



## research article

# Reframing informal disclosures of sexual violence as 'an ongoing conversation': how victim-survivors discuss victimisation with friends, family and partners

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Sexual violence (SV) is more likely to be disclosed to friends, family members and partner(s) (ONS, 2021), though less is known regarding these informal disclosure experiences compared to formal disclosures (for example, to the police). This victim-survivor-led study explored the ways in which victim-survivors of SV disclosed and discussed victimisation with friends, family and partners. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 31 victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, sexual assault and rape in the UK, demonstrating the gradual nature of disclosure. The findings highlight the various ways in which victim-survivors make others aware of their experiences, including: disclosing as memories emerge, disclosing as awareness emerges, disclosing multiple aspects of victimisation, disclosure gradually becoming limited, partially disclosing, attempting to disclose, and enlisting the support of others to disclose to specific people. In addition to disclosing victimisation experiences, victim-survivors also discuss the impact of victimisation, including the ways in which they were responded to by others. Various factors influence the way in which victim-survivors disclose, including victim-survivor identities, victimisation experiences, acknowledgement status, previous responses and feared responses. The findings indicate that informal disclosure is a complex and ever-shifting process through which victim-survivors attempt to speak about victimisation and impact(s) via numerous conversations with multiple people, potentially over the life course.

**Keywords** victim-survivor • informal disclosure • child sexual abuse • sexual assault • rape

### Key messages

- Informal disclosure is often a gradual and ongoing process through which victim-survivors attempt to speak about their experiences, potentially over the life course.
- Victim-survivors may engage in various inter-related ways of disclosing, including disclosing as memories emerge, disclosing as awareness emerges, disclosing multiple aspects of victimisation, disclosure gradually becoming limited, partially disclosing, attempting to disclose, and enlisting the support of others to disclose to specific people.
- The ways in which disclosure occurs is influenced by a range of factors including victim-survivor identities, nature of victimisation, acknowledgement status, prior and expected responses.

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## Introduction

Research indicates that victim-survivors of sexual violence (SV) disclose their experiences for various reasons including accessing help and support (Ahrens et al, 2007; Campbell et al, 2015), to be validated through belief and understanding (Demers et al, 2017), and in pursuit of justice (Patterson and Campbell, 2010). Despite the majority of SV disclosures occurring to peers, friends, family members and partners (Campbell et al, 2015; HM Government, 2021; Malloy et al, 2021; ONS, 2021), the existing literature has a propensity to focus on formal disclosure, such as reporting to police and medical services (London et al, 2005; MacLeod, 2016) and/or to support services (Campbell et al, 2015). The studies which do relate to informal disclosure often focus on challenges in disclosing and factors in non-disclosure (Collin-Vézina et al, 2015; Ullman et al, 2020), as well as responses to informal disclosure (Ahrens et al, 2007; Ahrens and Aldana, 2012). While prior research has explored how victim-survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) disclose their experiences (Alaggia, 2004; Collings et al, 2005; Collin-Vézina et al, 2015; Magnusson et al, 2017), less is known about how other forms of SV are disclosed. Crucially, the extant literature has limited capacity to explore the complexity of disclosure due to restrictive eligibility criteria. For example, Jaffe et al (2022: 305) excluded victim-survivors whose 'most meaningful' sexual assault occurred before the age of 18, more than five years ago, and less than six months ago. Further, research often focuses on initial disclosures (for example, Ahrens et al, 2007; Demers et al, 2017) or disclosures of their 'most serious' victimisation experience (Lorenz and Ullman, 2016). The majority of informal disclosure research has been carried out in the United States. Therefore, a knowledge deficit remains regarding how victim-survivors, especially adult victim-survivors disclose and discuss victimisation with friends, family and partners in the UK context, especially beyond the first disclosure.

This article reports on the findings from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 31 victim-survivors of CSA, sexual assault (SA) and rape, exploring perceptions and experiences of informal disclosure over life course. The decision to include victim-survivors of a range of SV experiences is predicated on the conceptualisation of SV as a continuum (see Kelly, 1987), wherein the interconnected and widespread nature of sexual victimisation is recognised as part of the everyday experience for women and girls. Further, although distinguishing between 'types' of SV is common in academic and/or legal discourse, there is little evidence that victim-survivors conceptualise their experiences along these lines.

The wider project was concerned with disclosure responses and impact; however, the data highlighted the intricate relationship between disclosure challenges, motivations, manifestations, responses and impact. The objective of this article, therefore, is to understand how victim-survivors of various forms of SV approach and embark upon the process of informal disclosure. Invariably this is less of a 'disclosure' and more of

a complex, ever-shifting conversation through which victim-survivors attempt to talk about what happened to them. This enhanced understanding of how informal disclosure may occur is crucial given that research demonstrates misconceptions regarding how disclosure occurs (disclosure myths) can be a factor in harmful informal disclosure responses (Rivera-Cuadrado, 2021; Bloomfield-Utting, forthcoming) and in the courtroom, where the defence often employ misconceptions regarding modes of disclosure to undermine complainant credibility (Shackel, 2009; Smith, 2018).

## How do victim-survivors disclose?

Alaggia's (2004) study was instrumental in expanding classifications of CSA disclosures, though no distinction between formal and informal was made. Three 'types' of disclosure in previous literature were highlighted by Alaggia (2004): purposeful (intentional disclosure via verbal means); accidental (victimisation is detected and confirmed); and elicited/prompted (via investigative approaches by a counsellor, for example). Hershkowitz et al's (2007) quantitative analysis revealed that 43 per cent of participants only disclosed after being prompted; this figure increased to 61 per cent when the perpetrator was known to the victim-survivor (see also Mathews et al, 2016), suggesting that 'prompted/elicited' disclosure is a frequent means by which CSA disclosures occur. In some cases, this may be the only way in which CSA victim-survivors disclose (see Brattfjell and Flâm, 2019).

Through interviews with 24 adult victim-survivors of CSA, Alaggia (2004) identified three emergent classifications: behavioural (intentional disclosure though non-verbal means); purposefully withheld (no disclosure is made, despite opportunity and including false denial of victimisation); and triggered (repressed memories are recalled resulting in disclosure). Importantly, Alaggia notes that disclosure of CSA is a complex process (see also Sorensen and Snow, 1991; Brattfjell and Flâm, 2019) and 'types' of disclosure are not mutually exclusive. For example, behavioural attempts at disclosure may be followed by a purposeful, verbal disclosure. McGuire and London's (2020) research further highlight the complexity of CSA disclosure in reporting that a small number of victim-survivors denied victimisation when directly asked by some people but not others, though the factors in this selective denial are not clear.

Alaggia's (2004) conceptualisation of CSA disclosure does not reference 'recanted' disclosure, despite being a feature of prior research (Summit, 1983). That said, research suggests that recanted disclosure is less likely to occur in informal disclosures (Summit, 1983; Sorensen and Snow, 1991) and when only disclosed in adulthood (Alaggia, 2004). A wealth of research has identified a propensity for delays between the onset/occurrence of victimisation and disclosure in a range of SV experiences, particularly CSA (Smith et al, 2000). For example, Malloy et al (2021) reported 45.8 per cent of incarcerated adolescents/young adults did not disclose within a year of experiencing sexual abuse and the average time between victimisation and disclosure was 21 years in Easton's (2013) study with 487 male victim-survivors of CSA. Alaggia (2004) refers to these as intentionally withheld disclosures. Widely recognised challenges to disclosure, such as its taboo nature (Collin-Vézina et al, 2015), fear of unwanted consequences and responses (see Ahrens, 2006; McElvaney, 2013), may be amplified by factors such as the perpetrator being known to the victim-survivor (Smith et al, 2000; Collings et al, 2005; Priebe and Svedin, 2008), which Hershkowitz et al (2007) argue is highly likely (see also ONS, 2021), the victim-survivor being male

(Easton, 2013) and if victimisation occurs within a marginalised community (Gill and Harrison, 2019). Importantly, Rivera-Cuadrado's (2021) research with disclosure respondents<sup>1</sup> illustrates that disclosure temporality (time between victimisation and disclosure) is a determinant of the level of sympathy afforded to victim-survivors, with 'older' disclosures being viewed as less urgent, warranting less follow-up, and requiring fewer forms of tangible support.

A considerable portion of the literature relating to how victim-survivors informally disclose relates to CSA, with few studies exploring why victim-survivors disclose adolescent and/or adult SV, and even less examining how these disclosures occur. However, dyadic interviews with victim-survivors of sexual assault and support providers highlight that disclosure is often a selective process in terms of to whom disclosures are made and the details provided (Ullman, 2024). For example, some participants recalled disclosing to friends but not family, carefully considering their choice of words, and only sharing certain details with certain people in order to protect themselves (for example, from judgement) and/or the support provider (for example, from distress) (Ullman, 2024). That said, the impact that this selectivity has on victim-survivors was not clear from Ullman's (2024) research. In addition to prompted disclosure being salient in CSA disclosure, research highlights that this is also a key means by which adult rape victim-survivors disclose (Ahrens et al, 2007; Carson et al, 2021), though in some cases, victim-survivors may feel coerced rather than prompted (Ullman, 2024). For instance, 'having to' disclose to explain changes in behaviour (Carson et al, 2021) or poor performance at work (Lorenz and O'Callaghan, 2022).

Prior research also points to disclosure being affected by victimisation acknowledgement status (see Littleton et al, 2006), with those who label their experience as rape being more likely to disclose compared with those who conceptualised their experience as a miscommunication (Dardis et al, 2017). In contrast, McCarthy and Thompson's (1997) research with adults with 'intellectual disabilities' highlighted that, in the majority of cases, participants described their victimisation without the awareness that their experience was abusive, suggesting that acknowledgement is not a prerequisite for disclosure. Similarly, in the context of CSA, unacknowledged victimisation, or 'not-yet-defined' CSA, was more often disclosed when prompted by others (Brattfjell and Flåm, 2019: 233; see also Schönbucher et al, 2012; Wager, 2015; Manay and Collin-Vézina, 2021), indicating that acknowledgement status may also influence the way in which disclosure occurs.

Disclosing unacknowledged victimisation requires greater exploration given the prevalence of unacknowledged victim-survivors (60.4 per cent according to Wilson and Miller's 2016 meta-analysis; see also Botta and Pingtree, 1997; Littleton et al, 2006; Donde et al, 2018) and the role that responses may play in either expediting or hindering the acknowledgement process (see Wilson et al [2020] and Ahrens et al [2007], respectively). In addition to disclosure responses, conceptualisations of 'real rape' and 'real victims' (Estrich, 1987; Ryan, 2011), often referred to as rape scripts, are thought to be instrumental in acknowledgement status (Sasson and Paul, 2014; Donde et al, 2018). Victimisation reflecting rape scripts and aligning with stereotypical understandings of rape is more likely to be acknowledged than victimisation which does not reflect this narrative. For instance, victimisation is less likely to be framed as such when the perpetrator is known to the victim-survivor, compared with stranger-perpetrated SV.

Informal disclosure is also a recognised route to formal disclosures (Patterson and Campbell, 2010; Brooks-Hay et al, 2019; Gill and Harrison, 2019). Campbell et al's (2015)

research with 20 adolescent victim-survivors of SA explored pathways to formal disclosure and help-seeking, suggesting that out of the three identified pathways to formal disclosure, informal disclosures were central to two pathways: voluntary (friends who encouraged and supported the victim-survivor in disclosing to an adult) and involuntary (friends who disclosed to an adult against the wishes of the victim-survivor). While [Campbell et al's \(2015\)](#) research captures the potentially interconnected nature between informal and formal disclosure, disclosures to legal and/or medical professionals were seemingly conceptualised as the 'end goal' of disclosure.

## Current study

This study elucidates the established complexity of informal disclosure by exploring the disclosure experiences of victim-survivors over the life course. Rather than focusing on initial or 'salient' disclosure experiences (see [Ahrens et al, 2007](#); [Carson et al, 2021](#)), participants reflected on the various disclosures and conversations they had engaged in regarding any of their SV experiences. This article reports on the findings of a wider study concerning victim-survivor perceptions of informal disclosure in terms of responses and impact. The aim of this article is to explore how victim-survivors disclose SV to friends, family and partners over the life course. While the rationale for disclosing, as expressed by participants, is sometimes discussed in this article, as far as it is relevant to understanding how disclosure occurred, the reasons for disclosure will be discussed in a separate article exploring the need to be heard, validated and understood by friends, family, partners and communities; arguing that this is a potential pathway to meeting (some) victim-survivor justice needs ([McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019](#)).

## Recruitment

Participants (n=31) were recruited via volunteer (n=28) and snowball (n=3) sampling methods. We sought to include as wide a range of voices as possible in order to begin to understand victim-survivors' experiences from a starting place of diversity rather than perceived homogeneity. As such, we proactively strove to include people from marginalised groups (in terms of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, age) who are often excluded from research. Some participants were made aware of the research through existing networks (see [Browne, 2005](#)) on account of the utility of these methods when seeking 'hard to reach' participants ([Hussey, 2012](#); [Robinson, 2014](#); [Ellard-Gray et al, 2015](#)) as well as gatekeepers where necessary. Notices were displayed in a range of locations to aid in the recruitment of diverse victim-survivors, including in public spaces (for example, supermarkets), in order to access victim-survivors who may not have sought and/or received formal support; SV support services with an emphasis on approaching services for specific marginalised identities (for example, ethnic minority SV groups); support services outside the context of SV (for example, a support group for LGBTQIA+ adults); and via online mediums such as mailing lists and social media platforms of the aforementioned support services.<sup>2</sup> The latter was particularly important given that recruitment occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when it was particularly difficult to recruit without utilising online methods because people were socially isolating.

It should be noted that recruitment materials contained terms such as ‘sexual violence’ and ‘rape’ and so unacknowledged victim-survivors would be unlikely to respond to requests for participants. It is also possible that victim-survivors who felt particularly supported or especially unsupported were more likely to respond to research requests than those with a sense of indifference or ambivalence (see [Jupp, 2011](#)), thereby resulting in a somewhat polarised understanding of disclosure experience. The willingness of gatekeepers to grant access in a number of cases was influenced by the (sometimes perceived) identities of the lead researcher, thereby influencing the diversity of the overall sample. For example, one LGBTQIA+ service explained that they do not endorse research to service users unless it is carried out by LGBTQIA+ researchers, meaning access was denied, whereas a support service for autistic adults granted access because the lead researcher is autistic. Prior to recruitment, a flexible target of 30 participants was established based on a pilot study, the time and resource constraints of the study, and the need for subsequent analysis to provide in-depth insight into the experiences of participants.

An information sheet was provided to prospective participants which outlined the various aspects of the research, including what participation would entail (with a degree of negotiation possible), data storage and usage, and participant rights (for example, to withdraw, to avoid answering specific questions). Consent forms were signed by participants, and interviews were arranged at the convenience of the participant. Participants then completed a basic demographic questionnaire via email prior to the interview taking place.

### *Data generation*

Interviews were informal and in part directed by the participant; however, the following were explored: when and to whom victimisation was disclosed; how disclosure was responded to; and the impacts of these responses. It is important to note that the interview itself was also another disclosure experience for victim-survivors and, as such, it was crucial that victim-survivors felt believed and validated. In addition, it was imperative that questions were asked sensitively and appropriately. An initial disclaimer was provided to reiterate that follow-up questions were merely for the purpose of clarity (as opposed to indicating doubt, for example) to minimise potential distress. Further, [Campbell et al \(2009: 397\)](#) contend that ‘engaged and empathetic listeners’ provide more valuable interview experiences for participants; enabling them to be heard, a key interest for victim-survivors ([McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019](#)). Despite employing these strategies, an inevitable power imbalance between the researcher and participants remained, though this was mitigated to some degree on account of the victim-survivor-led nature of the study ([Browne, 2005](#)). The victim-survivor-led nature of the study also facilitated participation for some victim-survivors in that the researcher having lived experience of SV was preferred by many participants and non-negotiable for a small number of participants. For participants with stigmatised and/or minoritised identities which overlaps with the lead researcher, this was even more salient. While lived experience may enable a level of empathy and shared understanding, it does not automatically grant this. Again, this is more salient for participants with stigmatised and/or minoritised identities differing from those of the lead researcher.

The interviews culminated in a discussion of how informal responses to disclosure could be improved to facilitate a positive and productive conclusion to participation, as well as to recognise the expertise of victim-survivors. This is discussed in a forthcoming publication. The participants were thanked for their time and insight, and then provided with a debrief form containing a range of SV resources and support groups. A small number of interviews were conducted face-to-face ( $n=7$ ); however, the remainder were conducted online primarily because of COVID-19 restrictions but also in the interest of convenience. Online interviews were advantageous in terms of enabling victim-survivors across the UK to participate, as well as in affording the participant greater control in their participation. Specifically, participants were in an accessible space they were familiar with (particularly important for disabled/neurodivergent victim-survivors). Besides intermittent poor connection in one interview, there were no issues with the online interviews.

## Participants

In accordance with the eligibility criteria, all participants were over the age of 18 at the time of the interview, living in the UK, and had informally disclosed to at least one person. The time between both victimisation/disclosure and participation in this study ranged from approximately 70 years to a few months. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 75. Two participants identified as male, the remaining 29 identified as female. Further demographic information is included in [Table 1](#).

Twenty participants had experienced multiple forms of SV with 12 of these participants experiencing SV in both childhood and adulthood. Sixteen participants recalled engaging with formal disclosure respondents (for example, the police), however, of these, 12 reported victimisation themselves (four indicated that the report was filed by another person) and none of the participants had reported every SV experience.

## Data analysis

The interviews were recorded with the explicit consent of the participant and subsequently transcribed. Thematic analysis was employed to provide 'a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data', specifically in terms of the nuances in victim-survivor experience ([King, 2004](#); [Braun and Clarke, 2006](#); [Nowell et al, 2017](#): 2) and was carried out using [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) guidelines, in accordance with [Nowell et al's \(2017\)](#) trustworthiness criteria. Transcription was regarded as the first stage of analysis on account of the increased familiarity with the data, followed by actively reading through the entire dataset ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#); [Kiger and Varpio, 2020](#)). At this stage, it was apparent that the findings built upon, extended and challenged pre-existing literature in terms of how victim-survivors disclose, justifying a more in-depth thematic analysis and this article. Initial memos were subsequently created via this process, which resulted in the construction of codes which, in turn, were collated into themes. This was a non-linear, iterative process wherein we continually returned to the dataset to ensure that the emergent codes and themes were grounded in the data and represented the dataset accurately (see [Joffe, 2012](#); [Kiger and Varpio, 2020](#)).

**Table 1: Basic participant demographic details**

| Demographic category                                     | Participants (n=) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Ethnicity</b>                                         |                   |
| White British                                            | 21                |
| Black                                                    | 1                 |
| Mixed race                                               | 2                 |
| White European                                           | 4                 |
| Ashkenazi                                                | 1                 |
| <b>Sexuality</b>                                         |                   |
| Heterosexual                                             | 16                |
| Bisexual                                                 | 10                |
| Lesbian                                                  | 1                 |
| Gay                                                      | 1                 |
| Asexual                                                  | 2                 |
| Did not disclose                                         | 1                 |
| <b>Disability/neurodivergent/mental health condition</b> |                   |
| Yes                                                      | 12                |
| No                                                       | 16                |
| Did not disclose                                         | 2                 |
| <b>Victimisation 'type'</b>                              |                   |
| Rape                                                     | 18                |
| Sexual assault                                           | 10                |
| CSA                                                      | 18                |

## *Ethics*

This research gained a favourable ethical opinion from the University of Bath. Given the sensitivity of the topic, a robust consideration of harm and distress was required. Steps were taken to minimise the possibility of participants experiencing distress by not asking details of victimisation given that the focus was on disclosure experiences. However, as evident in [Bloomfield-Utting \(forthcoming\)](#), for many participants, disclosure was equally if not more traumatic than SV victimisation, thereby having important ethical implications for future research. This was evident in many interviews in that discussing responses sometimes resulted in visual signs of distress, while explaining victimisation did not appear to. In line with the understanding that victim-survivors should be regarded as experts in their healing, be empowered to make decisions regarding involvement ([Survivor's Voices, 2019](#)), alongside the first author's involvement in lived experience advisory groups,<sup>3</sup> participants were not immediately asked if they wished to terminate the interview because they expressed or exhibited feelings of upset but, rather, were reassured that the content and pace of the interview was determined by them. Participants were reminded that the interview could be paused, however, none of the participants wished to do so.

Participants are referred to by a pseudonym and potentially identifiable information was redacted in order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. The intersecting

identities of some participants meant that they felt more identifiable, regardless of a pseudonym, and so even greater care was taken when presenting participant experiences. Relatedly, certain information is redacted at the participant's request.

## Discussion

The analysis emphasised the complex nature of disclosure, which occurred as a process as opposed to an event. For many, this was less about 'disclosing', and more about conversing and discussing experience(s) and impact(s) in an attempt to be heard, validated and understood. That said, echoing prior research (Alaggia, 2004; Ullman et al, 2020), for some victim-survivors, these discussions did not follow an intentional disclosure, but rather, were necessitated by the circumstances of victimisation. Leah, for example, stated that 'it wasn't really a matter of telling, it was a matter of being found' and, similarly, Esther explains that she 'didn't tell her [mother] because she was often there. That's how she knew'. As well as being present while victimisation occurred, potential disclosure respondents sometimes witnessed the impact of victimisation, such as being visibly upset, prompting a disclosure (as was the case for Piper and Zara). In some cases, this resulted in the respondent disclosing without the permission of the victim-survivor, as was the case for Zara and Una. This had the capacity to be especially harmful when victim-survivors had clear reasons for not wanting specific people to know. For instance, Una recalls: 'The first person I accidentally told was my sister and then this other girl who was [present] ... it was accidental because I promised [the perpetrator] I wouldn't say anything, so I was screaming "Come back!" when they were running to tell people.' Una explicitly stated that she did not want her parents to know because, as a disabled woman, Una feared amplified infantilisation. Despite this, her sister told their parents, resulting in Una feeling 'overwhelmed' by her parents 'checking that [she] is okay 24/7'.

This study also challenges the assumption that disclosure and non-disclosure are mutually exclusive. Instead, the findings signify the complexity of disclosure by demonstrating that victim-survivors can actively engage in disclosure and non-disclosure simultaneously. That is, a victim-survivor can disclose to a particular respondent (disclosure) while intentionally withholding disclosure (non-disclosure) from other potential respondents. For example, Chloe has disclosed being raped to close friends, however, has purposefully not disclosed to her parents, despite feeling that she 'should tell them'. Similarly, the fact that Peter's partner is aware that he experienced CSA while his parents are not, further vitiates the argument of disclosure and non-disclosure as binary states, especially as Peter described 'still carrying around a massive secret because [my parents] don't know'. Ultimately, this means that while he feels 'deeply understood' by his partner, his family 'think I'm a nutcase – they don't understand me and I can never let them because I can never tell them'. Therefore, distinguishing between general non-disclosure and selective non-disclosure may be conducive to a more refined understanding of non-disclosure and the implications for victim-survivors in terms of being heard, validated and understood. While Ullman (2024) explores the selectivity of disclosure, the current study offers further insight into the potential effect this may have on victim-survivors, notably that the impacts of non-disclosure and disclosure may be simultaneously experienced. Caution must also be exercised when assuming that non-disclosure directly reflects challenges to disclosure. Though this may be the case for some victim-survivors

(see [Hershkowitz et al, 2007](#); [Bloomfield-Utting, forthcoming](#)), others conceptualised disclosure as an ‘honour’ (Maya; Fiona; Zara); of which some are not ‘worthy’ (Zara).

The findings also suggest that the content of disclosure may change over time, often from outlining victimisation experience(s) to detailing the impact(s) of victimisation, including previous informal and formal disclosure responses. This shift in disclosure content is not necessarily linear. It was notable that, for some, disclosures became gradually more limited over time in terms of content (that is, fewer details provided, specific details withheld) and disclosure respondents (that is, telling fewer people). Again, this may be non-linear. All participants referred to their experiences of victimisation and subsequent impact becoming gradually known to others in their lives, as opposed to this being achieved via a singular interaction, though this was even more pronounced for those who experienced ongoing victimisation (for example, CSA, SV in a ‘romantic’ relationship) and/or those who felt revictimised by disclosure responses. Although research relating to CSA and adolescent disclosures has indicated that disclosure may occur gradually in terms of friends and peers being the initial disclosure respondents, followed by trusted adults and eventually formal services ([Campbell et al, 2015](#)), these studies tended to focus on formal reporting as an ‘end goal’ of disclosures. In contrast, the findings of this research highlight that gradual SV disclosures may also occur irrespective of formal disclosure.

Having elaborated on the ways in which participants conceptualised disclosure, the various ways in which victim-survivors made others aware of their experiences are now discussed. These include disclosing as memories emerge, disclosing as awareness emerges, disclosing multiple aspects of victimisation, disclosure gradually becoming limited, partially disclosing, attempting to disclose, and enlisting the support of others to disclose to specific people. This discussion is not intended as an exhaustive typology of disclosure, but rather, is demonstrative of the multi-faceted nature of disclosure occurrence.

### *Disclosing as memories emerge*

Eight participants described repressed memories of victimisation, predominately CSA, emerging in adult life and disclosing alongside these memories becoming clearer. For example, Ivy recalls disclosing her ‘buried memories’ of CSA to her husband ‘as they came out’. Astrid disclosed approximately 40 years later that ‘maybe some things happened’ after her work led her to the realisation that ‘a lot of the things that I was like when I was a teenager and before that’ are associated with experiencing CSA. This was the initial content of her disclosure to her husband, which, over time, became ‘part of an ongoing conversation’ not only around victimisation, but also around the impact on Astrid’s life and mental health. Though not exclusive to CSA, disclosure occurring in this way was more common for victim-survivors of CSA. Disclosure of repressed memories are often categorised as ‘delayed disclosures’ in the existing literature ([Collin-Vézina et al, 2015](#)), however, it appears that *disclosure as memories emerge*, linking to [Alaggia’s \(2004\)](#) ‘triggered’ disclosure, is more apt. ‘Delayed disclosure’ implies that the victim-survivor purposefully deferred disclosing and although there may be a delay between victimisation and disclosure, there is not necessarily a delay between awareness and disclosure.

### *Disclosing as awareness emerges*

While these participants previously had no memory of victimisation, others had clear memories of their experiences, however, it was not until they became aware of the nature of their victimisation that disclosure occurred. Cassia recalls 'slowly discovering what had happened and slowly telling [her best friend]', however, this discovery was not on account of repressed memories but rather realising that what she considered physical abuse during her childhood also constituted CSA. While these 'types' of disclosures are similar, the latter involves memory of incident(s) without awareness that these experiences represent SV, however, the former is characterised by no recollection of victimising incidents(s). [Rivera-Cuadrado \(2021\)](#) demonstrates that disclosures of 'non-recent'<sup>4</sup> victimisation are often thought to warrant more limited forms of support, however, further research is needed in the context of recent awareness but 'non-recent' victimisation.

Piper and Eliana, however, both experienced memories *and* awareness of the abusive nature of their adolescent 'relationships' emerging alongside one another, thereby reinforcing the interconnected nature of various 'types' of disclosure:

[I]t was a lot all at once – I remember realising that it could be considered abusive and then I began to remember other parts I suppose I had blocked out. Then I was uncomfortable with my feelings around it so blocked them out. After that, I moved from 'oh it could be seen as rape' to 'it was rape' – then because of my age and it being ongoing I realised that it was also sexual abuse of a child. (Eliana)

I didn't think you could be raped by your boyfriend – like I thought it was fine because they're your boyfriend ... I then learnt it wasn't okay and I started having flashbacks of all these other things he used to do. (Piper)

Disclosing as awareness emerges is very closely linked with disclosing unacknowledged victimisation. Many participants, especially those victimised in adolescence, did not initially label their experiences as SV to themselves or others and thus were unacknowledged victim-survivors ([Koss and Oros, 1980](#)). This aligns with age as a predictor of acknowledgement ([Donde et al, 2018](#)). Despite this, some unacknowledged victim-survivors did disclose, albeit without using words such as 'rape' and 'abuse'. Disclosure responses were often instrumental in victim-survivors beginning to frame their experiences as SV, to themselves and others, thus echoing prior research ([Ahrens et al, 2007](#)). Esther recalls that she 'didn't have a clue' that she had experienced SV until a conversation more than 15 years later in an addiction support group wherein Esther 'started talking about things' and was informed that what she had described was in fact CSA. Similarly, Debra's initial disclosures of domestic abuse were descriptions of her experiences, however, it was the facial expression of the first two disclosure respondents (police officer and current partner) that prompted Debra to 'realise exactly what's happened to me'. Debra stated, 'I remember telling [current partner] and I didn't use the word rape'. Carrie also explained that her initial disclosure described what she had experienced: 'I had woken up and he was on top of me.' Although she recognised the 'awful' nature of her experience, Carrie said that 'there wasn't a time when [she] particularly felt in danger' and so did not initially recognise that she had been raped. Even when Carrie framed her experience as rape,

the way in which she was responded to by family members meant that she found it difficult to feel validated in using the word rape to label her experience. Eliana also reflects on attempts at descriptive disclosures while still ‘in that situation’, noting how acknowledgement and disclosure may shift over time:

Eliana: Looking back, I did try to describe what was happening, but I didn’t know it was abuse so I didn’t use any of those words. Nobody else saw it that way either – or maybe they did and that’s why they shut me down but either way, they never did anything and it wasn’t until later that I realised. Once I had escaped though, I still didn’t use those words for a long time. There were a few times where my friends were talking about ex-boyfriends and stuff, like being idiotic and I added to it by describing some stuff that had happened to me without realising I was actually telling them I’d been abused for the ten years before I’d known them. As well, because I’m autistic, I just said it as it was – like matter-of-fact.

Interviewer: Do you still disclose in that way or was that reflective of those earlier disclosures?

Eliana: I still am matter-of-fact about it – I don’t have another way of being, but I don’t describe it as much anymore because I have the words now – rape, abuse. ... Back then though and even probably now, he was seen as like the golden boy – really good at [sport<sup>5</sup>], nice and friendly, good family, so nobody thought of him as a rapist or a paedophile – he didn’t fit the mould. In the beginning, he wasn’t physically violent and I wasn’t frightened of him at that time so I didn’t understand it to be abuse. I remember though that I knew the relationship was abusive before I knew that because I was 13 when it started that it began as sexual abuse of a minor.

The relationship between victimisation characteristics and acknowledgement is well-documented (Littleton et al, 2006; Donde et al, 2018), though victim-survivor *perception* of victimisation characteristics also appears to be relevant, specifically fear and/or danger. Eliana’s experience also suggests that acknowledgement may be a particularly complex process for those who have experienced various forms of SV. Further, it is crucial that victim-survivors are supported in going beyond mere acknowledgement of victimisation to acknowledge the impact of their experiences. For instance, Chloe acknowledged that she had been raped but through supportive disclosure experiences, Chloe was able to acknowledge the significant effects on her wellbeing. Chloe then felt empowered to seek formal support via counselling. Victimisation acknowledgement, then, must also be regarded as a process (Botta and Pingtree, 1997), influenced by the nature of victimisation and disclosure responses (see Littleton et al, 2006), as well as impacting the way in which disclosure occurs.

### *Disclosing multiple experiences/aspects of victimisation*

Participants who experienced ongoing SV illustrated that one aspect of victimisation may be disclosed, followed by others. This way of disclosing could occur as

victimisation occurs (for example, Angelika disclosed various forms of SV to her friends while 'seeing somebody'<sup>6</sup> who victimised her) or retrospectively. For instance, Debra's initial disclosure to her current partner related to the physically violent aspect of the abuse she endured after he had seen 'bruises on my body and so forth and so the sort of physical side of it came out'. Debra then disclosed the 'sexual assault and rape side'. Similarly, Eliana recalled '[my friends] knew about the abusive relationship first, then I told them all the stuff from before when I was a child'.

In contrast, Eliza's experience is an example of the way in which various victimisation experiences can be gradually disclosed to a single disclosure respondent. Eliza stated that her friend 'react[ing] very well' to an initial disclosure of sexual assault resulted in gradually disclosing childhood abuse: 'I told one of [my friends] because I was upset about the most recent thing that I mentioned, at school and then, kind of opening up more about the other stuff'. Racheli explained that as an Orthodox Jewish woman, living in an 'insular community', gradually disclosing the true extent of her experiences was intentional, and vital for her safety: 'it was like testing the waters because the stakes are so high ... not just for me but my family, the [family business], getting married – you cannot just say everything all at once'. For some marginalised victim-survivors, cultural narratives and community dynamics may render gradually disclosing as the safest way to speak about victimisation experiences. This reflects Gill and Harrison's (2019: 522) reference to the 'perils of disclosing' in certain cultural settings (for example, where virginity is a prerequisite of marriage and/or collectivist cultures). Racheli concluded that 'it's a trust thing, ultimately'; a sentiment which was also expressed by Peter.

Various participants felt that some of the responses they encountered were equally, if not more traumatic than the SV itself and so 'that's where my upset is – that my friends and family weren't there and my partner left me' (Zara) (see Bloomfield-Utting, forthcoming). Thus, a small number of participants explained that the content of their disclosures often centred around revictimisation as opposed to initial victimisation. Eliana summarises this:

One of the hardest parts of it all was how everyone tried to shut me up and kind of left me to deal with it all myself as a child so I think my disclosures often focus on that more than like, what he actually did. I feel the need to tell that side of it more than I ever feel the need to say that I was abused by him. I'm gradually realising that's what impacted me the most so that's what I have to disclose. (Eliana)

### *Disclosures gradually becoming more limited*

It is important to note that just as disclosure can occur gradually, leading to further details being discussed, potentially with a greater number of disclosure respondents, disclosure may gradually become more limited over time. For example, approximately 12 years after being raped, Carrie described not 'really feel[ing] much need to talk about it at all nowadays' and Esther lamented 'choosing not to go there anymore' because of disclosure responses. In Eliza's case, responses resulted in her recanting her disclosure of CSA perpetrated by her brother: 'I'd come home from school every day and [my mum] would be sat there crying and being like "Please tell me it's not true".'

This, alongside fearing the consequences of reporting, specifically being removed from her family home, lead Eliza to state to the police and her mum that she ‘made it up’. Eliza was the only participant to refer to recantation. These experiences are indicative of the non-linear nature of the process of disclosure in that just as non-disclosures and partial disclosures can gradually become more in-depth, disclosures can also become more limited over time, particularly on account of unsupportive and/or undesired responses.

### *Partially disclosing*

Linked to this discussion, participants mentioned that they had made vague disclosures which resulted in others being aware that some form of trauma/SV had occurred, but unaware of the specific details. For instance, Leah’s ex-husband was ‘aware that there was a complex situation’ – in reference to the physical and emotional abuse Leah experienced within her childhood home; however, Leah explained that she ‘never felt, kind of, safe to tell him’ the extent of her victimisation, including being raped as a child. Likewise, since moving to a different city, Eliza ‘feel[s] like a couple of people know that something happened’ but remain unaware of any details. Partial disclosure can be considered linked to gradual and ongoing disclosure in that this may be how early disclosure attempts occur. For example, Peter’s initial disclosure to his best friend was only that he had been abused as a child with no additional information provided. From this vague disclosure in which Peter felt ‘listened to and not judged’, Peter was able to gradually shed further light on his experience.

That said, some partial disclosures are not a pathway to more detailed disclosure but rather, reflect a conscious decision to withhold specific details, such as the identity of the perpetrator. Both Eliza and Isla felt that their familial relationship with the perpetrator prevented them from ever disclosing their experience in any detail, particularly to a partner. Eliza explained that she ‘can’t really tell anyone that’s going to be a part of my life because he’s still a part of my life and I don’t know how that would work’. Interestingly, Eliza and Isla both differentiated between the person who victimised them and ‘the person they are now’ and, therefore, expressed the need to protect them. Additionally, Isla felt that withholding the identity of the perpetrator protected her family from ‘imploding’. While the perpetrator being known to the victim-survivor is associated with ‘delayed’ disclosure in the context of CSA (Hershkowitz et al, 2007), it also affects the ways in which victim-survivors eventually disclose and to whom.

The perpetrator being a ‘respected man within the [Orthodox Jewish] community’ means that Racheli often refuses to identify the perpetrator when disclosing: ‘If I say who they are, I either won’t be believed because of he who is, or – I just feel responsible for the reputation of our community ... it limits what I will disclose to certain people.’ This implies that potential disclosure responses may also impact the way in which disclosure is approached, particularly when feared and/or expected responses may be underpinned by discriminatory or stereotypical attitudes. This was also evident in Maya, a mixed-race victim-survivor of CSA, declaring ‘I don’t trust White people with this’. Bloomfield-Utting (forthcoming) demonstrates the potentially harmful nature of disclosure responses, especially for minoritised victim-survivors, and so withholding specific details may be a strategy to avoid these harmful responses, not only for themselves, but also for their wider community.

### *Attempting to disclose*

Linked to partial disclosures, many participants felt that they had attempted to disclose through verbal or behavioural means, as well as wanting others to be aware of their victimisation but not feeling able to verbally disclose. While Chloe's behavioural changes, which ultimately initiated a prompted disclosure (see next subsection), were not intentional, Astrid recalls spending 'a fair bit of [her] time at school trying to get people to see I wasn't okay', thus echoing Alaggia's (2004) reference to behavioural disclosure. Astrid's verbal disclosure, however, did not occur until approximately 40 years later.

Maya recalls attempting to disclose CSA to her sister as an adult 'but there were too many questions. Too many questions that sounded like doubt', thus indicating that responses can halt a disclosure, as well as prevent subsequent disclosures (Ahrens, 2006). Esther's experience aligns with Maya's in the sense that although an attempt was made to 'get honest with [my parents]', the response she received to this was essentially 'a brick wall' which excluded the possibility of a discussion relating to Esther's experience of CSA and its impact. The fact that Esther's father was responsible for her childhood victimisation also indicates that victim-survivors may disclose to perpetrators of SV, particularly in relation to the consequences of being victimised. Esther's father not being amenable to a candid conversation about her experiences resulted in Esther questioning 'what am I worth?' Similarly, Piper explained that she wrote to the perpetrator in an attempt to convey the impact of his abuse. Further research is needed to explore the prevalence and impact of victim-survivors attempting to discuss their experiences with those responsible for victimisation.

### *Prompted or pressured to disclose*

In addition to being a common way in which children experiencing CSA disclose their experiences (Alaggia, 2004; Hershkowitz et al, 2007; Brattfjell and Flâm, 2019), the findings indicate that victim-survivors of rape and sexual assault may also be prompted to disclose (Ullman et al, 2020). Primarily, participants were prompted to disclose by potential disclosure respondents, other victim-survivors and/or circumstances. Carson et al (2021: 3123–4) referred to this type of disclosure as 'elicited', defined as those which occur through the victim-survivor being 'coerced by another individual', often 'due to an egocentric concern from the disclosure recipient' as opposed to any discernible behavioural changes or emotional distress. The findings counter this by highlighting that prompted disclosures may be experienced positively. For instance, it was Chloe's 'best friend from uni' that approached her a few months later, noticing that she was 'acting very differently since that night' which led the disclosure respondent to believe that she had been sexually assaulted and/or raped. Chloe's best friend sought confirmation for this, stating that she was 'here to talk about it when you're ready but you don't have to anytime soon'.

When asked to whom she initially disclosed, Sofia responded 'I didn't initially. My sister had a breakdown and was taken into hospital and that's where she sort of, talked to someone. Then the police were involved'. Sofia explained that she 'had to' tell her partner 'because of the complexity of what's happened. I have children that's come out of that'. Similarly, Graham's sister disclosing CSA by an extended

family member was the catalyst for Graham disclosing his experiences of CSA to his parents. Thus, victim-survivors may be prompted to disclose as others victimised by the same perpetrator(s) come forward. Echoing Carson et al's (2021) research, victim-survivors may also disclose their experiences following being disclosed to themselves. For example, Isla recalled disclosing to her friend because 'she had opened up to me about her experiences so I then kind of felt safe to open up about mine'.

While feeling *prompted* to disclose may result in positive outcomes, such as feeling 'helped', 'comfortable to talk about it', and no longer 'in denial' (Chloe), feeling *pressured* to disclose may be more accurate for some victim-survivors. Eliana, for example, felt 'pressured by [potential boyfriend] against my better judgement' which resulted in 'instant regret', thus reflecting Carson et al's (2021) notion of coerced disclosure. In some cases, the outcomes of prompted disclosure may be more complex. Veronica explained that she disclosed being raped to her best friend because, otherwise, a police officer would disclose this information to obtain witness statements. Veronica felt that disclosing was therefore necessary to pursue criminal justice, concluding: 'I don't think I would have told her otherwise.' Veronica was ultimately happy with this decision, despite the perpetrator not being found guilty, however, she discussed the ways in which she was blamed, doubted and judged following her disclosure.

### *Enlisting support for specific disclosures*

Anna recalls disclosing being sexually assaulted to her mum 'over the phone and then she told my family for me because I didn't want to tell them'. Louisa also explained that her parents were informed she was raped by a nurse as she 'didn't want to tell them'. Similarly, Sofia discussed granting permission for her sister to disclose the complex nature of the sexual abuse she experienced to her children. Sofia explained that she 'just couldn't do it. Too difficult. Too difficult'. Sofia's sister had a 'heart to heart' with her teenage children in order to 'summarise' the abuse they suffered from their stepfather (who also fathered Sofia's children) and to explain the criminal proceedings against him. The experiences of Louisa, Anna and Sofia may also link to prompted disclosure in that each disclosure was necessitated by circumstances requiring an explanation (that is, why Anna was at the police station, why Louisa was at the hospital, and why the father of Sofia's children had been arrested) and as such, victim-survivors may enlist the support of disclosure respondents in carrying out additional important disclosures. Disclosing in this way reflects the difficulty in disclosing, particularly to disclosure respondents who are likely to be adversely affected by knowledge of the victim-survivor's experience, such as close family.

### **Limitations, implications for future research and conclusions**

Given that the primary objective of the wider study related to disclosure responses and impact, exploring how disclosure occurred was not a primary aim and so participants were not directly and/or consistently asked about this aspect of their experiences. Relatedly, the original study was actively inclusive and so this article has started to indicate how disability/neurodivergence and certain cultural/religious

settings may influence the way in which disclosure is approached, as well as wider discrimination (for example, racism and/or religious intolerance). However, further inclusive research exploring how victim-survivors disclose is warranted. Moreover, recent research indicates the emerging prevalence of disclosures occurring online (for example, via social media and platforms; see [Gorissen et al, 2023](#); [Lanthier et al, 2023](#)). None of the participants in this study reported disclosing online (though one considered doing so and one explained that her initial disclosure respondent was someone she had only 'met' online) and so is unable to illuminate the experiences of victim-survivors who disclose in this way.

This article also has preliminary practice implications, primarily relating to raising awareness of disclosure myths. As demonstrated by previous literature, disclosure myths play a role in the perceived veracity of a SV disclosure ([Shackel, 2009](#)) and the level of support afforded to the victim-survivor ([Rivera-Cuadrado, 2021](#)). Despite this, evidence suggests that victim-survivors may disclose in a multitude of ways depending on the nature and impact of victimisation, victim-survivor background and identity, and responses to disclosure; both expected and experienced.

This article emphasises the complexity of informal disclosure by demonstrating that this is a gradual, sometimes non-linear process over the life course, which may be more appropriately termed conversations and discussions. These conversations are ongoing, often with no finite ending, revolving around various aspects and experiences of victimisation to differing extents. That is, in addition to discussing victimisation itself, victim-survivors may also talk about the impact of victimisation. The ongoing nature of these conversations means that victimisation and prior disclosure experiences may be continually reframed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, 'respondent' is used over 'recipient' (unless quoting) to demonstrate the co-constructed nature of disclosure.

<sup>2</sup> These are not listed in the interest of preserving anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> During discussions regarding how to respond to signs of upset and distress, among members of a lived experience advisory group for a project exploring pathways to support for trauma, it was agreed that asking victim-survivors if they wished to terminate an interview because of clear upset (for example, crying) was invalidating and unnecessary.

<sup>4</sup> Inverted commas are used here in recognition that many victim-survivors feel that terms such as 'recent' and 'non-recent' can be invalidating.

<sup>5</sup> The perpetrator was an instructor at the youth sports organisation Eliana attended. The type of sport is redacted at Eliana's request.

<sup>6</sup> This is used in line with Angelika's preference (that is, that they were not in an exclusive relationship).

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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