

# **Safety Rituals: How Women Cope with the Fear of Sexual Violence**

**Luciana C. Silva and David W. Wright**  
University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia USA

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*In this study we focus on how women's fear of sexual violence shapes their views on sexual assault and influences their use of safety strategies as well as how those safety strategies may restrict their use of time and space. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 participants who also journaled for one week on the topic of sexual violence. Data were analyzed through an inductive analysis approach. These women think about sexual violence as a widespread problem that affects them disproportionately more than it affects men; they engage in precautionary behaviors in a ritualistic manner; and their fear of sexual assault is restrictive. Safety rituals seem to help these women feel powerful, in control, and less anxious. Key Words: Sexual Violence, Sexual Assault, Ritual, Fear, Survivors, Safety, Rape, and Rape Myths*

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## **Introduction**

Women's fear of sexual violence received much attention from researchers in the 1970s and 1980s (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Holgate, 1989; Riger & Gordon, 1981; Valentine, 1989). Women's fear of sexual assault has been deemed widespread and limiting and it has been defined as "women's fear of rape [that keeps them] always on guard, vigilant and alert; a feeling that causes a woman to tighten with anxiety if someone is walking too closely behind her, especially at night. It is a fear that calls up admonitions that women have heard from childhood through adolescence and into maturity" (Gordon & Riger, p. 2). The term "female fear" has been coined to describe not only the prevalence of the fear of sexual violence among women, but also to bring attention to the fact this fear seems to affect only women (Gordon & Riger), indicating an underlying power imbalance between the genders. Fear of sexual assault serves to enforce social control of women, since they will restrict themselves because of it, leaving the public sphere, especially at night, to the free use of men (Day, 1994).

The present study is rooted in the feminist tradition; the purpose of which is to address and, ultimately, correct the devaluing or neglect of women's experience and "spheres of life" (Jaggar, 1991, p. 85). One of the main goals of feminism is to have women become part of the standard in our society—a role that has historically been attributed to men (Jaggar). Furthermore, the feminist movement is rooted in the fundamental belief in the equality of women and men and in the notion that women's status in society must be improved (Jaggar). This belief and ultimate goal necessitates an in-depth understanding of the social forces and dynamics--like the dynamics of sexual violence--that serve to subjugate women. Understanding how rape has been conceptualized in feminist theory helps one understand the role of sexual violence in

society. Rape is a symptom of societies in which patriarchal ideology is predominant (Sanday, 1998). Society's ambivalence toward rape, the generally upheld belief that rape is an unfortunate practice that cannot be eradicated, and a general acceptance of it as "normal" or a "fact of life" makes rape "an act and a social institution which perpetuate patriarchal domination" (Humm, 1995, p. 185). Whereas Brownmiller (1975) was the first to propose that rape is used as a means of social control of women, feminists presently view rape as "a political act of terror against an oppressed group," which serves as a constant reminder of women's vulnerable condition (Humm, p. 185).

In this study we investigate the effect of women's fear of sexual assault on their everyday lives and their views on sexual violence, which for many of them, is an undeniable reality because it occurs frequently. It is estimated that an American person is sexually assaulted every 2½ minutes, and 1 in 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network [RAINN] 2006). Fear is also understandable since assaults often come from someone close. Two thirds of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone known to the victim: 38% of reported sexual assaults are perpetrated by a friend or acquaintance, 28% are perpetrated by an intimate partner, and 6% are perpetrated by other relatives (RAINN). Sexual assault by a stranger only accounts for 26% of cases (RAINN). Of course, since sexual assault is an underreported crime, these statistics are only a blurry snapshot of what is probably occurring everyday (RAINN). The high prevalence of sexual assault in our society makes it a real concern for many women. We start from the assumption that the reality of sexual violence has real consequences for women and how they live their everyday lives. The purpose of this research is to better understand how the fear of sexual assault restricts women, how women cope with this fear, and how the concept of rituals can be applied to women's precautionary behaviors. With the exception of Gordon and Riger's *The Female Fear* (1989), women's fear of sexual assault has not been empirically studied as thoroughly as women's responses to actual violence, and through this study we hope to fill this gap in the literature.

To better understand women's fear of sexual assault, it seems important to discuss the origin of such fear and how it has been perpetuated over the years. The behaviors that some women adopt to live with this fear will also be discussed, as well as the consequences for women when they use such strategies. Finally, the concept of rituals and how it has been used in empirical research will be discussed and applied to the subject of fear of sexual violence as a way to further conceptualize the phenomenon.

### **How Fear of Sexual Assault Develops and is Maintained**

Women learn to fear sexual violence in their early socialization through warnings from family and friends about the public sphere (Gordon & Riger, 1989). These warnings are usually vague and mysterious since the open discussion of sexual assault is taboo (Hadleigh-West, 1998). Furthermore, family warnings may support false ideas about rape prevention (Burt, 1998; Gordon & Riger, 1989), which end up becoming entrenched beliefs based on rape myths—that is, false ideas about rape, the victim, or the perpetrator (Burt, 1980, 1998). The often mysterious aura of family warnings serves to camouflage many rape myths to the point where they become almost unrecognizable for their falsity. Ultimately, rape myths are dangerous and harmful because they undermine credibility in

the occurrence and prevalence of coercive sex (Burt, 1998; Clay-Warner, 2002; Gordon & Riger).

Personal experience and secondary victimization also affect fear of sexual violence (Day, 1999), although findings regarding the influence of previous victimization on present fear of sexual assault are contradictory. Some studies indicate that previous victimization does not predict current fear of any offense (Ferraro, 1996; Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2007), whereas other studies indicate victims have increased fear of being assaulted again (Culbertson, Vik, & Kooiman, 2001; Holgate, 1989). Such fear may be greater if the perpetrator was an acquaintance or a present partner of the victim since there is evidence that sexual assault tends to be most harmful in that circumstance (Temple, Weston, Rodriguez, & Marshall, 2007).

Some researchers write that experiencing sexual intimidation when in public greatly increases women's fear of sexual violence, most likely because these experiences increase a woman's sense of her own vulnerability (Domosh & Seager, 2001; Holgate, 1989). Public sexual intimidation includes being followed, stared at, being sexually solicited, being rubbed up against, seeing a flasher, and hearing sexual comments (Holgate). Informal conversations about crime with family and friends, and being exposed to the most violent and bizarre cases of sexual abuse through the media can also affect women's assessment of their own safety (Burt, 1998; Day, 1994; Gordon & Riger, 1989; Koss, 1998; Riger & Gordon, 1981). Public victim blaming and humiliation, both in the media's treatment of sexual assault cases and through the process of reporting and prosecuting the crime, contribute to higher fear of sexual assault (Madigan & Gamble, 1989).

### **How Women Cope With the Fear of Sexual Violence**

Women who fear sexual violence use precautionary behaviors to protect themselves (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Riger & Gordon, 1981). The two major types are: avoidance behaviors, which are those used to isolate oneself from danger by limiting one's actions and routines (Gordon & Riger; Valentine, 1989), and self-precautionary behaviors, practiced to minimize risk in the face of danger (Riger & Gordon).

Riger and Gordon (1981) found these two kinds of precautionary behaviors are used at different times for different reasons. Use of avoidance tactics are related to women's beliefs regarding their own physical competence, but these do not protect against date and acquaintance rape. These avoidance behaviors probably restrict women's movement in time and space the most (Riger & Gordon) because they involve self-imposed limitations. Minority women with less formal education use more of these tactics (Riger & Gordon).

Self-protective behaviors have been called "street savvy" tactics and they may be used more frequently than avoidance tactics (Riger & Gordon, 1981, p. 71). Some women will spend an inordinate amount of money and time on these precautionary behaviors, just to feel safer. Use of self-protective behaviors seems to be related to women's assessment of danger in their neighborhoods as fear of crime is the most powerful predictor of the use of these strategies (Riger & Gordon).

Women's use of precautionary behaviors restricts their use and occupation of public space (Gordon & Riger, 1989; Langelan, 1999; Valentine, 1989). Because it is

likely the victim might be blamed for not using precautionary measures, or not using them well, such strategies reinforce our society's tendency to blame the victim. Precautionary behaviors allow women "to transfer their threat appraisal from men to certain public spaces where they may encounter attackers...[and] to adopt false assumptions about their security when in places falsely deemed safe for women, such as the home" (Valentine, p. 385). In addition, men suffer from the consequences of the female fear. After all, not all men rape (Lisak, 1998), and many are used as women's visas into the public space—which further reinforces the idea that women should not be in those places by their own right (Hadleigh-West, 1998; Valentine).

Precautionary behaviors are somewhat controversial. Whether they actually increase one's real safety is difficult to know, especially because fear-inducing circumstances vary widely. Sometimes fear may be well-founded whereas at other times it may be a result of the flawed assessment of one's environment. In either case, the subjective experience of fear that leads women to use precautionary behaviors is real and can be restrictive.

## **Rituals**

Rituals have been called an "elusive concept" (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 401) because their boundaries are hard to identify and define. Rituals can be confused with simple patterned behavior (Wolin & Bennett). They seem to be more meaningful and intentional than behavioral patterns however, and they can be consciously created with specific needs and significance in mind (Beck & Metrick, 1990).

Rituals are characterized by various rules and principles used to create particular experiences (Deegan, 1989). Rituals can be large or small group enactments, created from the interactional patterns and shared experiences of those who create them (Deegan; Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Thus, rituals are generally observed in the context of relationships and groups. Rewarding activities or behaviors get repeated with time, and individuals gradually ascribe special meaning to these behaviors (Doherty, 2001; Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock, & Baker, 2002). Furthermore, people perform rituals because they generally believe these rituals will have real effects on their surroundings, either by modifying or sustaining a particular situation (Imber-Black, 1988).

Rituals have been studied in the context of family research as well. Similar to how rituals have been theorized in the sociological and anthropological literature, family rituals have been defined as acts and interactions within the family that are systematic, repetitious, and that hold special meaning to the group (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Couple rituals have been defined in the same way (Fiese et al., 2002; Imber-Black, 1988). Studies of rituals in family research have confirmed that they can be enactments of large or small groups, are generally expressed in the context of relationships and groups because they are created from interactional patterns and shared experiences (Suter et al., 2006; Wolin & Bennett, 1984), and are generally rewarding activities or behaviors that get repeated with time. Over time and with repetition, individuals start ascribing special meaning to these behaviors (Doherty, 2001; Fiese et al., 2002).

Everyday rituals are characterized by specific behaviors, settings, and rules that are not sacred as is the case with more structured, less frequent rituals determined and controlled by social structures and institutions (Deegan, 1989; Imber-Black, 1988). The term “participatory ritual” has been applied to rituals performed by people in the natural course of their everyday lives, whether alone or in a group (Deegan). These are the rituals with which this study is concerned.

We use the concept of rituals to understand and further elucidate women’s use of self-protective behaviors to cope with the fear of sexual violence. From what we have learned in the literature on women’s fear of sexual violence, we have come to conceptualize women’s use of precautionary behaviors as safety rituals because these precautionary strategies seem to be characterized by specific actions that are repeated, occur in specific settings, and follow certain rules. These behaviors are meaningful in that they are believed to protect the individual from sexual violence. These precautionary behaviors are responsive to the environment, but they also shape it as inherently sexist. Our conceptualization of rituals helped us arrive at the research questions we focus on and to formulate the questions we used to obtain participants’ accounts of precautionary behavior.

### **Method**

This study is rooted in the social constructivist tradition, in which knowledge is viewed as “constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2004, p. 42). An underlying assumption and consequent finding of this study is that women interact with their immediate environments in gathering information to assess their level of safety at any moment and later specifically manipulating aspects of their behavior, movement, and interaction with the same environment to increase their subjective feeling of safety and reduce their subjective feelings of risk of a possible sexual assault. In this way, women create, maintain, and perpetuate knowledge and meaning regarding what it is to be a woman in today’s society. The research questions were:

1. What attitudes do participants have about sexual violence, and do these attitudes influence the rituals participants create and enact to feel safe from sexual violence?
2. What do women do repeatedly to protect themselves from sexual violence? What are the processes involved in the creation of safety rituals and what are the intentions behind their enactment?
3. Do women’s safety rituals keep them constrained in time and space? If so, how?
4. How do these safety rituals impact women’s views of those who have been sexually assaulted and how do these rituals inform women’s own perceived vulnerability to sexual violence?

These research questions were generated primarily through careful and prolonged immersion in the literature on sexual violence and as a consequent awareness of an area of knowledge that has generally been underdeveloped. My (Luciana’s) work with sexual

assault survivors and personal interest on the topic of sexual violence also led me to these questions in a gradual process of observation of those around me and of my own behavior.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

As the first author, my investment in this study comes from the fact that I am a woman who fears sexual violence. I am very aware of my own safety rituals, and tend to rely on them and question them alternatively. Women in my circle of family and friends also seem to share my fear and coping mechanisms, which tells me I am not the only one who thinks about this issue in very concrete terms. I work with survivors of sexual assault, know women who have been assaulted, and so the issue of sexual victimization and how women cope with it is prominent in my life. After I started working with survivors of sexual violence, my own fear greatly increased in spite of my knowledge of how most assaults happen. The present study is relevant to my personal life; as I shared in other women's experiences and thoughts on the topic, I analyzed and uncovered my own experiences and how these affect my identity and everyday life.

As the second author, I (David) have long had an interest, expressed in my teaching, research, and practice, in the roots of sexual violence and violence in intimate relationships. In particular I have focused on the relationship between violence and gender socialization and the foundation of violence in cultural standards. As a therapist I have helped women deal with experiences and fears of violence and helped men confront their acceptance of violence and their own violent behaviors. As a husband and father of a young daughter, the reality of my loved ones' vulnerabilities to sexual violence pains me and I am saddened that they and other women must give up freedom of agency and place and carry an unfair burden of protecting themselves in situations where most men need not be concerned.

### **Participants**

For this study the researchers sought a group of participants who were single women, 18 years of age or older, and who knew someone who had been sexually assaulted. The characteristics of this pool are consistent with the notion that the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize to a population, but to create in-depth understanding to inform future research (Glesne, 1999). Friends, colleagues, and acquaintances of the first author were asked to provide contact information of any women they knew who fit the criteria described above. Furthermore, researchers asked participants to identify anyone they knew who qualified for the study. Flyers detailing the research topic and the participant selection criteria were placed in technical schools, neighborhood cafes, and university campus locations where potential participants would see them. Some of the participants were acquaintances to the first author. Participants were given a \$15 gift certificate for their participation in this study. Approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia under project number 2007103750.

Using a process of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) participant selection was made sequentially to ensure each participant's reported level of fear was

different from most of the other participants' levels of fear. This was established during the first conversation with each participant (either over the phone or in person), during which basic background information such as age, occupation, marital status, and contact information was gathered. In this conversation, the first author asked the participants why they were interested in participating in the study, and whether they had thought much about the topic of sexual assault in their lives. These questions were enough to elicit participant's beginning accounts of their own fear and thoughts on the subject. Because the first two participants had said they had not thought that much about the subject before, the next three participants were recruited specifically because they reported frequently thinking about the topic. Preliminary analysis was conducted on each participant's first interview (and sometimes journal) before the next participant was recruited. Selection of each new participant took into consideration what was learned in the previously analyzed data, as theoretical sampling requires (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Patton, 2002).

The five participants ranged in age from 20 to 34. All were single and, with the exception of one, were in committed, non-cohabiting relationships with men. One participant, Jane, was an emergency room nurse. Tina, another participant, worked for a real-estate agency and was pursuing studies for her real-estate license. Ava, the third participant, worked at a restaurant and was a student in paralegal studies in a small technical college. Isabelle and Sonia were graduate students in Psychology. All knew at least one person who had been sexually assaulted. Furthermore, Tina and Isabelle are survivors of sexual assault, and Ava is an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. The participants differed widely in terms of their level of fear; Jane reported little or no fear, Tina reported little conscious fear accompanied by complex and detailed safety strategies, Isabelle and Sonia reported moderate amounts of fear, and Ava reported the greatest amount of fear among the five participants.

Jane was referred to the study by an acquaintance, and had to be interviewed over the phone because she lived in another state. Tina was an acquaintance of the first author, and Ava made contact after seeing a flier advertising the study. Isabelle was an acquaintance of the first author, and she referred Sonia to the study after completing one interview. The decision to include acquaintances in the study was made after these individuals approached the researcher specifically volunteering to be a part of the study, citing they wished to talk about the subject because it was important to them. It was our perspective that research can be a form of activism, that is, giving people an active voice on a particular subject or dialogue, and an opportunity to confront and possibly modify social realities. Therefore, including participants who had an expressed interest in talking about the subject and being a part of the project seemed to be a way to blend research with activism and a way to give back to participants in meaningful, personal ways.

## **Procedure**

These five women were interviewed twice for this study. In addition, participants also kept a journal for about one week. Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) were conducted in the first phase of the study. Key questions asked of all participants (and common probes that followed up such questions) included, "Do you think about sexual violence? (When? How? How often?)," and "Were you given any messages about sexual

assault throughout your life? (By whom? What were the messages about? What did you think about them?).” Because little research has been conducted on women’s fear of sexual assault, this qualitative approach, focusing specifically on women’s accounts of their fear and what they do to protect themselves, seemed necessary for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Qualitative methodology seemed most likely to fill the gap in the literature left by quantitative studies based on large survey data that did not provide a deep understanding of women’s fear. Once a better understanding was attained it was also important to organize the new knowledge into a beginning conceptual framework about women’s fear of sexual assault and its effects on their lives.

Because the purpose of this study was to find out how women who fear sexual violence typically think about it and cope with this fear, the use of semi-structured interviews was especially important because it allowed us, the researchers, to guide participants’ accounts while allowing participants to talk about what they felt was important about the subject. We assumed from the beginning that women’s experiences of fear are idiosyncratic so the semi-structured interviews allowed each participant to talk about what that experience (or the lack of such experience) is like for her.

We also assumed women would probably not be accustomed to thinking and talking about the subject in so much depth, so we included two interviews in the study design. This allowed time for participants to organize their thoughts and remember relevant occasions when they had felt fear for their safety. The second interview also gave us the opportunity to confirm hunches after preliminary analysis of the first interview data, to ask questions regarding things participants said in the first interviews and in the journals, and to use deeper probes to expand their knowledge of the topic. The week of journaling was meant not only to help participants brainstorm and free write (and free think) about the topic and their experiences, but also to give researchers access to participants’ conversations with friends and family, musings on the general topic of sexual violence, and actual occasions when participants felt fear or felt themselves becoming more aware of their surroundings—all actual topics participants reported in their journals and instances of data that would be lost if the study had a more traditional one-interview design.

Journaling also was used as a triangulation method (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002) and as a way to get at thoughts the participants might have after their first interview—sometimes one needs to be prompted to talk about a subject to start thinking about it more deeply (Glesne). Furthermore, participant journaling is a way for a researcher to tap into additional (and untraditional) sources of data (St. Pierre, 1997). Documentary analysis increases the quality of findings in two ways: by offering additional data, and by supplementing interviews and observations with additional points of inquiry (Patton). Consequently, the second interview contained questions asked of all participants, as well as questions derived from each participant’s first interview and journal data. All interviews were conducted by the first author and each lasted between 1 and 2 hours.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was established in various ways. First, data were triangulated through the three different methods of collection: the two separate participant interviews, participants’ journals, and a field log reporting all the first author’s thoughts and ideas

pertinent to the study and its subject (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Glesne, 1999; St. Pierre, 1997). Secondly, member checks were conducted.

*Table 1. Development of Themes*

| Component of Categorization                         | Temporal Designation |                 |  |
|---|----------------------|-----------------|--|
|   | A priori             | A posteriori    | Iterative<br>(developed gradually and tentatively throughout research) |
| <b>Origination</b>                                  |                      |                 |  |
| Participants  |                      | r               | 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11<br>f, g, j, l, n, o, p, q                  |
| Investigative<br>(researcher's views & experiences) |                      | a, b, c, e      | 7<br>d, i  |
| Literature  |                      |                 | 3<br>h, k, m   |
| <b>Nomination</b>                                   |                      |                 |  |
| Participants  |                      |                 |  |
| Investigative                                       |                      | 1 – 11<br>a – r |  |
| Literature  |                      |                 |  |

*Note.* Origination is where authority for creating category resides; Nomination is the source of the name to describe the category.

*Category Label Key.*

| Themes                                       | Patterns                                    |
|--|---|
| 1. definition                                | a. threat as part of assault                |
| 2. widespread problem                        | b. actions or behaviors as assault          |
| 3. sexual assault as exertion of power       | c. sexual assault as devastating            |
| 4. uncertain origins of safety rituals       | d. internalized responsibility for safety   |
| 5. precipitating event                       | e. precautions just in case                 |
| 6. personal risk assessment                  | f. women's solidarity                       |
| 7. safety ritual mode                        | g. capitalization on physical vulnerability |
| 8. constraint by fear                        | h. reliance on men for safety               |
| 9. no perceived constraint by safety rituals | i. fear of men in general                   |
| 10. increased control and empowerment        | j. men's perceived immunity                 |
| 11. the victim is blameless                  | k. indirect messages from family            |
|  | l. direct warnings from friends             |
|  | m. influence of media                       |
|  | n. immediate precipitating event            |
|  | o. distant precipitating event              |
|  | p. immediate safety rituals                 |
|  | q. distant safety rituals                   |
|  | r. safety rituals for peace of mind         |

Once data were collected and analysis was underway, participants were contacted and asked to comment on the use and interpretation of data from interview and journals. Some of these participant checks were conducted during the second interview. Lastly, the second author served as an expert auditor who reviewed random selections of the data and their coding (Patton, 2002).

Constas' (1992) method of recording the theme development process in tables also was used as a way to increase transparency in this study (see Table 1). Constas proposes that researchers should keep careful records of how themes and patterns develop and are named—from participants' accounts, from the researcher's experiences, from the literature, or as tentative developments over the course of data analysis. These records have the purpose of making the data analysis more transparent to research consumers.

## **Data Analysis**

Methods associated with grounded theory, such as the constant comparative method of data analysis, theoretical sampling, and the building of a conceptual framework out of the many themes generated through data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used in conjunction with a generalist approach to inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006).

Data analysis for this research project involved three steps. The first was to transcribe interviews as they were conducted, and to conduct a preliminary analysis in which general themes were found in each interview in and of itself, and then in all interviews and journal data as collected up to that point. This process involved memo writing about preliminary ideas related to themes as well as comments and questions inserted in the transcript that highlighted and exemplified important segments of the interview. These comments were also used to formulate new questions or probes for second interviews. This preliminary analysis also identified gaps left by each participant's accounts that needed to be filled by specifically recruiting new participants.

The second phase of analysis occurred after all second interviews had been conducted and all participant journals had been collected. In this phase, these data were aggregated and analyzed for formal patterns. Tentative labels were given to each pattern in the data, and segments of data from transcripts and journals were grouped with each label. As a segment of data was added under a label, it was compared to all other data segments already there to confirm it rightfully belonged in that group. In this phase, we did not differentiate according to a data segment's scope. If an idea was expressed more than once by different participants it was considered a pattern and the segments of data that illustrated it were grouped together under the pattern's label.

The third phase of analysis immediately followed the second phase. It first involved reading through each pattern and its segments of data, ascertaining that each data segment fit with all the others under that pattern label, and writing a brief description of it. After all patterns had been described in words, a second reading of each pattern and its segments of data was done. This second reading focused on grouping similar patterns together, to develop larger themes. These groups (the themes) were then assigned descriptors and a representative data segment was found for each of them. As a last step, memos were used to elucidate how themes related to each other, to begin building a conceptual framework of how fear of sexual assault develops, how it manifests itself,

how women cope with it, and what purpose it accomplishes. All steps of data analysis were conducted by the first author who selected random representative segments of data and analytical documents from each step for the second author to audit. Changes suggested by the second author were incorporated into each step of the analysis.

This process of data analysis yielded themes and patterns that were organized to answer each research question. Table 2 provides a tabular representation of themes associated with each research question as well as the smaller patterns that compose each theme. These themes are large, overarching topics composed of various smaller patterns, which refer to descriptive trends that complement each other and stand together in their reference to a particular phenomenon, characteristic, or subject (Patton, 2002). Themes and patterns are described in detail below with examples of each, and organized by the question to which they refer.

*Table 2. Themes and Patterns by Research Question*

| <b>Research Question</b>   | <b>Themes</b>                                   | <b>Patterns</b>                                      |
|--|---|--|
| Question 1:  | Definition                                      | Threat as Part of Assault                            |
| What attitudes do participants have about sexual violence, and do these attitudes influence the rituals participants create and enact to feel safe from sexual violence? | Widespread Problem That Affects All             | Actions or Behaviors as Assault                      |
|  |   | Sexual Assault as Devastating Event                  |
|  | Sexual Assault as Exertion of Power and Control | Internalized Responsibility for Safety               |
|  |   | Precautions Just in Case                             |
|  |   | Women's Solidarity as a Safety Network               |
|  | Sexual Assault as Exertion of Power and Control | Sexual Assault Capitalizes on Physical Vulnerability |
|  |   | Reliance on Men for Added Safety                     |
| Fear of Men in General   |   |  |
|  |   | Men's Perceived Immunity                             |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Question 2:<br>What are the processes involved in the creation of safety rituals and what are the intentions behind their enactment?<br>What do women do repeatedly to protect themselves from sexual violence? | Uncertain Origins of Safety Rituals<br><br><br><br><br><br><br>Precipitating Event<br><br><br><br>Personal Risk Assessment | Indirect and Unclear Messages from Family<br><br>Direct Warnings and Suggestions from Friends<br><br>Influence of Media<br>Immediate Precipitating Events<br><br>Distant Precipitating Events |
|---|--|---|

## Findings

### Attitudes about Sexual Violence

The first research question was: What attitudes do participants have about sexual violence, and do these attitudes influence the rituals participants create and enact to feel safe from sexual violence? Three general themes and ten patterns addressed this question. Each theme is discussed below, and the patterns making up each theme are briefly explained.

#### *Definition*

Because the first research question this study asked is about participants' attitudes about sexual assault and because the way one defines sexual assault influences how one views it as a phenomenon in society, a good place to start the conversation was to ask each participant for her definition of sexual assault. Each participant had a unique definition of the term "sexual violence." All definitions were broad and encompassed more than just rape. The two patterns found in this theme revolve around defining sexual violence in terms of acts and the threat of violence or abuse (through harassment or intimidation). For Jane, "sexual violence is anything that would make a person feel threatened...which would include verbal as well as physical actions." For Isabelle, however, "a sexual behavior or action upon another would have to be attempted or take place against the other person's will." Isabelle's comment exemplifies a definition that focuses on actual consummated acts.

#### *Widespread problem that affects all*

All participants viewed sexual assault as a serious problem that is widespread in society. They saw it as a multifaceted issue that affects many lives, even if one has not

been victimized personally. Many were aware that sexual assault is underreported, and they seemed to connect this to victim-blaming. For example, when asked if she felt that sexual violence is a big problem in society, Tina suggested that it is probably underreported, especially because people tend to doubt the victim or dismiss her reports. Participants also described sexual violence as an issue especially prominent for women. Ava says: “As a woman, sexual assault is something that we all risk....So, I mean, I think most women at least have some fear, whether or not they realize it—whether or not they can even vocalize it. I think women, I mean, every woman has got to have thought about [it].”

*Four main patterns make up this theme*

First, the participants viewed sexual assault as a devastating event. For example, Jane said, “I think about, like I said, how you would...try to react or how you would try to protect yourself in the situation. And you also think about how it will affect your life down the road, meaning...how it would alter your life and what you would have to go through.” Sonia, on the other hand, was more direct in her statement: “I just couldn’t imagine...if that were to happen-, you know, to happen to me I don’t know if I could handle it.” Secondly, participants exhibited some internalized responsibility for their own safety by how often they say they “should” do or think about something. For example, when describing a particular incident, Ava stated, “It was after dark, and it was night time, and I shouldn’t have been walking, but I was.” Tina also implied that she probably “should” think more about sexual assault when she said, “I guess I just don’t really—I’m so fast paced that I don’t ever think about this. It may not be a good thing.” Even participants who exhibited little fear in general or in a specific moment in time have taken precautions “just in case” they are at risk, which is a third pattern. For example, Isabelle stated, “I wasn’t too terribly concerned, but I was leaving someone’s house...sometime past midnight and it was a couple days ago...I was looking for something in my car at the time and I actually stopped and got [in], locked the door while sitting there, while I was sitting in the parking lot...And that was just because it was so late, dark, I couldn’t see around me.” And Tina states that she hardly ever feels fearful, but she takes precautions anyway: “I never feel scared in my own life. I try not to be at the [place where I study] until one [am] and then walk out to my car. There have probably only been a handful of times that I’ve actually thought in my mind, like in the middle of the night, or walking alone, ‘Oh, what if someone’s watching me.’” Finally, participants talked about women’s solidarity as a safety network. Jane said, “I guess [I worry about] women in general. I always want to be sure my friends are safe. There is no one, I guess, there’s no one in particular that worries me more than another...I hate to admit this, but I just have the sense, generally speaking, that women need to be a little bit more prepared and, so...you are [responsible for making sure], that your friends are okay.” Ava also said, “I have a fear of any of the women that are close to me having to deal with any sort of violent situation. I mean, sexual violence would be really bad, but I definitely feel afraid of them having to deal with any situation like that,” and then went on to list all the things she does to ensure her mother’s safety.

*Sexual assault as exertion of power and control*

Most participants reflected a feminist interpretation of sexual violence in the sense that it is about power. They viewed sexual assault as someone stripping someone else of personal agency and control. For example, Isabelle said, “I actually get frustrated that I have to feel [fear]. I get frustrated that the other wouldn’t know that it’s inappropriate and that I have as much power as them and they shouldn’t be infringing on mine. So I think I get more angry than scared. I mean, I might be scared for moments, but I’m actually angry too that I have to feel uncomfortable.”

*This theme consists of four patterns*

First, participants viewed sexual assault as capitalizing on women’s physical vulnerability. Tina, for example, said,

I know I’m 5 foot 4. What could I do if some six-foot man approached me and [attacked me]. I couldn’t do too much. I hate to say it but I couldn’t do shit. I mean, I ran track in high school, but you know. My cheerleading ability is not like I can do a back flip and anything will happen, I mean, I’m not--, I’m pretty useless... It seems like I never really built up a defense physically.

When Jane was asked why she thought women have to be more cautious than men, she said,

just speaking physically, men are stronger than women, and I know that if I...was being assaulted by a man I don’t know if I could fend him off easier, or just as evenly as men [could]. I don’t think I could. And I hate to admit that because I’d like to think of us as equal, and I don’t think we are in just that sense.

Because they perceived themselves as generally physically weaker than men, participants tended to rely on men for added safety, which is a second pattern within the theme of power and control. For example, Jane said, “

I definitely feel safer when I am with my boyfriend. I hate saying it, but it’s true. There’s a presence that...men have, and if you are out somewhere and you are seen with another, with a man, maybe guys, people will leave you alone. Not leave you alone, but they won’t try and approach you.

When the interviewer asked Isabelle if she felt safer around familiar men, she was very direct in her answer, “In general, you’re right – I mean that – yes, I would probably say I would probably be less inclined to worry if a male was present.” Another pattern is that participants tended to fear all men in general, although they have relied on some men for protection. When asked if there are some people she fears more than others, Tina

simply says, “Men—of course...” and Ava stated, “My mom has [taught me]... to be very cautious around all men, especially the ones around you, and—because you never know when something evil is going to happen.” The last pattern within this theme is participants’ agreement that men perceive themselves to be immune to sexual violence victimization—a confidence that seems naïve to most participants, but that might actually inspire more confidence in men’s ability to be the protectors of the women in their lives. Jane said she doesn’t think men think about protecting themselves as much as women do. She stated,

I think they think that they are much-, that they are prepared to handle almost anything that comes their way.” And when Sonia was asked if she thinks that men think about the possibility of being sexually assaulted, she said, “No...no. Maybe their relative-, maybe their sisters or, you know, their girlfriends, or their mothers, but not themselves.

### **Protection from Violence**

The second research question was “What do women do repeatedly to protect themselves from sexual violence? What are the processes involved in the creation of safety rituals and what are the intentions behind their enactment?” Three themes and four patterns refer to what women do repeatedly to protect themselves from sexual violence and one theme and three patterns refer to the processes involved in the creation of safety rituals. Explanations for each theme and pattern follow.

#### *Uncertain origin of safety rituals*

Participants most often could not concretely specify the source of their precautions when asked how they came to think of the specific safety rituals they enact. They generally could not say where exactly their safety rituals originated, when they started doing them, or how they got in the habit of enacting these rituals over time. Isabelle explained this idea when she said, “I think that those [safety strategies] are just real, real general precautions. They’re not real [specific]...they didn’t originate from a specific source. I think I just accumulated them.” Sonia also brought up the role of positive reinforcement in the process of creating and enacting safety rituals: “I guess what’s worked to make me feel better in the past, you know. Not opening the door, I felt safer, so I’m not going to open it next time, you know?”

When asked about the origins of their safety strategies most participants cited a basis in unclear messages they had received from family, the direct, overt messages they received from friends, and the media. These three sources of warnings make up the three patterns within the larger theme of the uncertain origins of women’s safety strategies described above. When asked if she was given any messages about sexual assault when she was a child, Isabelle talked about messages about safety being abstract or aimed at general safety instead of being specific about safety from sexual violence,

If anything, I can tell you for sure that my memory is not failing me: it’s never been because of a sexual violent act. If anything from a child it was,

“Well, people might hurt you.” That was the most general. Or, “people might try to take your purse.”

Tina also stated that the messages from family when she was young were few and very abstract, but added, “I feel as though it’s pretty much at this stage in my life a topic that is perhaps more frequent among my girlfriends—stories about other women or other college-aged girls-- and pretty much just giving precautions to each other or warning each other.” And, as an example of the media’s influence on how women think about sexual violence, Jane stated, “If I learned anything it was from television. I don’t remember anyone ever, ever sitting me down and explaining what it was and how-, what to do [if I were attacked].”

### *Precipitating event*

A precipitating event can be any trigger that makes a woman think about her safety or lack of safety. All participants mentioned experiencing precipitating events at least from time to time. These were personal experiences as well as vicarious experiences. Precipitating events also were situational. They made the thought of sexual violence more salient for some of these women, which led them to assess their own risk, and take action if they found it necessary. Precipitating events were immediate or distant depending on whether the women experienced the trigger first-hand, or heard about someone’s experience. Precipitating events evoked premonitions and warnings participants had heard throughout their lives. When asked when she knows it’s time to use her safety strategies, Isabelle said,

Just when something...seems different to me. Or when someone’s around or following me or if I’m alone and I’m walking to my car and it’s dark and there’s no one around. So, I mean, it has to be primed by either context and lack of people or a specific person that I don’t know that’s around me and there’s no one else around.

### *Personal risk assessment*

After a precipitating event, a woman might assess her own safety and whether she should do something to make herself safer. If the precipitating event is hearing about a case of sexual violence, there would usually be an element of social comparison to the victim of the crime to assess whether one is likely to get victimized in the same way. Personal risk assessment was often a split-second decision. Participants often equated this assessment with a “feeling,” or a “premonition,” that all is not right, and they need to do something to either get out of the situation or to protect themselves. Depending on whether the precipitating event is immediate or distant, the assessment process was longer or shorter—more or less salient to the woman. Sonia said, “I guess it depends...with other people, feeling that I have to use, you know, some precaution. I think it’s the feeling I get about...You know, an alarmed, threatened feeling maybe. I think that’s it.” Isabelle explained the thought process that led her to enact some safety rituals in a particular situation: “I mean that’s why I did lock the doors. But it was just a

cautious feeling. It's not a hyper-anxious feeling. Just a cautiousness and an acknowledgement that this is a more risky situation." Tina, on the other hand, talked about the process of personal risk assessment following a distant precipitating event: "I don't know that I took very strong action once I heard that story, but I did at least think about it. And I thought to myself, what little things could I do? And so I took my address off [this particular website] at least." If a woman concluded she was indeed at risk or less safe than she would like to be in any particular situation, she might enter safety ritual mode after concluding the process of personal risk assessment.

### *Safety ritual mode*

If at any point the woman felt unsafe or not safe enough, she was likely to enact safety strategies to lower her anxiety or make her feel safer, if nothing else. Assessment was so quick it was sometimes difficult to separate that process from safety ritual enactment. Safety strategies were indeed repeated over time, every time there was a need for it: they become habitual and rewarding because they provided peace of mind to present and future selves (when one looks back on the threatening situation). When participants were asked to provide a check on rituals as a framework for understanding safety strategies, they agreed the concept seemed fitting. Tina talked about why she enacted safety rituals in situations where she felt unsafe:

I think I do a lot of these things completely subconsciously. I think I do a lot of them because I've programmed myself that if anything bad were to happen, if a man were trying to hurt me, there would be three things that could happen. Obviously I can't kickbox, and I can't run, I don't have a gun, but I have my cell phone out, I have my keys out, and I am walking a little faster than normal, so maybe I can resist or go faster, or whatever. I guess these are the three built-in mechanisms I have developed that seem to work for me to make me feel comfortable.

Although she said these acts are largely subconscious for her, she seemed to be very aware of these safety rituals, why she chooses to enact them, and the effect they have had on her.

Immediate safety rituals are safety strategies that were repeatedly enacted in the moment a woman felt unsafe—after an immediate precipitating event. They are immediate actions that were enacted with the goal of fending off someone, getting oneself out of a situation, or preparing for a possible attack. Immediate safety rituals fall into five categories: use of weapons, image management, gathering environmental cues, seeking attention, and leaving the situation or isolating oneself. As an example of the use of weapons as an immediate safety ritual, Ava reported, "When I walked around I used to carry a police baton and I also—I don't know how legal this is—I used to carry a butterfly knife too. I would carry at least one of those." Isabelle provided an example of image management when she said, "I walk quickly, directive, like you know, 'I know what I'm doing.' I don't make a lot of eye contact with, uh, people I don't know, if there's people around and I don't know them and I'm trying to get to my house, my car or something. I'll be just very straightforward. You know, not dilly-dally. So I don't have

too much time to waste.” And Tina stated, “I did, however, notice to look for the security guard before I parked,” as an example of seeking attention from people who can provide possible help. Distant safety rituals seem to be rituals participants enact to become less vulnerable in the long run. These are precautions over time and tend to be more future-oriented. Participants reported using these safety rituals after experiencing a distant precipitating event, since they are safety strategies aimed at one’s general level of safety instead of one’s immediate environment and its immediate risks. For example, Sonia wrote in her journal, “As soon as I got home I turned the alarm on and made sure all doors were locked. The alarm makes me feel safe and I also try to pay attention to anything out of the usual.” Additionally, after hearing about an especially gruesome case, Tina reports: “I thought to myself, what little things could I do? And so I took my address off [the website] at least.”

Safety rituals seem to be dynamic enactments; participants report these rituals change as circumstances change, and they are repeated when similar situations are experienced. Participants reported that their purpose is to lower anxiety and to prepare for whatever may come, and participants often reported feeling more in control when they enacted their immediate safety rituals. Safety rituals were ritualistic in the sense that they were repeated over time, they held special meaning to the women who enacted them, and they were rewarding behaviors. When asked whether they felt the definition of ritual explained earlier in this paper fit with their enactment of safety rituals, all participants agreed that safety strategies could indeed be seen as rituals, even if they had not thought about it that way before.

### **Constraint in Time and Space**

The third research question was: Do women’s safety rituals keep them constrained in time and space? If so, how? Two main themes from the data refer directly to this question. The first theme, entitled “Constraint by Fear” relates to participants’ views on the limiting role of fear in their lives. The second theme, “No Perceived Constraint by Safety Rituals,” relates to participants’ attitudes toward their safety rituals and their enactment.

#### *Constraint by fear*

Participants tended to point to the fear of sexual assault as a real limiting or constraining force in their lives. They viewed the need to live with fear as unfair, which points to their keen awareness of the gender inequalities at play in the workings of sexual assault victimization. They seemed to separate the fear and its effects from the safety rituals and their effects. The fear limited participants by serving as the small voice in their minds always warning against what they want or have to do because it might be unsafe. Ava pointed out and questioned the role of fear in her life in one of her journal entries:

I have believed for a long time that allowing something or someone to have control over me is a negative thing. Recently it occurred to me that fear can be a type of control. So why do I allow fear to affect me? Protection? Stupidity? Intelligence? Tradition? Or is it something else?”

In this passage she alludes to the idea of letting fear dictate what she does or does not do. She explained in her second interview that it is not the safety strategies themselves that have made her feel more afraid, but the fact that she needed to use them at any particular time.

*No perceived constraint by safety rituals*

As mentioned above, participants did not view their safety rituals as constraining—much to the contrary, they reported feeling more limited by fear if they did not enact these safety rituals. The safety rituals seemed to give them the empowerment, assurance, and composure they needed to offset the tendency to let fear completely limit them in what they wanted to do. Furthermore, participants reported that safety rituals did not interrupt their everyday lives or routines—in other words, they were not inconvenient. Tina, for example, spoke directly to this idea when she said,

[The safety rituals] don't disturb my life if that's what you are asking. It's definitely not like a similarity or any sort of characteristic of any sort of OCD or anxiety-related concern I would have. It's more so just habit. I mean, it doesn't disturb me. I mean, it's easy for me to get out my cell phone. I know if my cell phone is dead I certainly get more uncomfortable...Or if I don't have my phone definitely I feel more uncomfortable but you know, it's not like it restricts my life to any significant-...You know, I mean, I pull out my keys...that takes no effort really.

Sonia added,

You know, the reason I do some of the things I do is because it is right for me, and if I don't do it for myself in that situation immediately I feel [anxious]...I just wouldn't feel okay about it. I'd sit down and I'd be uncomfortable the whole time, so what's the point in that? So, I go do it more to relieve my own [anxiety], and you know, [other women] might do things to alleviate their own anxiety.

## **Safety Rituals**

The fourth research question was “How do these safety rituals impact women's views of those who have been sexually assaulted and how do these rituals inform women's own perceived vulnerability to sexual violence?” One theme and one pattern refer to how safety rituals have influenced women's views of their own vulnerability, and one main theme refers to women's views of those who have been victimized by sexual violence.

*Increased control and empowerment*

The women tended to generally see their safety rituals as empowering and as a relief to anxiety. Safety rituals were viewed in a positive light. This theme suggests that fear of assault has been constraining, not safety rituals themselves. Sonia explained the empowerment that comes from enacting a safety strategy when she stated:

Why do I do those things? I don't really know...It's all about it makes me feel safe, I guess. Maybe have some control over where the situation [leads], like—something I-, you know, something I can do.

Ava alluded to the idea of separating the fear of sexual assault from the precautions one takes when she said, “I think there can be a productive thing [about the fear of sexual violence], definitely...Like I said, you know, I hope that while the fear may have, you know, it may have wasted a bunch of time from me--walking out of my way sometimes, or to avoid situations...it has also helped me—and I know this, so I think it can be productive too. Yeah, it's just kind of a mental thing and balancing it out and working things out, you know, in your person.”

The idea that safety rituals provided peace of mind to the women who enacted them is a pattern that comes out of the main theme of empowerment. Participants often said they feel relieved knowing they did something to protect themselves in the times they felt afraid or unsafe. Participants trusted that their rituals had actually kept them safe and sound in the past, which only made them continue using them in the present and in the future.

*The victim is blameless*

This is the only theme observable in the data when it comes to how participants viewed those who have been victimized by sexual violence. There was not one instance of victim blaming in the data. All participants agreed that women are not to blame if they do get assaulted. Two main interview topics, asked of all participants, led to conversations regarding guilt, blame, and victimization. These topics were brought up by the questions: “How do you think other women keep themselves safe? How do you think they view sexual assault? How do you think you compare to them in your own views on the subject?” and “What would you advise other women to do when they find themselves in unsafe situations?”

All participants reported they did not differ significantly from other women in how they view sexual assault and what they do to protect themselves. Most said that women should trust their instincts when they feel something around them is not right, and that they should do whatever it is they think they should do. For most, the interviewer needed to ask a follow up question regarding whether a woman was at fault for being assaulted if she did not enact any rituals. All participants who were asked that directly said no, and the one who was not had already said things to the same effect earlier in the interview.

Participants seemed to agree that safety rituals are a good source of protection, but in the end sexual assault can happen to anyone regardless of what they do (or don't do) to

protect themselves. Participants worried at times about women who do not enact safety strategies—or the same safety strategies they do—but not because they are putting themselves at risk but because they did not want to see these women have to suffer through the devastating event that sexual assault seems to be. Isabelle said,

I believe that there are a lot of unsafe situations, and I think it's easy to become a victim of a situation very quickly, where you wouldn't necessarily--, mentally you think 'oh, that's not going to happen.' But I think that's what happens all the time to people, and that's why it's not their fault...They're in a situation and then something happens where they are perpetrated, and so I think that it's so easy to become that victim.

Sonia added that she herself remains vulnerable, despite all she does. Sonia stated, "No [I don't think a woman is to blame if she doesn't take precautions]. Absolutely not. I think it could really happen to anyone and that's why, you know, I think so many women are always constantly afraid and not opening doors, and not-, you know, staying away from people and trying to protect themselves, because, you know, I know that even if I do that I could still-, something still happens, so...It doesn't mean it's not going to happen to me."

### **Discussion**

All of the participants in this study had well thought-out opinions and views on the subject of sexual assault. Risk of assault seems present in their minds because they view themselves as similar to victims, their gender as being vulnerable to the risk, and sexual violence as a widespread problem. They generally viewed sexual assault as a devastating event with serious and debilitating consequences and seemed to enact safety strategies to protect themselves from such a fear-inducing crime. Even participants who reported low fear enacted safety strategies "just in case."

The participants were not very successful at verbalizing how they came to do what they do to protect themselves, and we believe other women would also have difficulty with this task, not only because memory may fail them, but because direct warnings about sexual violence in particular seem to be few and far in between. In general, they reported that the primary purpose of safety strategies is to feel safer.

All participants agreed they enact safety strategies in a ritualistic manner—in fact, they were all able to apply all aspects of the definition of rituals to their use of safety strategies. They use different rituals to protect themselves under different circumstances, but all their strategies are repeated or continued over time.

Surprisingly, these safety rituals did not seem to constrain the women interviewed for this study. It may be that they purposefully develop their safety rituals to be subtle and to go unnoticed most of the time. Overall, participants were very clear in differentiating the effects of their fear from the effects of their safety rituals. They view the fear of sexual assault as the real constricting force in their lives—not their rituals. However, safety ritual enactment may foster a false sense of security. If a woman feels she is doing everything she can to avoid being assaulted, she may not pay attention to a potential risk she may not be looking for. Given that most sexual assault is perpetrated by

an acquaintance of the victim, women are most likely to get assaulted when they do not feel the need to enact any safety strategies because they happen to be around people they trust.

Although safety rituals are enacted for safety, participants are not completely certain these rituals actually insulate them from danger or provide complete safety, but they continue to enact them to feel safer. Safety ritual enactment might be empowering because it soothes one's anxiety, whether it actually affords objective protection or not. Because participants seemed aware of this reality, they did not blame or look down on women who do not enact safety rituals. Indeed, participants did not view survivors of sexual assault as very different from themselves and there was not one single instance of victim blaming in the immense amount of data gathered for this study. It would be interesting to know how survivors of sexual assault view their own safety rituals, and how these views have helped or hindered their healing process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Although one limitation of this study was the small number of participants, the use of theoretical sampling as the recruitment strategy increased the chances that each of them contributed a unique view of the topic, which aided us in the task of building our conceptual framework. This methodological choice also strengthened study findings, by including views of the participants that in many cases were very different from our own views. Thus, participants' levels of fear of sexual assault fell on a well-defined and detailed continuum, so that the findings of this study may actually be applicable to many different women. One conclusion that is clear from those findings is that women's use of safety strategies is indeed ritualistic and, contrary to what the authors previously believed, a way women can reclaim power over their activities and environments in and outside the home. Women may rely on their safety rituals because they think they do not have a good chance to protect themselves physically, and that ultimately the responsibility for remaining safe still falls on their shoulders. Another conclusion is that the fear of sexual assault is viewed by these women as limiting and this limitation is viewed as unfair, yet their safety rituals may be their way to neutralize it.

### **Limitations of This Study**

One of the main (and most regretful) limitations of this study is its small number of participants, which is the trademark of most qualitative studies. This limitation was counterbalanced by careful selection that ensured a wide variety of opinions and experiences on the part of participants. One cannot help but wonder, however, how much more could have been learned had circumstances been different. A sixth participant was recruited and actually started the first phase of the study, but had to stop participation for personal reasons unrelated to the study. Unfortunately, her data and all she had to contribute were lost to this study. Another limitation is that participants are young, educated women, moderate or liberal in their political views. Their acceptance of feminist views on the subject of sexual assault was certainly influenced by these social characteristics (Burt, 1980). Furthermore, they were accustomed to thinking about this issue, and they had more financial resources to cope with their fears, whereas many

women in the general population may not. The sensitive subject of this study made many women approached by the researchers decline to participate—no matter how much the researchers tried to explain participants would not be asked to share their personal experiences related to sexual violence. This problem indicates that the women who actually agreed to participate in the study were self-selected, forming a biased group perhaps.

Although a lack of time and resources prevented the recruitment of more participants, theoretical sampling was used to get participants whose accounts were complementary, but more participants would be needed to ascertain what else can be known about women's fear of sexual assault and its effects on women's everyday lives. Thus, these data were organized into initial elements of a framework for understanding women's fear of sexual violence, but this is just a beginning step that needs more development.

### **Future Research**

The area of study encompassing women's fear of sexual violence would benefit from more research on women's use of safety rituals. It would be of interest to researchers, therapists, and other practitioners to know how survivors of sexual assault view their own safety rituals, and how these views have helped or hindered their healing process. Although some participants in this study are survivors of sexual assault, their healing process was not a focus here. Identity construction may also have a role on women's level of fear and how they cope (or do not cope) with it. Because the women in this study expressed such strong reliance and fear of men, it would be interesting to investigate how men think about sexual violence, including whether they fear for the women in their lives, whether they are aware women rely on them for protection (and if they feel apt to provide such protection), and whether they are aware of the risk they pose to strange women in their everyday lives. Furthermore, if a wife, daughter, or other female relative is victimized, do men blame themselves? These are all questions that could be answered through careful empirical research.

### **Conclusion**

This study helps elucidate the process women go through when they create and enact precautionary behaviors. It is clear from the findings that women's use of safety strategies is indeed ritualistic and, contrary to what the authors previously believed, a way women have to reclaim power over their activities and environments in and outside the home. Women may rely on their safety rituals because they think they do not have a good chance to protect themselves physically, and that ultimately the responsibility for remaining safe still falls on their shoulders. The fear of sexual assault is viewed by these women as limiting and this limitation is viewed as unfair, yet their safety rituals may just be their way to neutralize this limitation imposed in their lives.

It is fitting to end on a note of hope for how this project may contribute to the larger literature on women's fear of sexual violence. This study has the potential to help therapists who work with sexual assault survivors and with women in general. A better understanding of the time, effort, and pervasiveness of fully developed scripts to attempt

to control one's environment might help therapists gain a better understanding of the guilt and shame associated with rape victimization. Therapists who work within a feminist framework can use this study to help women in various walks of life confront the social pressures and constraints to conform to patriarchal ideology. Crisis center workers can use this type of research in their efforts to further educate the general public, especially some men who might not be sensitive or aware of how prominent this issue is for many women. Scholars who focus on sexual assault victimization will benefit from this study because it examines more profoundly the issue of self-protective behaviors, in a way that, to the researchers' knowledge, has not been done in the past. This study will also provide a new conceptual framework for the understanding of women's self-protective behaviors. It may be through these focused efforts that we may one day raise the power and status of women to the same level as that of men, and thus eliminate the problem of sexual violence from our society. This is our sincere hope.

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### Author Note

Dr. Luciana Silva is a recent graduate of the doctoral program in Child and Family Development at the University of Georgia, specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy. She has a master's degree in child and family development from the same university and this manuscript is based on the work she did for her thesis. Her research interests include feminist inquiry on trauma survivorship, especially trauma related to sexual assault and domestic violence. She is also interested in issues of multiculturalism within the family, and is currently studying negotiation in intercultural relationships. Luciana is an affiliate member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and her clinical interests include working with sexual assault and domestic violence survivors and their families. She is in private practice in Nashville, TN. Her hobbies include art, creative writing, and dancing. The author can be contacted at 915 Cedar Creek South, Marietta, GA 30067; Telephone: (615) 693-2987; E-mail: lucianacunhasilva@gmail.com

David Wright is an Associate Professor of Child and Family Development. His professional training and education includes a master's degree in marriage, family and child therapy and a doctorate in child and family development. He has directed a variety of research projects including studies of the transition to adulthood, the relationship characteristics and competencies of adolescents and young adults, the antecedents and consequences of adolescent sexual behavior, divorce and remarriage, leadership and mentoring. David also is a Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Although he finds too little time for hobbies, he followed in the footsteps of both his mother and father by getting his pilot's license about ten years ago. He takes to the air to get a different perspective on the world

as often as he can. The author can be contacted at 202 Family Science Center II (House D), 405 Sanford Dr, Athens, GA 30602; Telephone: (706) 542-4825; E-mail: [dwright@fcs.uga.edu](mailto:dwright@fcs.uga.edu)

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