knew that I could just sob in his arms…I totally believe that’s why he was in my life at that time and for no other reason…he went through some very difficult stuff and I went through some very difficult stuff with the right person (Debby).

Julie also described a sense of mutuality surrounding the circumstances when she disclosed at 21 and how this helped her feel safe in disclosing. Like Debby and Marie, Julie’s partner had experienced his own trauma; he had recently learned of his mother’s rape when she was a child. It was through her partner’s disclosure that Julie then felt safe to share her story. In addition, their shared faith contributed to a context of mutuality that helped them make meaning together of their painful individual experiences.
Other participants, such as Roberta and Megan described additional influences that helped make disclosure safe. Often this safety involved perceiving that their social world involved others who understood their experience. For Megan, being involved in Alcoholics Anonymous where others shared difficult stories contributed to her sharing her past abuse to the first few romantic partners to whom she disclosed. Roberta also describes the positive benefit that came out of disclosing to a fellow graduate student in social work.

Because we were both like in a graduate program, and social workers and stuff like that, he was able to handle what I told him in caring and loving way. And he was actually probably the person that really helped me get into therapy for it (Roberta).

Thus, several participants conveyed the importance of situating their personal experience of abuse in a wider social context. For Marie, this sense of mutuality extended to the wider culture in which she felt there was a greater capacity for understanding the reality of childhood sexual abuse when compared to her mother’s generation.

I think a lot of people can relate whether it has happened personally to them or someone they love or know or a friend. I think like, say my mom’s generation, she’s almost 70, there was a lot of things going on in those generations; they didn’t talk about it at all, like it was kind of swept under the carpet. Whereas our generation, I think people are a little more open to talking about it and like hearing other people's experiences. I think that was definitely on my side (Marie).

This sense of the culture being more accepting was an important influence in Marie’s perception and expectation that romantic partners would generally be accepting of her when she disclosed. Such a perception signified a counterpoint to expectations many participants had concerning their disclosures. Frequently they described feeling isolated because of having been abused, especially when they perceived that others had no basis for understanding the meaning the abuse had for them. However, when participants’ felt there was some foundation of understanding and their partners responded positively, disclosure was transformative in helping participants make sense of their past abuse.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to enrich understanding of how disclosing childhood sexual abuse to romantic partners can create a unique set of challenges and possibilities for women with histories of CSA as they attempt to address the impact of past sexual abuse in their lived experience. The seven participants’ stories conveyed that their disclosure experiences to
romantic partners were often meaningful ones where aspects of their identity, developing sexuality, capacity for intimacy, as well as their ongoing recovery process were uniquely situated. Several of the 13 themes that emerged out of the women’s accounts suggest aspects of this disclosure process that have not been a detailed focus of previous studies (Anderson-Jacob & McCarthy-Veach, 2005; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004, 2005; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Wind, 1994). The findings are now reviewed to explore their relevance in two domains: expanding conceptual implications of this disclosure process; and, recovery from past sexual abuse. In addition, practical implications for therapists are discussed throughout.

**Conceptual Implications**

Consistent with prior qualitative studies on CSA disclosure (Allagia, 2004; Donalek, 2001; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004, 2005; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005), the findings of this study suggest the importance of situating understanding of the disclosure process from within the social context it takes place. In conceptualizing this process, we identified three phases that emerged from the seven women’s narratives—**Struggling in Private about Disclosure, The Experience of Disclosing, and The Aftereffects of Disclosure**—to indicate that disclosing past sexual abuse to romantic partners is both a discrete event as well as an unfolding process within romantic relationships. That is, it is not only the act of disclosure that was important to participants in their experiences of disclosure. How they felt after the disclosure also influenced their ongoing decision about what and how much they would share with their partner and with subsequent partners. Our findings thus support the idea of taking a holistic approach to understanding this disclosure process as situated in multiple contexts.

For instance, many participants conveyed how their experiences were shaped in a developmental context. They characterized the change in their disclosure process depending on their age, the sense they had of where they were at in their recovery, and what they had learned in their intimate relationships. Where once they had struggled intensely with feeling impacted by the past abuse, later this sense of struggle subsided and disclosing did not feel as significant an event. As one participant put it, when she was just discovering the impact of the abuse in her life she had felt like it was “everything about who I was;” this self-defined sense was then elaborated when she described disclosing to the first romantic partner she disclosed to as a “vomiting,” that the disclosure was “all over the place.” In subsequent relationships, disclosing was still important and she would thus convey the vigilance that attended the process though she was able to exert
more control over the form the disclosure took. In this regard, she conveyed the need to contain the disclosure process, as she felt not doing so could interfere with sexual intimacy. In a later period of her life, and after engaging in therapy, she no longer felt she had to make the “pronouncement” to her partner, as if to suggest the past abuse was no longer a central part of her identity. Such findings are consistent with studies that have traced the developmental impact of CSA on identity (Herman, 1992; Phillips & Daniluk, 2004), and elaborate more fully the need to broaden conceptualizations to consider how developmental issues of identity, intimacy, and recovery all bear on the disclosure process in a bi-directional relationship with each other.

Conceptualizing Types of Disclosures

We also suggest the importance of understanding how women disclose to romantic partners. Allagia (2004) identified six different types of disclosures in her study of children’s disclosure process, five of which (purposeful, elicited/prompted, behavioral, purposefully withheld, and triggered) were found in the seven participants descriptions. Although the circumstances are different when a child discloses CSA, the present findings also indicate that disclosure was often more than a purposeful act. Particularly, it may be useful to consider when participants were triggered to disclose. Often these triggered disclosures occurred in sexual situations involving dissociation and associated traumatic sequelae (e.g., flashbacks) as compared to other disclosure types. Although participants indicated some ability to decide who of their various partners they would disclose to, their frequent descriptions of feeling triggered indicate that disclosure is often less voluntary. This highlights the sense of danger and vulnerability participants often described as accompanying their disclosure experiences. For this reason, therapists can help their clients become aware of and able to manage the ways they might become triggered to disclose and thus help them create disclosure situations with romantic partners that help them feel more safe and agentic in disclosing.

Participants also conveyed the various ways they felt their disclosures were elicited or prompted and how such elicitations often had conflicting outcomes. One participant felt her partner became too keyed into her various signs of discomfort during sexual activities. She would then feel compelled to disclose despite having misgivings about doing so. Another indicated that one such elicitation helped her face more directly the impact of her past abuse and subsequently get help for it. In these situations, participants conveyed relatively more control over the process as compared to triggered disclosures. However, such findings do provide insight
into the many signs, both verbal and non-verbal, that are often communicated and which lead partners to elicit disclosure.

In a related way, several participants also conveyed how the past sexual abuse was disclosed behaviorally. Participants believed that their “odd behavior”—that is, episodes of crying, of feeling absent in sexual situations, or other more general indications of anxiety—had disclosed ambiguous information. Or, in another example of behavioral disclosure, a participant attributed her sexualized behavior in her twenties to her past abuse; for her, this was a behavioral representation of the past abuse. In this sense, through therapy, understanding of the behavior functioned as a disclosure to the self, which was then more purposefully disclosed to her partner. In this regard, different types of disclosures could work together to convey participants’ complex sense of being impacted while with their romantic partners. Considering such findings can help therapists have empathy for the various ways their clients may disclose the past abuse, and thus help them better cope with the impact of past sexual abuse in their romantic relationships.

**Impact on the Romantic Relationship**

Participants’ reflections also focused on the way establishing intimacy in their romantic relationships was impacted by the process of disclosing the past sexual abuse. As part of this process, participants described how they assessed their own readiness to share the feelings, experiences, and concerns related to having been abused. Their own sense of acceptability as a result of having been abused was at stake, and so an important issue often concerned how much they trusted their partner would respond in an accepting way. The bind that then often occurred for participants involved questioning themselves about how authentic, honest, or forthcoming they were being when they began to feel their partners were trustworthy, though they still realized that disclosing would entail risk; or, conversely, how they should proceed when they felt that their partner could not be trusted with the disclosure. Thus, as the process of disclosure evolved from being an internal process of assessing the risk to going forward with the disclosure (or not), it became more readily apparent how the partner’s response impacted both the process and outcome of the disclosure experience. In some cases, this could lead to a sense of interdependence and emotional closeness, which is consistent with models that describe interpersonal processes of establishing intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). That is, participants often described the increasing trust necessary in disclosing, the importance of receiving an empathic and caring response, as well as how this safety in disclosing led to
increased feelings of intimacy with the partner. Inevitably, such positive feelings involved the partner as his response conveyed a basis for understanding the feelings and concerns related to what the participant was disclosing.

However, the element of stigma and its associated feelings of shame, as well as feeling their sexualities had been traumatized by the past abuse sometimes complicated and obstructed participants' ability to establish and maintain intimacy during and after they had disclosed. Several of the participants in this study described feelings of shame or of memories of their past sexual abuse at some point in the disclosure process. This is consistent with previous research that has indicated how shame often accompanies CSA disclosure (Bonanno, et al. 2002). Yet, it was not so crucial that such feelings or memories surfaced, but rather that when they did, participants were able to manage them, sometimes with the help of their partner, so that they could safely establish and re-establish, if necessary, a sense of intimacy with their partner. But this often did not occur, and this impacted intimacy with the partner in a number of adverse ways. For instance, one participant described feeling inauthentic because of her attempts to conceal her feelings of discomfort from her partner after an initial disclosure; another felt like a “rag doll” in sexual situations with one of her partners, and yet never disclosed perceiving that he was not caring enough to “hear” the disclosure; and, for others, feelings of shame lingered and limited the extent that participants felt they could connect with their partners—in some situations, this led to ceasing any sexual involvement with their partner. As many participants indicated, it was as if they got stuck or frozen in the past and were unable to experience meaningful intimacy, which is consistent with research that has examined the temporal orientation toward the past that occurs for some incest victims (Holman & Silver, 1998; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). That is, many participants felt aspects of their disclosure revisited their past not only on them individually, but also on their relationship.

In addition, the majority of participants conveyed how their sense of sexual and emotional intimacy was not necessarily conjoined in their experiences, and that it was only through their ongoing recovery that they realized they were more closely related. Such findings are consistent with studies that have investigated how sexuality can become distorted for some women who have been sexually abused in childhood (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Noll, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003), and several participants indicated their process of struggling with the disconnection between emotional and sexual intimacy; they further reflected on how this process
impacted disclosure. For many participants, this entailed that they could become sexual with a partner with whom they had no plans of establishing a long-term commitment and never feel the pressure to disclose. On the other hand, when they did begin to feel their partner was important to them, only then did disclosure become important. In another variation, some participants described how with some partners they could feel emotionally connected, something akin to a deep friendship, but not feel as sexually involved. In this situation, participants felt freer to disclose and this seemed to be related to feeling their sexuality was not an important focus in the relationship. These variations and different ways of approaching and retreating from intimacy suggest the complex intersection between participants’ disclosure processes and the various ways they would establish intimacy with their partner. Thus, the present findings complicate earlier research that investigated reasons cited for disclosure in romantic relationships (i.e., “getting it out in the open,” “feeling safe in a relationship,” and “to gain intimacy;” Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1995; Roesler & Wind, 1995), and suggest that when women disclose CSA to romantic partners much of the experience is contingent on how both sexual and emotional intimacy are involved with the partners to whom they disclose.

The majority of participants also described the impact of disclosure in later stages of their romantic relationships. These residual effects were often related to specific aspects of the interaction during disclosure. For instance, one participant had disclosed abuse perpetrated by a female minister, which led to ongoing questions by her husband concerning her sexual orientation. Another was afraid of how the disclosure could “contaminate” the relationship, preoccupying her partner during sexual activities. Thus, a more complicated picture often emerged based on what happened after the disclosure occurred. Studies have indicated how couples are deleteriously impacted when one partner has experienced CSA (DiLillo & Long, 1999; Anderson-Jacob & McCarthy-Veach, 2005); how the experience of disclosing CSA plays out appears important in understanding this impact. Therapists intervening with such couples might explore more fully the unspoken feelings their clients have related to the disclosure event. This would likely help disentangle the real and imagined fears that linger after disclosure.

Impact of Disclosure Experiences on Participants Recovery

The findings of this study suggest that participants’ disclosure experiences to romantic partners be considered an integral aspect of their recovery from childhood sexual abuse. Research on adult disclosures has put some focus on how disclosure may uniquely impact
psychopathology and subjective health (McNulty & Wardle, 1994; Waller & Ruddock, 1993),
sometimes suggesting the overriding influence of disclosure over abuse characteristics in
predicting the long-term consequences of CSA (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). Furthermore, as
Jonzon and Lindblad (2005) have shown, the romantic partner’s positive response was found to
be particularly important in buffering the negative effects of CSA that are sometimes present in
adults who have been sexually abused.

In the present study, participants’ descriptions of their romantic partners positive and
negative responses put these earlier findings (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005) into context, and show
how the variety of responses participants received impacted their ability to recover from self-
blame, intrusive thoughts, stigmatization, other negative traumatic sequelae, as well as gain more
confidence in interpersonal functioning in terms of the ability to trust, to more readily relinquish
control, to feel safe, and to create more interdependence in their relationships. However, the high
prevalence of negative responses indicates that participants’ recovery processes were often
disrupted. In many cases, especially early in their recovery, participants would normalize their
partners negative responses, which, in effect, led to patterns of self-blame for the past abuse.
This ongoing pattern of shame and self-blame may function in deleterious ways in romantic
relationships, contributing to overall patterns of maladjustment (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1996).

Participants also indicated other ways their disclosure experiences reflected patterns of
maladjustment in relation to the past abuse. These patterns were not only in reaction to clearly
negative responses to the disclosure, but also in relation to those that participants characterized
as neutral. For instance, one participant’s tendency to minimize the abuse was left unchallenged
after a partner was accepting of her disclosure, though her sense was that “he didn’t know what
to do with it.” For this reason, she felt he had minimized her past abuse. As she later indicated,
she may have not been ready herself to face the consequences of her abuse (as she later
explained “I didn’t know what to do with it”) and in this way the partner’s response reflected her
own tendency to minimize the abuse. Such findings are consistent with research that suggests the
importance of understanding the long-term effects of CSA from within the interpersonal context
they occur (DiLillo, 2001; Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001).

Participants also described even more insidious ways disclosure could impact their
recovery. One particular danger involved feeling that disclosing sometimes led to a reenactment
of certain features of the original abuse situation. Although they were equivocal regarding the
extent to which they felt their partner influenced this outcome, participants conveyed the uncanny effects disclosure sometimes had in duplicating their past feelings from when they were abused. Finkelhor and Browne’s (1985) description of the traumagenic dynamics of stigmatization, betrayal, powerlessness, and traumatic sexualization describe well the sense participants had when disclosure reenacted the past abuse. When this reenactment occurred, participants described feeling victimized and unable to speak back to the partner after such a negative response.

Although re-victimization is more commonly conceptualized as taking place in the context of sexual assault, the present findings suggest considering how the subjective experience of re-victimization can register for women with histories of sexual abuse in the experience of disclosing. In many situations, such a negative response adversely impacted participants’ recovery process by reinforcing negative beliefs concerning their perception of responsibility for the abuse. While it was often unclear how participants interpreted and came to conclusions about their partners’ responses, it is evident that disclosing to a romantic partner sometimes placed them in a vulnerable position where they felt the abuse was reenacted. Furthermore, it appears that this is part of the nature of the risk in disclosing to romantic partners in that feelings about their own sexuality may be evoked more readily in comparison to other disclosure types (i.e., in those to friends, therapists, family members).

Narrative Perspectives on Recovery

Narrative perspectives on recovery provide a useful framework for understanding the present findings as many participants reflected on the varying extent to which they had situated the past abuse into a coherent framework of meaning and how this impacted their disclosures to romantic partners. This finding is consistent with a narrative understanding of how people story and make meaning out of the traumatic events in their lives and which emphasizes the importance of narrative coherence (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen, & Harney, 2000; McAdams, 2006). As McAdams (2006) explains, “in the most basic sense, the problem of narrative coherence is the problem of being understood in a social context” (p. 111). Part of this problem involves the narrator’s task of finding an audience receptive to the story being told, and how this may be particularly problematic when the story defies the listener’s understanding about how the world works. In this regard, participants’ struggles conveyed their difficulty in feeling like they had a coherent story to tell to their romantic partners. Sometimes what they felt in relation to the
past abuse could not be represented to themselves, much less to their partner in disclosing the past abuse. Yet, a sexual encounter, a memory, as well as other stimuli could lead to a disclosure in which the message was fragmentary and in which they did not yet feel ready to disclose.

Consistent with this perspective (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen, & Harney, 2000; McAdams, 2006), there thus seemed to exist a cruel paradox that was sometimes present in participants’ disclosures: when some were most in need of a positive response—that is, when they had yet to create a healing narrative that made meaning out of their past abuse—they received rejecting and minimizing responses. Harvey et al. (2000) explain that part of the reason for this cruel paradox may be the demand placed on survivors for coherent stories, which can make survivors, especially at the beginning of their recovery, more vulnerable to a negative response. However, it is important to note the divergence in this trend in some of the participants’ experiences. They indicate that the most positive responses sometimes came at a time when participants were just discovering the impact of the abuse; that is, when they seemed most in need of a positive, accepting response. Thus, participants “discovered” in two senses of the word; that is, participants not only discovered the impact of the abuse, but also discovered a sense of empathy and concern from their partner in an area of their lives in which they had previously felt damaged in some way. For these participants, such experiences represented “turning points” (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen, & Harney, 2000), ones that provided a new perspective on the past abuse and which were linked in important ways to the romantic partner’s response. Such experiences were deemed especially significant at early points in their recovery when they had yet to make meaning out of their past abuse.

In other instances, participants described an increased sense of closure around the meaning of the past abuse. This sign of increased narrative coherence (McAdams, 2006) influenced participants’ disclosure process to become more self-defined. In addition, where once they felt the abuse experience left them isolated and sometimes ill-equipped to convey important aspects of themselves to their romantic partner, later their sense of self in relationship became more inclusive of several life roles (e.g., parent, friend). Such a shift changed how they disclosed to their romantic partners. They became less concerned and less watchful in the moment about the partner’s reaction. In addition, their voices became more agentic when they perceived their partners had misunderstood the meaning of their disclosure. However, this process of meaning-making sometimes involved conflict. For instance, one participant had developed a healing
narrative through therapy that helped her to extricate herself from feelings of shame and responsibility for the past abuse, though her romantic partner was simultaneously sending her messages in response to her disclosure that she felt were blaming and suggested she should feel responsible and shameful for what happened. Such a finding suggests that changes in therapy in terms of narrative reconstruction of past traumatic events rarely take place in isolation and that extending one’s healing narrative into other life contexts is not always a smooth process.

Practice Implications

The present findings suggest that therapists consider how the process of disclosing to romantic partners is often divergent from the process of disclosing past sexual abuse in therapy. Participants often highlighted how they experienced negative consequences in disclosing to romantic partners even after therapy had helped them gain resolution in terms of the past abuse. Their disclosures to romantic partners often took time to settle, frequently well beyond the interaction that took place during the initial disclosure. That is, as in therapy, the meaning of the past abuse was processed in an ongoing way. However, participants suggested elements of their past abuse experiences that were evoked with their romantic partners in ways they were sometimes not prepared regardless of their therapy experiences. The sense of feeling like “damaged goods,” of feeling like their disclosures were not understood, of feeling like their partner was going to abandon them if the disclosure was poorly timed were aspects of the disclosure experience that would much less likely be a concern in the supportive relational context of therapy.

Such understanding may help therapists more fully explore with their clients the possible consequences that may result from their disclosures to romantic partners. This understanding may be especially important given that participants disclose at various stages of their recovery. As indicated above, many participants were particularly vulnerable to negative responses at early stages of their recovery. At this point of their recovery, therapists can help such clients become aware of the possibility that disclosure can expose them to adverse consequences sometimes related to a wider problem in the culture rather than one that is unique to their personal experience. Clients are then in a position to situate their personal experiences within a larger social context and thus find ways to empower themselves when they disclose. Far too little attention has been paid to the critical task of helping clients disclose potentially stigmatizing information outside the context of therapy (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kelly, 1998, 2000). As
Kelly (2000) suggests, therapy can actually put some individuals at risk for undesirable self-images because of the premium it puts on self-disclosure. Therapy clients may carry over into other relationships a tendency to disclose that is sometimes deleterious to forming close relationships, which was a pattern described by several women in this study. Further research, then, should attend to the reasons disclosure in therapy and disclosure to romantic partners are sometimes at odds, and assess critical periods when clients with sexual abuse histories may be at risk for adverse disclosure experiences outside therapy.

Because therapy was only one among many influences on the unpredictable responses to disclosure that participants described, it is unlikely that women with histories of CSA can be spared of the risks that often attend disclosure to romantic partners. However, the findings of this study do indicate the circumstances that surrounded positive and negative disclosure experiences and can thus help therapists have more empathy for their clients’ struggles in disclosing as well as insight in intervening in such a way that the particular context of disclosing to a romantic partner is better appreciated.

Limitations

Perhaps the greatest limitation in the present study is in having available only the story of the person who disclosed. The experience of CSA does not impact the survivor alone. It also has the potential to significantly affect those who are important to the survivor, and thus to impact the ongoing relationship between the survivor and those close to her. Hearing how the disclosure of CSA does impact the romantic partner would enrich understanding of this disclosure experience and could advance a more rounded understanding of the phenomenon. Such understanding would also provide greater insight into what is needed to promote positive disclosure experiences.

Another limitation involved the study’s retrospective design. In certain cases, participants reflected on disclosure experiences that had taken place sometimes as long as ten years prior to the interview. Some details of the disclosure experiences were likely forgotten or others potentially inaccurately recalled. However, the fact that they could recall clear details from these past experiences suggests the significance of such events. Moreover, we were less interested in factual accuracy as we were in narrated meaning (Spence, 1982). This perspective privileges the meaning-making process brought to participants experiences, and the impact such a process has had on their recovery. In addition, several participants indicated that reflecting on their past
disclosure experiences during the interview facilitated new insights, something Stiles (1993) referred to as *catalytic validity*. As one participant put it, the interview process had provided her an “aerial view” on her past disclosure experiences. Never before had she perceived the impact of her disclosure experiences in quite the same way, and this seemed to energize her with new understanding. Such statements support the validity of research concerned with participant data based on self-report.

Other limitations involved characteristics of the participants as well as the research process. In some respects, participants’ experiences were homogeneous: all had received therapy at some point, and a few were, at the time of the interview, in therapy. This may have influenced more reporting of negative disclosure experiences as their abuse experiences may have had a greater impact compared to women who had not sought psychotherapy for such concerns. On the other hand, many were highly educated and perhaps had the means to benefit from long-term psychotherapy. In addition, because all the participants were heterosexual women, future research might consider homosexual women’s and hetero and homosexual men’s experiences of disclosing to romantic partners. Finally, it is likely that the research process may have been different had a female interviewer conducted the interviews. As was evident, however, participants were very willing to describe sensitive aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, future research might consider how these various differences could impact understanding of this disclosure process.

**Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the limitations noted above, the seven participants’ stories provided an important contribution by showing how the process of disclosing CSA to a romantic partner can represent a multifaceted experience that bears on aspects of identity, sexuality, intimacy, and overall recovery from past sexual abuse. These findings build on extant research by providing a more descriptive understanding of what occurs when women disclose CSA to romantic partners. This understanding may be particularly important for therapists in helping them have greater empathy for the complex task that many of their clients with sexual abuse histories have when they risk making such histories known.
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Debby: “…so yeah, I mean the whole disclosure, I think it was just all over the place….it wasn't a choice with him, I think that was the most remarkable thing. After that was when I started to have to think about it and how to put it into some sort of framework for how I wanted it to be. I had to make a decision about what and how much to share.”

Debby began disclosing to romantic partners in her early thirties when she first sought therapy for concerns related to having been sexually abused. In the following section she describes a time in her life when she was recovering memories of her abuse in therapy and becoming outraged at the perpetrators by whom she had been victimized. It was during this period of her life that emerging memories of her abuse were triggering intense emotional reactions. Meanwhile she was in a romantic relationship. As becomes apparent, the importance of her past sexual abuse had an all-encompassing impact on her identity:

I: Do you remember when it first became urgent to share? I think you mentioned the one partner that you talked to. What was it like when it became urgent, like I need to share this with my romantic partner?

D: Yeah, I mean, with him, and it was just because it was everything about who I was at that point. It was just so, so overwhelming and I was just so filled with rage and to the point where I think it was dangerous. I’d go to the gym everyday and pump weights and fantasize that I’m kicking these guys in the head, you know it was just, I was either in pain or I was enraged and it just went on for months and months and months. And so it was all about who I was, so I think there wasn’t any way to avoid it, you know, he had to know what that was about.

Thus, when Debby first started experiencing the impact of her abuse she was unable to contain the intense feelings, thoughts, and memories this impact had in her life despite or perhaps because of the work she was doing in therapy. Such intensity seemed to influence any sense of control over the disclosure process:

D: it was just flooding, completely flooding, so I didn’t have any, it wasn’t a choice…I mean it was, it was just like vomiting it up all over the place.

Yet, Debby also reflects that this sense that there was no control in disclosing changed over time. As she explains in the opening passage, over time she sought a framework in which to contain the many feelings she was experiencing. Before Debby could find such a framework, having a romantic partner to contain the as yet undigested aspects of her experience was very significant at this time in her life:
D: It would have been awful having to do that alone. I mean I think in that relationship we were so systematic about it, we sort of had this routine. I’d come home from therapy, we’d sit on the couch, I’d fall in his arms for awhile and then I’d start talking…I totally believe that’s why he was in my life at that time and not for any other reason…we supported each other. He went through some very difficult stuff and I went through some very difficult stuff with the right person.

Debby’s description of the romantic partner above conveys the mutuality inherent in construing this partner as the “right person.” In this regard, he could empathize with her experience. This partner’s capacity to empathize was an important feature of her feeling that she could work through some of her past issues of sexual abuse in the context of this relationship. Yet, Debby’s positive account becomes contradicted when she later describes this same partner’s insensitive response to her ongoing disclosures:

D: I just remember one incidence in particular where…I told him…a memory that had come up in therapy, and he called me little girl, and wanted to have sex with me right there in his office. And I was really offended, because I was in a really vulnerable place, and I felt like I was being abused again. And so, I never really experienced that with anybody else, but I think that you know, it made me cautious, that those images were there for them…for him, it was clear to me what he was doing with them. He was sexualizing me as a little kid being abused…

In the passages above, it becomes evident that disclosure had a range of meanings for Debby even within the same relationship. In the same relationship she could feel accepted and validated concerning the issue of her past abuse while at other times she could feel hurt, invalidated, and even objectified. In this regard, disclosure was confusing and could be re-traumatizing. Thus, Debby’s subsequent pattern of disclosing to romantic partners makes more sense when considered in the context of the disclosure experiences with the first romantic partner with whom she disclosed: she explained that from her early thirties (the time of her first disclosure to a romantic partner) to the present she disclosed to 3 or 4 romantic partners including her current husband but had at least 20 sexual partners.

Another influence on Debby’s disclosure process involved the feelings disclosure generated, which may partly explain why she chose to share her past abuse only in particular relationships. For Debby, disclosure often led to distressing feelings that arose out of a stigmatized sense of self. In one passage, she described feeling like “slightly rotten fruit” when she would disclose and how she felt vulnerable to being perceived as such by the romantic
partners to whom she disclosed. In the passage below she elaborates how disclosure served as a disclaimer for what the partner would be getting into:

I: Yeah, the disclaimer, its an interesting image. Umm, I wonder if you can say more about that?

D: I think I felt like I was damaged goods, that these icky things have happened and so getting sexual with me meant that you have to share in the ickiness. So, I think it is sort of like that general sense of shame that was there, just a feeling like, you know by being touched in that way, somehow I got tainted or spoiled… and so the disclaimer was a way of sort of putting it into context: “Well, this is why I am the way I am.”

I: So, you mean that somehow they would already have some kind of sense and then so the telling, the sharing becomes a kind of well this is why.

D: I think so. [11 second pause] I do think it was like that. I think I always went into it feeling like I wasn’t the freshest piece of fruit, you know, and umm and that somehow I needed to offer some explanation for that.

Debby’s descriptions above reveal how her past sexual abuse left her feeling that her sexuality was damaged and that the romantic partner “needed to know” about this. However, Debby could apparently avoid these feelings of shame and vulnerability in other scenarios with romantic partners. As mentioned above, disclosure never occurred with most of her sexual partners. In this regard, Debby provided somewhat contradictory descriptions of her sexuality:

D: I really believed that my sexual, what I could do and what I did sexually, was kind of the glue that held the relationship together, kind of the bait that got them in, and then the glue that held things together and that that was a very strong, well-developed part of myself and something that I felt very confident and very comfortable doing. It kind of gave me a sense of power and control in the relationship…

Debby’s contradictory accounts of her sexuality, and how these relate to her disclosure process, reflect an overarching theme concerning what she can and cannot control as an outcome of having been sexually abused. Upon reflection, she realizes that her sexual behavior throughout her thirties often left her feeling out of control, though paradoxically she felt confident being sexual. Similarly, as described above, disclosure also led to feeling out of control in the sense of potentially being perceived in an undesirable way. Another fear was that the romantic partner would carry images of the abuse experience in their memory, as the first romantic partner described did when he sexualized Debby as a child being sexually abused.
When Debby later goes on to describe wanting to limit her disclosures, particularly with her current spouse, part of the reasoning was that she would not want such images to come between them in sexual encounters, as she feared they might have with earlier romantic partners. In an analogous way, Debby was concerned about how the disclosure concern in disclosing the still unsure sense that her father may have molested her is how such information may come between her spouse and her father. Thus, Debby has experienced and may still fear the unpredictable outcomes that have often resulted from her disclosures.

As Debby’s story has shown, the disclosure of her past sexual abuse had a changing significance over the course of the different relationships in which she disclosed. Such significance also seemed multiply determined. That is, the changing significance of her disclosures to some extent mirrored the changing sense of her own sexuality, which also apparently mirrored the changing sense of her past sexual abuse. The complexity of Debby’s story then indicates how her sexuality, her identity, her sexual abuse experiences, as well as her healing process are all closely related to her experiences of disclosure.
Appendix B

Marie: “I’ve only told 3 or 4 people that I was intimate with and they’ve just seen it as something I’ve gone through and gotten through and moved on with, so it’s never really been like a negative response.”

Consistent with the above passage, Marie’s descriptions in the interview often depict her disclosure process as one that has been relatively unproblematic as compared to the other participants who shared their story. Much of this difference is based on the responses she received from the romantic partners to whom she disclosed. However, it becomes evident that disclosure encompassed more than merely the fact that she had not received negative responses to her disclosures. Rather, Marie described three very different ways in which her disclosures unfolded, some of which were problematic for her despite not receiving a negative response. All of these speak to the way Marie’s disclosure experiences changed over time, and reflected Marie’s changing understanding of her abuse experiences.

It was not until Marie was 16 years old that she began recovering memories of her past abuse experiences. This initial discovery of her past abuse took place in the fearful context of a flashback brought on by her first consensual sexual experience:

M: ...I was sixteen and I had a boyfriend for four and a half years, and when we would start to become intimate, I would, what I thought was hallucinating, like I would see these pictures in my head of when I was little with the particular person that abused me, but I could never see their face...it would be like these really intense situations and I would just have to stop in the moment and I would just start crying. Like this happened so many times and this individual, my boyfriend at the time, would hold me while I was crying...I talked to my sister, and that’s when she said, “don’t you remember when you were little?” So that was groundbreaking for me because it reaffirmed the fact that, “no, you’re not going crazy, these things did in fact happen and this is why you are reacting to this situation now.”

Marie goes on to describe how her sister helped her make sense of the disturbing experiences she was having. Because Marie was four years old when she was sexually molested, this understanding and validation from her sister when she was 16 was likely important, as the reality of the abuse was still unclear to her. Even so, as she explains, these flashbacks still prompted questions from her partner. Before answering them, Marie still had questions that she was asking herself:
M: …so I went to my sister and I told her I thought I was gay, you know, because I couldn’t be intimate with boys and she said, “well, are you attracted to boys?” and I said “yeah, I just can’t be intimate with my boyfriend…”

As Marie was able to make sense of what happened to her, she was able to disentangle questions about her sexual orientation from the adverse reactions she was having to becoming intimate. She also became concerned that this boyfriend would think her reactions were in some way his fault and so wanted to provide some explanation for what she viewed as her “odd behavior.” Consequently, she would eventually verbally disclose to her then current boyfriend. However, as becomes apparent, her non-verbal reactions had already served as a disclosure to this partner:

I: And so you did then, at some point, share with this first boyfriend?

M: Right cause I started going to therapy for the first time soon thereafter, and he was very understanding. He had had when he was younger a past of sexual abuse too, so it was an interesting dynamic because it was almost like he knew before I knew.

The mutuality between Marie’s and her partner’s experience was important for her. As she later describes, this partner was “understanding,” “never aggressive or pushing,” which helped alleviate the sense of isolation she experienced around having been abused. Ultimately, such safety in the relationship seemed to have a direct impact on Marie’s healing process:

M: You know with him, it was like, “oh gosh, okay, so I’m not so alone, like someone understands the feelings that come along with this,” you know, because there was a lot of guilt and sadness and depression over these things. I would say from like 16 to 21 with therapy and working all these things out, there was a lot to handle at that time so being with somebody who kind of understood made it a little easier to talk about.

Marie’s description of the disclosure process with her first boyfriend can then be contrasted with how disclosure (or lack of disclosure) played out with her second romantic partner. Unlike her first sensitive boyfriend who could sense the meaning of her struggles without her having to verbalize them, the second boyfriend who was the first partner she would have intercourse with was apparently oblivious to her many signs of discomfort. She describes how in this relationship she felt like a “rag doll;” how being in this relationship that was neither “loving” or “nurturing” influenced her to dissociate during sexual encounters. In one section, Marie describes this time in her life with a certain amount of puzzlement:
M: it’s interesting in *that*-the first person that was my first sexual partner, how I kind of chose somebody who was a little more of like the aggressor type. So I’m looking back on that now, it makes perfect sense, but at the time, it was almost like replaying a role, you know? So, I didn’t really share it with him. He wasn’t the type of person that would be willing to listen or take it into consideration.

In this section, Marie intimates that with her second partner the lack of mutuality mirrored, to some extent, the dynamics present when she was victimized as a child. That is, she felt objectified and there was apparently no concern for her feelings during such sexual encounters. Nor could she readily disclose in this situation, which also mirrored some of the circumstances when she was abused: her mother was and is still unable to acknowledge that she was sexually abused. In this sense, it could be said that part of Marie’s description of “replaying a role” with her second romantic partner also included being in a relationship where she felt unable or unwilling to disclose.

In subsequent relationships, Marie described yet another change in her disclosure process. These changes seemed to be influenced by her positive experiences in psychotherapy. That is, Marie came to expect that her disclosures would be validated and understood. Part of the expectation of such acceptance seemed to stem from her sense of the wider awareness in the culture of childhood sexual abuse, as well as her process of coming to terms with hurtful aspects of her mother’s reactions to the abuse:

M: I think a lot of people can relate whether it has happened personally to them or someone they love or know or a friend. I think like, say, my mom’s generation…they didn’t talk about it at all, like it was kind of swept under the carpet, to whereas our generation, I think people are a little more open to talking about it and like hearing other people's experiences. I think that was definitely on my side because it wasn't anything we talked about in my family.

As the above passages indicate, Marie was able to make new meaning out of the various circumstances surrounding her abuse experiences and situate it into a wider context in the culture. This also enabled her to put her mother’s lack of response in a wider context. The re-framing of her experience was also reflected in how she chose to disclose in her more recent relationships. Because she had managed to make sense of her abuse experience despite her mother’s lack of validation, the more recent disclosures provide a sense of her own control in the process. One line is particularly telling in this regard: “I think it’s the way that I handle it too ummm, kind of like on a lighter note…” In this sense, Marie sets the tone for her disclosure
experiences. In one passage, she describes how she has had to “correct” her two more recent partners after disclosing her abuse experience to them:

M: They think that maybe I need to be helped in some way, that they can help me in some way, when like I have to correct them and be like “oh, no no no, you know, I’ve gone to counseling and I’ve done my work and I’ve moved past it…”

I: So they would, in your view, overreact, or…

M: Yeah, or see my character as something maybe not as strong or someone who needed to be like protected more and then I would correct them and let them know that’s not where I was coming from, or that I didn’t need someone to counsel me…

In describing the above interactions, Marie conveys her sense of control over the disclosure process. In many instances, she indicates disclosure as involving a highly monitored interaction between her and her romantic partner. Initially, it involves a process of “gauging” the kind of romantic partner that can handle the disclosure. The fear was that the partner’s sense of overwhelm would lead to a subsequent fleeing from the relationship. With those partners with whom she did decide to take the risk, she described how she would practice “the speech a little bit. How am I gonna say this so it doesn’t freak ‘em out too much?” In addition, with these more recent partners she would, as she put it, “just skim the surface” and provide a “rough outline” of what happened.

The descriptions that Marie provides of her more recent disclosures indicate the way in which her disclosures changed over time, becoming more cognitively controlled. In describing her more recent disclosure experiences, she conveys that she has much more fully organized the meaning of her abuse when compared to the disclosures that took place when she was just uncovering that she was sexually abused. Increasingly, disclosure became a more agentic process whereas initially she was unable to find words for her experience.
Appendix C

Roberta: For so long I had minimized it, so it was really hard for me to see like how much it played out in my life... but after delving into therapy, I remember just explaining like, “okay, I’m f***d up in this area and I think this is why, and he was like, ‘don’t use that as an excuse.’”

As Roberta explains above, for a long time she had minimized the impact of her sexual abuse experiences. At the time of the interview, Roberta was 34 years old and engaged to be married. At this point, she provided a different sense of the impact such abuse experiences had in her life compared to periods through her twenties. That is, she could reflect and see how she had previously minimized her abuse experiences as well as how such minimization influenced her disclosure process.

Roberta’s sexual abuse experiences started when she was 9 years old and involved fondling which lasted for approximately one year. As she described in the interview, part of the pain of having been abused involved more than her own abuse; she also felt guilty and responsible for not being able to do anything when she watched her younger sister also get molested. However, because the abuse “did not happen everyday,” did not involve “intercourse,” and because she had thought of her grandfather’s molestation in such terms as “he just fondled me,” for many years she did not perceive the impact of the abuse in her life.

As mentioned earlier, Roberta’s minimization of her abuse experiences influenced her disclosure experiences in romantic relationships. However, some of her partners’ responded adversely to her disclosures and this also influenced her ongoing minimization of the abuse. Such was the case in the romantic relationship in which she had first had sexual intercourse, and in which, Roberta, at age 20, first disclosed her past sexual abuse. The disclosure had come up randomly and she gives the impression of being entirely caught off guard by her partner’s response:

R: I told him, “that happened to me, I was molested by grandfather” and he, ummm, told me, “that’s not funny, I don’t want to talk about that.”

I: Oh really…

R: Yeah. So, my first experience of disclosing, it was not a good one, it wasn’t positive, it wasn’t accepted by him, it was very rejecting…

Much of the pain in this partner’s rejecting response stemmed from the fact that he was
the first person with whom she chose to be sexual. She describes how this affected her at the time:

I: When you heard that, what came to your mind?

R: I remember being shocked, and I just remember shutting down. I was a lot weaker of a person and not so able to say, “you can’t say that to me” or “what do you mean, I’m not joking,” and following through and basically trying to clarify with him, “what’s the problem, why are you responding that way?” So my initial reaction was just to shut down, and umm, I think the shame came back again, like oh my gosh see, I can’t even talk about it…”

Roberta’s disclosure led to shame and to a literal shutting down; never again would the topic of her past sexual abuse be broached in this relationship. This first disclosure experience would thus make her “nervous” when she faced the decision of whether to disclose to her second serious boyfriend making her more vigilant about how she disclosed. And while her second partner’s response would not be as flagrantly adverse as the first partner’s, there were ways in which Roberta still felt that her past experiences of abuse were minimized:

R: The second one, he was just more like, “oh gosh, I’m sorry that happened to you.” That was really it; I don’t think he really knew what to do with any of it. And I really didn’t either…

I: You said he didn’t know what to do with it…

R: Well, I guess I don’t know what he would do with it…

I: How was that for you, feeling like he didn’t know what to do with it?

R: It didn’t feel so rejecting to me, it was like okay, you know. I just kind of went back to the minimizing of it all.

Roberta’s sense that her second boyfriend “did not know what to do with it” seemed to mirror her own sense that she did not yet know what to do with her past sexual abuse experiences. In a later passage, she further conveys her difficulty in adequately representing her past abuse experiences in her romantic relationship:

R: I came back from a weeklong retreat and that’s when it really came to a head for me. I think when I came home from that it was terrible between us…I was in shock and he was like, “what the hell happened to you?” I couldn’t even articulate what happened. I was so overwhelmed by it all. I couldn’t make sense of it…
Roberta’s struggle in making sense of her past sexual abuse seemed to influence her ongoing avoidance of disclosure in her romantic relationships. In an episode with the third romantic partner to whom Roberta had disclosed, she described how she suddenly became triggered and felt in a predicament where she could not help but disclose. After she had left a classroom presentation on child sexual abuse, her partner, who was also a classmate, inquired into her reaction:

R: He had asked me, “what was that all about?” I tried to blow it off, I didn’t want to really acknowledge that I had any problem with that, I’m like, “I just don’t want to hear that stuff.” But then I told him. Because we were both like in a graduate program and social workers and stuff like that he was able to handle what I told him in a caring and loving way and was actually probably the person that really helped me to get into therapy for it.

Roberta’s disclosure process with her third boyfriend then served an important function in her recovery. Disclosing to someone who had knowledge of sexual abuse (i.e., a fellow graduate student in social work) provided a safe context in which to disclose. Her partner was also sensitive in terms of checking in with her when she might have become distressed because of triggers in their sexual activities. Such experiences could be contrasted with the disclosure process that had taken place in earlier relationships and for this reason Roberta identifies this relationship as a turning point in her struggle in facing the impact of her abuse.

In her late twenties, Roberta decided to seek psychotherapy for concerns related to having been sexually abused. It was from the context of reflecting on the emerging awareness that resulted from therapy that Roberta would describe the complicated dynamics of her disclosure process with the fourth romantic partner to whom she disclosed. She describes feeling pulled in different directions by her therapist and her partner in terms of the meaning of the abuse. In therapy, Roberta began making connections between being “really sexualized in my twenties” and her past sexual abuse; however, her partner did not share Roberta and her therapist’s conceptualization of her promiscuous sexual behavior when Roberta had eventually told him about it:

R: I remember just explaining like, “okay, I’m f***ed up in that area, and I think this is why.” And he was like, “don’t use that as an excuse.”
Roberta provides the sense that this partner represented a voice in her that was condemnatory, blaming, and seemingly adept at undoing the messages she was receiving in therapy that the abuse was not her fault:

I: It almost sounds like, in describing this relationship that he was looking at you through a microscope; but then at the same time you were going through your own therapy…

R: Yeah, because I’m going to therapy with somebody who I don’t have an intimate relationship with. So, I’m kind of like uncovering all of these things and feeling like, “oh gosh, thank God you are telling me that, that feels good, I don’t have anything to be shameful of,” yet I’m in this relationship and I’m with somebody that supposedly cares about me and we’re intimate and we’re, you know, it’s like a more real relationship and he’s like, “no, she’s got it all wrong, you do have something to be shameful of.”

I: So you had really mixed messages when all of this stuff was coming up for you?

R: Very. Oh my gosh, it was horrible.

I: It sounds really confusing

R: It was very because for so long, like in therapy, I can tell that my therapist wanted me to just get that it wasn’t my fault, my sexuality had a lot to do with that and I finally got to a point where I could accept that thought and attitude and then it was totally shut down by someone that supposedly cared about me, you know, in the real world.

In the manner that Roberta describes above, the way the disclosure was contained in therapy versus her romantic relationship was entirely at odds. As a result of her experiences in therapy eventually she would extricate herself from the relationship with the fourth boyfriend. Furthermore, becoming receptive to the therapist’s voice concerning the meaning of her past abuse enabled Roberta to change how she disclosed in her subsequent romantic relationships. In the passage below, she describes her disclosure process with her then current fiancé:

R: He wasn’t rejecting and I also think because I was able to dissociate from the responsibility of it all, I presented it differently. I wasn’t shameful about it, because it was out of my control.

Thus, disclosure was no longer described as a “blow up” as it had been in previous relationships. Furthermore, there was much less fear concerning the partner’s response to her disclosure. Instead, with her current partner disclosure was more a “matter of fact kind of thing,” something that no longer had the same emotional intensity.
In reflecting on Roberta’s story, the recurring theme of minimization is important to consider across the relationships in which she disclosed. In most instances with her partners, minimization was problematic in that it kept Roberta from coming to terms with the impact of her abuse. In the fourth relationship in which she disclosed, it was as if two warring voices were present around the issue of minimization; one, the voice of the therapist, was encouraging her to make meaningful links with her past abuse experiences and her sexualized behavior; the other, the voice of her condemning partner, was the voice of blame suggesting that such links did not exist. Thus, disclosure became conflict ridden with little opportunities for understanding between her and her partner. As this conflict subsided, and Roberta was able to more fully integrate the knowledge that she was not responsible for being sexually abused, she no longer needed to minimize the impact of the abuse, though, paradoxically, such acceptance seems to have made this impact in her relationships relatively minimal. In her current relationship, disclosure thus became more purposeful and less an all-encompassing dilemma in need of resolution, which demonstrates Roberta’s changing disclosure process in her romantic relationships.
Appendix D

*Julie:* “you know the one when I was 21 years old, I had already disclosed all of that to him before we were even engaging in anything sexual together, I already had this firm foundation of trust and I knew that he loved me...whereas with this boyfriend at 28 years old, the disclosure came way too early, I mean as far as the timing...”

At the time of the interview, Julie was a 31-year-old woman who had disclosed her past sexual abuse in two of her romantic relationships. Already in the brief passage above the difference between such disclosures is readily apparent. In one the timing was right, but in the other it was not. These themes of finding the right time to disclose and of trusting the disclosure process will run throughout much of Julie’s story of her disclosure experiences in romantic relationships.

The impact of Julie’s sexual abuse experiences came up in several aspects of her relationships with men. She described a generalized apprehension that influences many of her interactions and linked such apprehension with being sexually abused as a child:

*J:* It is definitely something I am thinking about in terms of, “are they really wanting to approach me because they are really wanting to know me and who I am, or do they just like what they see, or are they wanting to take advantage of me?”

She further described an “initial guard” she puts up in relationships. However, this initial guard frequently did not enable Julie to verbalize her discomfort once she was in a situation with a romantic partner that made her uncomfortable. Instead, much of time she would attempt to manage her feelings by opting not to disclose:

*J:* I had a really hard time saying that I was uncomfortable because it made me feel like a weaker person, or I instantly went to, “what’s wrong with me that I can’t just be comfortable in this moment with this man?” And so rather than making a boundary or being able to vocalize what was going on with me, it was more of an internal conversation beating myself up about the fact that I was even there...I feared if I were to say I was uncomfortable, that would lead me to having to explain why and I didn’t want to tell them.

Julie would thus experience such situations with romantic partners as very frustrating. She would feel triggered to re-experience memories and feelings associated with her past abuse in the context of intimate encounters but feel unable or unwilling to tell her romantic partner. As a result, she would attempt to desensitize from the ways in which she would get triggered. Oftentimes it seemed such strategies worked. In this regard, she implies that she had several
partners with whom she could be sexual with and yet avoid any disclosure of her past sexual abuse. However, sometimes her ability to desensitize did not work. Such a scenario was set in motion when she described the undesirable circumstances surrounding the disclosure to her romantic partner when she was 28:

J: I remember we had gone out for dinner, and we had actually just gone for pizza and beer and it turned into this like silly contest thing with the beer pitcher and so I ended up pretty intoxicated at the end of this date, and he was too. And we went back to his house, and we started to fool around and the beer on his breath, when I could smell the beer on his breath, it instantly sent me into feeling really uncomfortable because when I was real young, like 4 to 7 years old, the man who molested me drank beer, and so that smell of the beer on the breath took me back within an instant to that, and I felt really uncomfortable and I remember just saying, “Just please stop, just stop, stop, stop.”

Feeling compelled to provide some explanation for her sudden distress, Julie would tell her partner that same night of her past abuse. At first her partner responded well and seemed supportive. However, she later regretted having disclosed when he stopped returning her phone calls. She felt that the disclosure had immediately put a distance between them. Later they were able to talk more and he was again supportive. Together they attempted to deal constructively with the ways in which Julie’s reminders of her abuse would surface in the relationship. Ultimately, however, she felt their relationship was “not able to handle” the disclosure, that the timing was all wrong:

J: Well, I mean just putting myself in his shoes…After only a month of dating this woman, and here’s this heavy issue of past sexual abuse and how I have or haven’t healed from that and the different ways that he might be with me that might trigger me. I think that what ended up happening was that it put him in this spot that he didn’t know how to be with me. And he wouldn’t want to hurt me, I mean I knew that he really cared about me. And you know there were a couple of times that we were together within those few months that we did date that were really, really special…and then all the sudden I would just split, like a light switch, you know, and it was the smallest thing between us.

Julie’s descriptions of how she would just “split,” go on “autopilot,” or enter a “head space” reveal how automatically her dissociative reactions occurred. She conveys how it would have been untenable to disclose every time such triggers occurred. In these moments, she would often simply attempt to cope trying her best not to show signs of discomfort. However, her partner would frequently notice, and as she explains, “it was hard to look at him in those moments that I wasn’t being 100% authentic.” Thus, disclosure created an impossible bind. Julie’s descriptions capture this conflict poignantly:
J: I didn’t want to frustrate him. I didn’t want to frustrate me, either. I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t want to not be there with him, but I didn’t want to be in that head space, and I didn’t want to be there in that…I didn’t want to be back there…And so there’s that false hope of ignoring it and just hoping that its going to go away, if I just keep in the moment with him then this feeling is going to subside. And what I learned is that it doesn’t.

Thus, the feelings Julie experienced were often persistent; especially so when she felt sexually as well as emotionally involved with her partner. In the passage below she describes how both kinds of involvements influenced the difficulty around disclosure:

J: he was actually the first man that I was as sexually intimate with; and was in a relationship with. Because I had had those other experiences with men outside of a relationship, but to be emotionally tied and also sexually tied was new.

Julie’s disclosure experience at 28 can then be meaningfully contrasted with the circumstances that surrounded her earlier disclosure experience at 21. As she says of this earlier disclosure experience when she was 21, “you know with him, it was a completely different experience because we were not as sexually intimate.” She further explained that the disclosure at 21 was “more on my terms,” and not in response to distressing affect brought on by sexual experiences. Similarly, Julie describes how in many of her relationships throughout her 20’s she would “engage in dating relationships that I felt like I had the upper hand and that I didn’t give my heart to so there wasn’t the risk of being hurt.” She would also not disclose in such dating relationships.

Another difference of Julie’s disclosure experience at 21 was the sense of mutuality in sharing with her partner. Such mutuality was present in several respects. The most salient seemed to be that her partner’s mother had just recovered memories of being raped and it was on the basis of his disclosure that Julie disclosed having been sexually abused. She described this as a “connecting point;” one that made it easier to trust. Thus, Julie experienced his concern as sensitive and nurturing. In this way he offered her a supportive voice, which she also offered in return. This mutually supportive aspect of their relationship was part of a long-term friendship that started prior to their dating as romantic partners. When they both disclosed the ensuing conversations were an important part of Julie’s healing process and provided the feeling that they were “journeying” together. In this regard, Julie contrasts this earlier disclosure with the disclosure that occurred at 28:
J: Because he knew me so well, he would want to talk about different areas of my life that that experience may have influenced me in terms of like my self worth, or my confidence, my passions. So, it was almost more integrated. Whereas with my boyfriend when I was 28, the way that it came up, the way that we discussed it, and the questions that were asked, were all about our sexual relationship.

Julie’s descriptions convey that in the relationship at 21 there was a wider context of meaning in which to assimilate her abuse experiences. At 31-years-old (at the time of the interview) Julie was still seeking such a romantic relationship. That is, one that helps her to feel safe, accepted, and validated despite any vulnerability she may experience around having been sexually abused. Part of the difficulty in finding such a relationship concerns the dilemma she will face in future disclosures, which involves the following. As a Christian, Julie has chosen to remain a virgin. In this regard, she would like to find a Christian partner. The problem in doing so is that because she developed a sexually transmitted disease as a result of being sexually abused, the disclosure of her past sexual abuse now feels like a forced disclosure. She describes the consequences for her romantic relationships as follows:

J: There are several things I feel like I need to factor into my dating relationships now as far as disclosure of the abuse because I don’t feel comfortable saying, “Yes, I am a virgin, yet I have this STD.” However, I would want to disclose to someone that I am dating who I see a potential of us getting serious. I would want to disclose to that person, “look here’s my situation, I have this STD,” because I want for them to decide if that’s something they want to invite into their life or not. So, within that, it is almost like a forced disclosure of the rape.

Thus, as Julie indicates, the stakes involved in disclosure have been raised. As she indicates, trust has become even more difficult:

J: And I mean there’s a fear of rejection about having sexual abuse in the past anyways, and then to have this life long consequence of it too.

Because Julie must now contend with these additional consequences of having been sexually abused, disclosure has taken on additional layers of meaning. The sexually transmitted disease has made it less possible to conceal the effects of her past sexual abuse in her relationships. Thus far, she has coped with such effects by concealing them and has generally avoided disclosure. However, such a tactic is no longer ethically congruent. This does not take away from the fact that disclosure will remain a powerful source of stigmatization, especially in the context of the Christian community in which such a disclosure would take place. Julie’s story
then shows how complex a relation disclosure can have in the shaping of one’s identity in romantic relationships over a significant portion of one’s young adulthood.
Appendix E

Shawna: “I didn’t want to let him see me as vulnerable, so I tried to bring it up in a way that it was just another, ‘okay, well don’t call me after 9, and by the way, don’t touch me while I’m asleep.’ I guess I didn’t really need it as an excuse per se, but I didn’t want him to think it was a big deal.”

The most salient feature of Shawna’s descriptions of her disclosures in romantic relationships involved the discrepancy between experiencing the impact of being sexually abused and conveying such an impact to her romantic partner. As she indicates throughout the interview, as well as in the above passage, she often uses humor to deflect from the seriousness inherent in what she is saying. In addition, part of the mismatch between her experience and what she can convey to her partner may involve her relatively young age compared to the other women who have told their stories. As a 20-year-old woman, she still apparently struggles to put her abuse experiences into a meaningful framework and is currently undergoing psychotherapy for concerns related to being sexually abused. In this regard, Shawna’s story provides a sense of the struggle in developing intimacy in adolescence and young adulthood when the development of such intimacy is complicated by disclosing childhood sexual abuse.

The majority of Shawna’s reflections on her disclosure experiences in the interview concerned her then current romantic partner. However, she also described her first disclosure experience when she was 14-years-old. Part of the struggle in this disclosure experience involved making sense of her partner’s response. In this respect, it becomes apparent that through this disclosure experience she directly confronted dynamics that reflected her abuse experience. In the following passage, she provides a sense of this process:

S: I told my boyfriend when I was 14, we were the same age at the same school. I told him and his initial reaction was okay, I mean nothing that completely threw me off. But, I think later on when we were going out, he said something that really pissed me off: Well, whatever my father did to me, I couldn’t ever not talk to him or something like that, I don’t know what was fucking going on. Men! Alright, teenage men.

I: So, he was minimizing your experience then?

S: Yeah, he’s an asshole, I don’t talk to him. But, yeah, yeah.

I: Was that your feeling when he said what he said?

S: I kind of didn’t believe him completely, but I understood where he was coming from and I knew that that’s half what I was feeling. And, yeah, the other part of me was just, I
think I had been, yeah I was in therapy then, but I didn’t have the terms. But I knew he was trying to minimize it but since I was feeling half that way, it only slightly pissed me off, now it pisses me off a lot.

In reflecting on Shawna’s reaction to her boyfriend’s response to her disclosure, a number of meaningful elements emerge. In one way, the boyfriend’s reaction mirrored Shawna’s feelings and represented a voice that was then informing her understanding of the abuse. At the time, she was still struggling to undo the message that the abuse was her fault. In several sections of the interview she describes feelings of guilt and responsibility with which she had to contend. As Shawna also elaborates, perhaps subsequently she would have had the “terms” and have been more able to talk back to the things her boyfriend was saying. Instead, the boy becomes a generalized other (i.e., “Men!”) with whom a straightforward exchange becomes difficult if not impossible.

In her second relationship, there were additional features of the disclosure process that Shawna described. Many of these features seemed to reflect Shawna’s efforts to control the disclosure process. She explains how with this second partner there was “a big fear of how he was going to respond,” and describes how this fear of his response kept her from “laying it all out right at the beginning.” In this regard, she feared the outcome of her disclosure. In the passages below she provides the basis for some of her fears concerning disclosure:

S: Well I’m pretty sure my reason to begin with was to make sure that he wouldn’t run, I mean you know wouldn’t be scared away. Not necessarily to make sure; to find out if he was trustworthy, because I didn’t want to tell it all and have his friend come back and ask me about it the next day. I wanted to make sure he was trustworthy and I’m pretty sure I only told him you know a little bit at a time over 4 years.

I: So it was sort of a trust building?

S: Oh yeah, oh definitely, because I was still in the middle of being abandoned by my family during the trial, so I was very afraid of another person abandoning me.

While initially Shawna would attempt to control the disclosure process in order to prevent abandonment and the perception of her vulnerability, later in the relationship her disclosures changed. That is, later in the relationships she had different reasons for her ongoing disclosures. For example, Shawna and her partner were later deciding whether to have sex, and further disclosure took place as a way of setting the “ground rules” for acceptable activities. She also elaborated the disclosure for the purpose of explaining that if she “held back” or “was
weird” in any way it was because of the abuse. In making the decision to have sex, “he would have to know, I would have to be in control at all times…if I say ‘no,’ it’s the end of it right then and there.” In subsequently engaging in sexual activity, Shawna described how sex made her “feel like crap,” and her and her partner have thus ceased any sexual activity. In describing this decision, she linked her abuse experiences and how these have impacted her with wanting to stop such sexual activity. However, in disclosing this to her partner she seems to view her motivation with some suspicion:

S: The emotional intimacy was coming about as we were becoming physically intimate. And I knew that the more, you know, close I would get to him, the more that I would, I guess, come to trust him. You know, I didn’t want to trust anyone. So I think I used that as an excuse to tell him that my past experiences were why I was hesitant toward sex and sexual relations of any kind…So, it has been about a year for me and I don’t miss it. It’s been a big issue because I always thought that relationships involved sex, always involved sex so I had to, I guess, redefine my idea of relationships to where they didn’t have to include it.

When Shawna later was asked to elaborate on how she felt her disclosure was an “excuse,” it was apparently difficult for her to do so, though what she does say elucidates her fear of directly conveying how the impact of her abuse affected her:

I: What were you using as an excuse?

S: I wanted to have an excuse to set the ground rules. I didn’t want to make, I guess I didn’t want to make it as big as deal as it really was umm. [9 second pause] I think I used it as an excuse. Maybe I didn’t need it as an excuse? I’m getting a little off track…[She laughs]

I: No that’s okay, that’s okay.

S: I didn’t want to let him see me as vulnerable, so I tried to bring it up in a way that it was just another okay, well don’t call me after 9, and by the way, don’t touch me while I’m asleep. I guess I didn’t really need it as an excuse per se, but I didn’t want him to think it was a big deal.

Because of Shawna’s concern that her boyfriend would think the impact of her abuse was a “big deal” and because she “didn’t want to make it as big a deal as it really was,” she conveys the sense that she had to work hard to conceal the extent of her feelings. Although this was protective in one way, she also described her frustration in him not saying the right things or demonstrating an accurate sense of empathy. Along these lines, Shawna described how her partner would ask, “would it make it all better or would it be better for you if he [the perpetrator]
was dead?” She would explain that such an outcome was really not the issue, but it was more the “effect he’s had on my beliefs…it’s not his presence in the world that screws me up.” In this mismatch between Shawna and her boyfriend’s way of interpreting the meaning of the abuse—that is, his problem solving approach and her attempts to cognitively re-frame the abuse—she conveys their diverging understanding concerning the meaning of the abuse. In a paradoxical way, this mismatch makes sense in that Shawna conveys the sense of still being in the middle of her healing process. There is still much she is learning about the impact of the abuse in her life. Perhaps this sense of still working things out relates to her decision to stop sexual involvement at this time. In this regard, Shawna’s story shows one of the many ways disclosure may be limited in conveying meaning around an experience like childhood sexual abuse, and how such experiences may only partially be assimilated and transformed in the context of disclosing in a romantic relationship.
Appendix F

*Megan:* “*Well, I would say I that I have been very detached about it.*”

Several times throughout the interview, Megan described her sense of being detached when disclosing her past sexual abuse in her romantic relationships. In one sense, one might then conclude that her sexual abuse had little meaning in the context of her romantic relationships. To an extent, this was true. Many of her reflections on how her past sexual abuse came up in the context of her relationships provided little sense or detail of emotional significance around disclosure. However, the issue of her past sexual abuse did come up, which thus demonstrates how such issues can register within a romantic relationship despite the sense of a detached verbal exchange. In this way, disclosure encompassed more than words. In addition, the sense she provides of her disclosures as detached seemed to reflect a more general self-presentational style evident during the interview. Thus, these and some of the other influences that were apparent in the interview will be described in conveying a sense of her story.

At the time of the interview, Megan was 31-years-old. In describing her process of disclosing to romantic partners, Megan indicates that she started disclosing when she was 18-years-old. Part of the reason Megan describes such disclosures as detached is because of the context in which they initially took place. All four of the men she listed as romantic partners to whom she disclosed had previously known of her past sexual abuse through her disclosures in Alcoholics Anonymous functions. Because others in such groups would describe painful aspects of their own past, this left Megan feeling, in some ways, safe in disclosing. She gives the sense that the social context normalized the disclosure process. However, she also provides a sense of contradiction in her description of feeling safe in terms of how, at first, she would tell “fictitious sexual abuse scenarios” because of really “just wanting to talk but not really feeling comfortable telling my story.” Some of this need to tell such fictitious stories changed as she became sober, though the emotional detachment from what she was saying remained:

M: So by the time I actually got sober, I was used to telling fake stories anyway, so it probably made it easier to talk about it with other people.

Later in the interview, she elaborates further:

I: So you would characterize the way you would share as detached when you would share with a romantic partner. After you got sober, did that change?
M: No

I: What was it like when you were detached?

M: Well, I would tell a story like it was factual, like it was something I had seen on TV, but I didn’t have any emotions about it.

Thus, former friends from Alcoholics Anonymous who subsequently became Megan’s romantic partners knew the facts of her sexual abuse experiences, and this was, based on her descriptions, the extent of the significance such experiences had in her romantic relationships. In her spousal relationship the disclosure did not take place previously in a group, but this did not change the description of the disclosure:

I: And then in your spousal relationship, did you remain detached when telling it?

M: Umm hmmm

I: What do you, can you think about maybe why it was like that for you?

M: Well, I don’t think it had anything to do with the spouse or romantic partner. I think I’m detached from it.

Although Megan describes this sense of detachment in verbal disclosure, there were other ways her past sexual abuse became known that indicated significant meaning for her spousal relationship:

I: Did it come up again umm in any other way, or was it just that they knew and it didn’t need to come up? Was it ever a topic of discussion?

M: It was. And it had an influence, for sure. In my marriage now its come up just the first, well, the biggest reason it has come up is because whenever we have been sexually intimate, there have been plenty of times when it has been difficult for me so it has come up. When we first actually started being intimate umm, sexually intimate, I told. At one point I actually cried because it was the first time that it didn’t hurt.

In the description provided above, Megan’s emergent bodily awareness of the distinction between past painful feelings related to being sexually abused and how she felt with her husband served as a catalyst for a disclosure of the effects of her abuse. Her descriptions of this experience in sharing with her husband diverge from her earlier descriptions of detached verbal disclosures. She later explains that, “Well, it scared the heck out of him. I guess it was probably one of the first times I felt emotionally involved with it.” Such emotional involvement emerged
spontaneously and served as a striking contrast to previous sexual experiences. In this sense, the contrast seemed to make her more aware of how her past sexual abuse had impacted her in her subsequent sexual experiences with men. Thus, while words often failed as signifiers of Megan’s emotional and bodily experiences, there seemed to be other ways the issue of her past abuse entered into the relationship disclosing its significance.

While Megan often indicated how emotional detachment attended her disclosures, she still indicates a definite purpose in some of her disclosures. In one passage she described how “there were definitely certain sexual activities that I was not gonna engage in, so we talked about that.” In this regard, she indicates that her and her husband’s conversations in this vein may have had unforeseen consequences. She described how the issue of her past sexual abuse “has also come up because there have been a lot of times where he has been hesitant to pursue sexual activity for fear of how I would take it,” that sometimes he “he refused to be sexual at all.” In one passage, she explains:

M: Well, when he has asked me if I would be interested in any kind of sexual activity, he asks in a very questioning way. He just obviously has a tendency to even ask. Umm but for the most part he doesn’t even ask, I feel like I have to be the one to initiate. Often. Most often.

Although there may have been several reasons for such issues, Megan seemed to link them, at least partially to their conversations concerning her sexual abuse.

In several passages of the interview, she provides the sense that being detached about her abuse experiences was necessary, especially as it pertained to being the “strong one” in her marriage: “you know, I shouldered everything, I shouldered the physical burden of caring for the house, the financial burden of caring in the house, and the emotional burden of taking care of the family…” Because of this, Megan described how it is often difficult to convey her own needs and vulnerability. This general theme of remaining detached and struggling in conveying vulnerability in a relational setting also came up in the context of the interview:

I: Maybe you can say what its been like to share with me in this interview, what its like to share about this experience, how its been for you?

M: Umm [5 second pause] well, I guess it feels awkward, a little bit, to some degree. [4-5 second pause] Like I said, I’ve always been used to being the strong one, and the one sort of in charge and umm I’ve done qualitative research analysis before in studies, and I’ve always been the interviewer, not the interviewee.
I: Oh, I see.

M: The other thing, of course, is talking about the abuse with somebody that I don’t know is also uncomfortable. And that it’s being recorded is a little bit uncomfortable. And umm [12 second pause] well I guess the other thing about it that is uncomfortable is the fact that I’m being interviewed, see I’ve been in a lot of denial about all of this too. The fact that I’m being interviewed makes it more significant to somebody I don’t know. Like you know, what happened to me ended up being a study, it makes it more meaningful, more serious than I’ve let myself believe that it is.

In this regard, the interview situation was similar to what she had been describing in terms of being detached when she would disclose. For perhaps understandable reasons, she was detached in talking to me, a male researcher, about a very sensitive topic. As I explained the wider significance of the project and my appreciation for what she did disclose, she would then go on to explain that had it been a different day she may have had much more to disclose. She had recently been struggling with her husband, which made it difficult to think about her past disclosures. Further she would explain:

M: I try to stay very much in control…yeah, I’ve always tried to be somewhat invincible…to protect myself by not feeling about things…

Specifically in regard to the interview and having a bad week, she would describe how:

M: Well, when I have a bad time, I don’t necessarily even remember things that we talk about, its not that I’m choosing not to, it’s just not present.

Megan’s detached disclosures then seemed to relate to several issues. The interview context is apparently one reason, and seemed to be an analogous setting to the one in which she would disclose to romantic partners. That is, in disclosure she felt a loss of control. In such a situation, such detachment is a reaction that makes sense in terms of protecting her from the feelings associated with what she is saying or might say. It is thus difficult to know whether this detachment was unique to disclosures of her sexual abuse, unique to her interview with me, or a more general approach to talking about her experiences. Whatever the case, Megan seemed to recognize the limitations that such detachment could have in regard to her marriage. One can then only speculate as to how her disclosures of past sexual abuse would change in response to changes she was implying were on the horizon in a number of issues in her life. The one certainty, which is not in any sense surprising, is that her reflections on her manner of disclosure did seem to reflect other aspects of her life.
Appendix G

_Janice:_ “I mean people don’t know what to say when you say you’re sexually abused and my experience is they really don’t know what to say when you’re sexually abused by a woman…and they don’t know what to say when you’re sexually abused by a woman who was a minister.”

Much of the essential aspects of Janice’s disclosure experience to the one romantic partner to whom she disclosed, her current husband, is encapsulated in the above passage. Reflective of her belief that people “don’t know what to say” to disclosures of sexual abuse, Janice would also describe the “devastating” effect that her husband’s response to her disclosure had on her. Part of what she feels complicated the disclosure process with her husband was the fact that her perpetrator was a woman as well as her former minister. In addition, she feels the disclosure was complicated by her age when she was abused. As she states, “I wasn’t 3 years old, so it wasn’t like I was captive, I could have left.” All these features of her abuse experience seemed to have an impact on her subsequent identity as well as on how the disclosure played out in her spousal relationship.

Janice had already been married for four years when she began acknowledging the abuse. The first disclosure of the abuse was to a friend and she then disclosed to her husband when she was 32-years-old. In describing the disclosure experience with her husband, it becomes immediately apparent what she means when she says, “his reaction was not the best:”

J: His initial reaction was, well, you remained in that relationship and you were older, so you must have liked it.

Janice goes on to describe how his reaction was “devastating,” especially, as she explains, “I didn’t feel that was my experience at all.” In this sense, she describes feeling that her husband misinterpreted her experience. Yet, there were other ways that his response mirrored her confusion about what happened. After reflecting on his response to her disclosure, she described the following:

J: I wasn’t 3-years-old, so it wasn’t like I was captive. I could have left, I could have, you know, I felt like I had a lot of options being that age. And him saying that made me feel like it was my more fault than I already did.

From this passage, it becomes apparent that the age at which Janice was abused, and as she later describes, the gender of the perpetrator, influenced both her and her husband’s
understanding of the meaning of the abuse. As regards the latter, Janice indicates that the disclosure created a sense of “intrigue” for her husband:

J: It sounds really bad, I know, but, and he has made comments on occasion about lesbians, like, ‘are you a lesbian, do you think you might be a lesbian?’ Sometimes I think that those questions stem from me telling him that that occurred when I was 15. Which any more, I just say, ‘I tried that, didn’t like it!’”

In emphasizing this last statement (‘I tried that, didn’t like it’), Janice’s voice changes indicating her indignation with her husband’s response. However, in responding that she “tried that,” there is still some sense of the confusion regarding the extent of her involvement in the abuse. In this manner, her husband’s response again mirrored her feelings and thoughts. In the passage below, she indicates some of the struggle she had subsequent to being abused but previous to acknowledging that she was abused:

J: …I was wondering what exactly did happen with me and I had moments in my college period where I thought, ‘gee am I a lesbian?’ And I thought ‘why do I think that, why do I?’ I would think why did I keep thinking that because I know that I’m attracted to men, I’m attracted to male bodies, I’m not attracted to female bodies. Why do I keep having these things go through my head?

Because of the confusion she experienced regarding the meaning of the abuse, and how she links this confusion with questions regarding her sexuality, Janice indicates that it was difficult for her to argue with her husband after his adverse response to her disclosure. As she explains, “I don’t think that I clarified a lot with him, because I’m not sure I had a lot clarified for me at that point.” She would then provide a sense of feeling compelled to normalize his reaction by referring to how she believes people in general would respond:

J: I think a lot of people would have had the reaction of, “why didn’t you get out of that relationship if it was that painful and there were things that were hurting you, why wouldn’t you get out of that when you were old enough to make that choice, and you appear old enough to make that choice?”

In the passage above, Janice places her husband’s negative response in a wider context. In this way, this normalizing of his response may have mitigated some of the pain that arose from his response to her disclosure. Later, she describes the source of her disappointment:

J: Well, I thought he would, you know, almost scoop me up and, you know, be indignant that this happened. And he was more kind of sarcastic and ummm, not hurtful, because that’s not his personality at all, but he didn’t understand it.
Janice’s wish for understanding was then disappointed as a result of her husband’s reaction. And though he was not intentionally hurtful, throughout the interview she often describes a kind of interference standing in the way of a shared understanding between her and her husband concerning the meaning of the abuse. Sometimes Janice described such misunderstanding as resulting from it being a “confusing topic.” When her husband asks about her psychotherapy, she explains that “going through this whole [therapeutic] process is a lot deeper than most people would think,” which implies that it is deeper than he might think. Thus, it is hard for him to understand as he is, in important ways, outside of the understanding Janice shares with her therapist.

This same lack of understanding also applies to Janice’s relationship with her friends. Related to his accusation concerning the abuse and her sexual orientation, Janice’s also links her husband’s “intrigue” about the abuse with other things he has said about the close relationship she has with her female friends. Such relationships are often more affectionate than the ones he has, which, as Janice describes, seems to signify for him meanings beyond what might appear on the surface:

J: I think that’s what I mean when I say I just have this impression, which I never articulated before now, this impression that there is this sense of, you know, “do you have this other side to you that I, you know, that’s been there all along…”

As Janice indicates, for her husband, her affectionate behaviors with her friends serve as a disclosure to him of the ambiguity that remains concerning the meaning of the abuse.

Janice’s description of the misunderstanding concerning her disclosure also reflects, as she describes it, a wider context of gender norms, or at least, popular conceptions of such norms. Janice conveys that such gender norms influence her and her husband’s discrepant manner of handling her disclosure. That is, as she construes it, men, including her husband, want to “fix” the problem. “Like other men,” he becomes active about the issue and becomes angry and wants to get revenge. Meanwhile she describes a sense of wanting something else. She explains that, “I don’t think he wants to, to really be there, I mean really be there.” However, she is also able to acknowledge that the difficulty in creating a shared context for understanding is not only reflective of his limitations. As she states below:

J: There’s a lot of sadness. And I don’t think he knows what to do with that, but you know, I don’t know what to do with that sometimes. So, I guess that’s not too surprising.
In this sense, Janice’s sadness discloses the meaning of her abuse and seems to ask for a response, though there is a sense in which a part of her feels inconsolable. This same sense of loss without recourse to consolation is also evident when she describes how the abuse impacted the sexual relationship with her husband:

J: She stole things from our marriage, from our sexual relationship, from me, you know, that I have difficulty with. So, I mean he knows those things because of flashes that happen in sex or things that I cannot tolerate, ummm, of don’t enjoy or nightmares that I have, things like that. He knows about those things.

In the above passage, Janice indicates how he “knows about those things,” and conveys the ongoing presence of the abuse in their relationship. In this regard, the message is that by no means did the initial disclosure settle the issue between her and her husband. Later she makes this message even more explicit:

J: Maybe it’s just for me, maybe it’s not for him, it’s always there like…it’s not like something you just get over and it goes away. It’s lingering around us, in our home, in between us, in me, to different degrees at different times, so it’s not gonna ever be not there, I don’t think. It lessens and it has gotten better, but it’s always an impact, which is kind of weird, I’ve never really thought that much about that before now. But it’s like something that is always going to be a part of me and therefore us.

I: It gets in the way?

J: Umm hmm. Yeah. [11 second pause] Not as much as it used to, it just gets in the way, and it’s always there. [8 second pause] It’s just weird to think therapy would finish it…it’s a part of your, it’s a part of my history. I understand that more all the time.

In Janice’s descriptions of the abuse experiences and their impact as part of who she is and of how such an impact lingers around in her home, there is a profound way in which her narrative links the impact of the abuse with her identity. Moreover, because it is a part of her it is therefore, as she says, a part of “us.” In this regard, although Janice previously described how her husband often failed to convey empathy in a way that led to a shared understanding of the abuse, here the message is that there is a felt impact of the abuse between them. Although this does not close the issue concerning what she may want or need from her husband in terms of greater understanding, it does convey his growing awareness of the impact of the abuse in their lives. To be sure, in describing to me the conversation she had with her husband about doing the interview, she conveyed his misgivings about her talking about his initial reactions to the disclosure and how he felt ashamed regarding them.
Janice’s descriptions of her disclosures in her spousal relationship thus indicate both static as well as changing processes. As regards the former, the impact of the abuse settled into her identity, as it were, and consequently settled into her marriage. As she described it, the disclosure had widespread effects. In relation to the latter, Janice provides the sense of a growing concern on the part of her husband. She describes an increasing effort on his part to empathize with her experience. Whereas disclosure initially created a gulf between them that seemed influenced by their construal of Janice’s age at the time of the abuse, the gender of the perpetrator, as well as his insensitivity, they would eventually come to a point of making sense out of something that was originally difficult to assimilate in the context of their relationship. This process speaks to the complex role that time plays over the course of a relationship and how disclosure must be understood with this temporal sense in mind.