

# INSTRUCTOR STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON CAMPUS

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## ABSTRACT

*While increasing attention has been paid to the issue of sexual violence (SV) on university and college campuses, there is a paucity of research about how post-secondary instructors should respond to student disclosures of SV and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV). The limited amount of evidence suggests instructors who receive disclosures are often confused about their role in supporting students. We address this gap by providing a reflexive examination of autobiographical data, and mobilize this analysis to recommend a set of strategies for post-secondary instructors to use when responding to disclosures of SV and GBV in higher education.*

**KEYWORDS:** Sexual violence; gender-based violence; disclosure; teaching strategies; feminist pedagogy.

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence on campus, often conceptualized as sexual assault in early studies, has long been identified as a serious and persistent concern on university campuses (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Recently, increased attention has been paid to the rates of gender-based and sexualized violence on university campuses in the United States (U.S.) and Canada. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention assert sexual violence is a major public health problem, in the U.S. and worldwide (DeGue et al., 2012), and scholars have made it clear that there is an urgent need to address gender-based and sexual violence on university and college campuses (Carey, Durney, Shepardson, & Carey, 2015; Senn et al., 2014). Canadian prevalence rates indicate 1 in 4 women-identified

students experience some form of sexualized violence (SV) or gender-based violence (GBV) while enrolled in post-secondary education (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993), with a recent Canadian study revealing 58% of first-year women students reporting some experience of sexualized violence since the age of 14 (Senn, et al., 2014). Global studies of on-campus sexual violence, including in the U.S., echo these findings with victimization rates ranging from 13% to 29% (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Gavey, 1991; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). These rates have remained high for the past 25 years, despite meaningful and engaged prevention and intervention work.

At this point in time, and often at the behest of government-initiated action plans and legislation (e.g., Ontario Bill 132 Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act; The First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault), higher education institutions are turning their attention toward systemic changes in the form of policy development, research, and student support (e.g., see Council of Ontario Universities, 2016). In the United States, sexual assault on federally funded post-secondary campuses is governed by Title IX, a portion of the Education Amendments of 1972; however, the Canadian context is quite different. University instructors in Canada are not currently governed by federal or provincial legislation with respect to responding to student disclosures of GBV. A few provinces across Canada are currently passing legislation that will require universities to establish and uphold stand-alone policies and procedures related to student reports of sexual violence, such as Ontario's Bill 132 which requires all Ontario universities and colleges to have policies in place as of January 2017. However, at this time, it is unclear whether these policies will include any statements regarding how instructors should respond to student disclosures because, thus far, the legislation has not focused on instructor responsibilities. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that a particular university may choose to address this issue as part of their policy, but currently the authors are not aware of any Canadian universities that have explicit policies or procedures related to instructors receiving student disclosures of GBV. The current climate of institutional accountability and responsibility could be considered a turning point in how student survivors of SV and GBV should be treated; an emphasis that could lead to an increase in frequency of student disclosures.

In keeping with tenets of action research, the purpose of this paper is to explore the pressing issue of student disclosures of SV and GBV on post-secondary campuses, specifically as it relates to teaching and learning. There is a paucity of research about how post-secondary instructors should respond to student disclosures of violence, and the limited amount of evidence available suggests instructors who receive disclosures are often confused about their role in supporting students (Branch, Hayes-Smith, & Richards, 2011). The need for immediate problem-solving about the lack of information about how to best respond to students became evident to us during our own search for information within various scholarly literatures. Having found very little information about navigating and responding to student disclosures of GBV, we designed a study utilizing autobiographical data and reflexive analyses as means to begin resolving this identified gap and produce a set of recommendations designed to inform teaching practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sexual Violence on Campus

Studies indicate SV is perpetrated against women enrolled in higher education (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993, p. 155; Fisher, et al., 2000, p. 33), and often at higher rates than non-matriculating women (Koss, et al., 1987, p. 168). Findings from The National Sexual Assault Study, in the United States, indicate nineteen percent of female participants (N= 5,446) experienced an attempted (13%) and/or completed (13%) sexual assault since entering college (Krebs, et al., 2007, p. xiii). Another recent study confirms these prevalence rates, reporting that in the first year of college 15% of women report experiencing incapacitated rape (attempted or completed) and 9% report experiencing forcible rape (attempted or completed) (Carey, et al., 2015, p. 679). These rates are consistent with a foundational study conducted at Canadian universities, suggesting 1 in 4 woman-identified students have been sexually assaulted (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993, p. 148).

In addition to violence perpetrated during post-secondary studies, some students arrive on campus having already experienced sexualized violence and rape, perpetrated against them as children, adolescents, and/or young adults. Findings from Senn et al. and colleagues' randomized control trial at three Canadian universities exploring sexualized violence in the lives of first-year university women (n=899) indicate over half of these students (58%) had experienced one or more forms of sexualized victimization (including rape, attempted rape, coercion, sexual contact, etc.) since the age of 14 (2014, p. 3). Among rape victims (n=211), 79% were raped while incapacitated by drugs or alcohol (2014, p. 5). Similar studies in the U.S. indicate 27% of woman-identified college students (n=3,187) reported experiencing an act that met legal definitions of rape, which includes attempted rapes (Koss et al., 1987, p. 168). Thus, it is clear that there are large numbers of women, in particular, on campuses who 1) carry historical experiences of sexualized violence while attending universities and colleges and 2) face considerable risks of SV and GBV while enrolled in post-secondary studies – although these two groups are not mutually exclusive.

### Student Disclosure

The number of women who have experienced some form of GBV in their lifetime lends insight into the likelihood of disclosure to members of the university community, particularly instructors. Survivors of GBV most often disclose to their informal networks, including friends and family members, when seeking support (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Dichter & Rhodes, 2011). Similarly, evidence from post-secondary contexts also suggests students disclose experiences of GBV more often to their informal networks rather than formal campus services (Branch & Richards, 2013; Branch, Richards, & Dretsch, 2013; Orchowski, Meyer, & Gidycz, 2009). However, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests professors and teaching instructors are also frequently receiving disclosures of SV and GBV (Branch et al., 2011; Hayes-Smith, Richards, & Branch, 2010; Richards, Branch, & Hayes, 2013). These studies highlight that post-secondary instructors often build strong relationships with their students through the learning process and are seen as one of the few trusted “entry points” into receiving institutional support. Moreover, academic accommodations are one of the key needs of student survivors of SV and GBV, so students

may feel compelled to disclose to their instructors in order to have their requests for deferrals and extensions met.

Branch and colleagues' (2011) is one of few studies that have provided an in-depth exploration of the impact and strategic responses of professors following receipt of student disclosures of GBV. Their findings reveal how student disclosures differentially impact teaching and pedagogy. For instance, after receiving a disclosure of GBV some professors created more space for students to disclose, while others changed their teaching practices to minimize the likelihood of disclosure. These findings are echoed in Hayes-Smith and colleagues' (2010) study which suggests professors who receive disclosures of SV and GBV are confused about their role in supporting students and are personally impacted by student disclosures.

This confusion is reflected in various teaching literatures where there is a divergence of opinion about the responsibilities of educators when responding to disclosures of GBV. Some evidence suggests instructors have a responsibility to engage in pedagogical practices that will support students who disclose immediate and historical experiences of GBV (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009) while other findings suggest the role of the instructor is not that of counselor or therapist (Hayes-Smith et al., 2010). But an important reality remains: we know based on prevalence data and empirical evidence, and our own extensive experience responding to student disclosures, that students are indeed disclosing to professors, *regardless of our comfort level, expertise, or willingness to provide support*. Thus, we argue it is vital for instructors to prepare for student disclosures, and think about their role and responsibility of attending to disclosures within the context of organized, institutional responses. This is all the more imperative because evidence shows that when a survivor discloses to their support systems and receives an unsupportive response, this can have a significant negative impact on 'recovery' (Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007). With this in mind, we use autobiographical data to illustrate and explore responses to student disclosures of GBV as a first step toward filling a gap in knowledge about teaching practices that contribute to supportive responses to student disclosures of SV and GBV.

### **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMES**

Our understanding and use of the term *gender-based violence* applies to women's experiences of direct and indirect violence. Our use of this term is consistent with the definition articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993. It defines GBV against women as:

Any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (United Nations, Article 1)

In comparison, *sexualized violence* is any type of non-consensual sexual act done by one person to another. While these two terms are not equivalent, it is often the case that GBV is

expressed in and through forms of SV. SV and GBV are perpetrated against individuals of all genders, including trans\* individuals,<sup>1</sup> women, girls, men, and boys. However, women and girls are disproportionately targeted and impacted by SV and GBV, and this type of violence is often perpetuated against members of the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities because they are perceived as not conforming to traditional gender roles (Cooper, Paluck, & Fletcher, 2013). Given the majority of survivors of SV and GBV are women and girls, including in the post-secondary context, the focus of this paper is on violence against women.

Our responses to disclosures of SV and GBV are directly informed by our understanding of anti-oppressive practice (AOP), which is drawn from the work of Baines (2007):

AOP is an umbrella term for a number of social justice oriented approaches...including, feminist, Marxist, post-modernist, Indigenous, post-structuralist, critical constructionist, anti-colonial and anti-racist....As part of larger movements for social change, AOP is constantly refining its theory and practice to address new tensions and social problems, as well as underlying structural factors (p. 4).

More specifically, our politicized, intersectional feminist identities are intrinsically connected to our AOP-informed, feminist approach to pedagogy. Our understanding of and use of the term feminist pedagogy is consistent with the work of Webb, Kandi and Bollis (2004) which notes feminist pedagogy is concerned with: disrupting hegemonic discourses; transforming and liberating classroom spaces for discursive discussions; acknowledging systemic and societal inequalities can be replicated in classroom dynamics; honouring the co-creation of knowledge between teacher and student; and creating spaces for voices often unheard by those in privileged positions.

AOP and feminist pedagogical approaches also highlight the importance of locating oneself in relation to teaching, learning and scholarship in order to engage in fully reflexive practice. To begin, we are tenured and tenure-stream faculty members at a large university in Southwestern Ontario, Canada, and collectively have been teaching in the Canadian post-secondary context for over 10 years. We purposefully employ self-disclosure in our teaching and ask our students to critically examine and reflect upon their own experiences of living in the world in relation to what they are learning in the classroom. In our role as educators, we have received countless disclosures from students, and anticipate this pattern will continue over the course of our academic careers. We are deeply connected to violence prevention and intervention work in our communities, engaging with local and regional organizations working to eliminate all forms of gendered violence, especially in the lives of cisgender and trans-women. We identify as White settler, economically privileged, bisexual/straight-seeming, cisgender women. In this respect, the way we

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word trans\* with an asterisk to represent an umbrella term to refer to diverse identities within a gender identity spectrum, distinctive from traditional cisgender identities (i.e., cisgender describes congruency between an individual's gender/sex as assigned at birth and their gender expression). Trans\* includes (but is not limited to): transgender, trans man, trans woman, gender queer, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, non-gendered, and two spirit.

experience rape culture, misogyny, sexism, and everyday forms of violence are directly connected to our race and class privilege. We understand that violence can be perpetrated within all types of relationships (i.e. heterosexual, queer, asexual, etc.), romantic configurations (i.e. casual, monogamous, polyamorous, celibate, etc.), non-romantic configurations (i.e. friendships, acquaintances, etc.), and by strangers. We provide a few more details about our specific positions below.

### **Critical Reflection on Student Disclosures**

The data and analysis in this paper engages with a reflexive examination of autobiographical data from our collective experience of over 10 years of responding to SV and GBV in the post-secondary context. The use of autobiographical data, consistent with action research projects, has been utilized by researchers when analyzing data that contains information about the self, especially when reporting on practice (Cherry, 2000). Following this analysis, we provide a generalized set of strategies for post-secondary instructors to consider when responding to student disclosures of SV and GBV. These strategies are rooted in teaching practices that are student- and survivor- centred and that demand attention be paid to how various forms of violence are perpetuated within interlocking systems of oppression that include sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism (Magnet & Diamond, 2010).

Our autobiographical data is presented in the form of composites describing typical scenarios where we have received student disclosures, followed by a reflective analysis of our immediate and evolving responses. In consideration of the ethics of presenting information about our experience of the student disclosure process, we developed composites of student disclosures as a means to avoid compromising the privacy of the students who have disclosed to us over the years. We have chosen to scaffold this paper around these composites, not to sensationalize the experiences of SV and GBV, but rather to anchor *our* stories; to illuminate our responses and our critical reflection about the issue of student disclosure. Each composite is presented in a first person narrative voice as a way to “speak” to the reader and ground the theoretical discussion of student disclosure in real life experiences. However, it is also important to note that each of these experiences, and our responses to them, reflect a context unique to our time and place.

### **Composite 1: Purposeful or Planned Discloser**

Following the conclusion of a graduate lecture exploring intersections of poverty and gender, a student approached me to request an appointment to discuss workload and the upcoming final paper. We scheduled a time to meet that week. After two cancellations, and three weeks later, the student met with me in my office.

The student arrived on time and apologized for cancelling our previous meetings. Our discussion began with the student describing feelings of being overwhelmed by assignments, course work, employment responsibilities, etc. The student described her feeling of being overwhelmed was not typical, and in fact, described being quite proud of her ability to keep herself organized. She talked about always being a good student. At this point, the student became visibly emotional, tearing up, pausing to collect herself, and

began apologizing for being upset. In very apologetic tones the student stated she was having a lot of personal difficulties during the academic term that were impacting her studies. The student disclosed being in an abusive intimate relationship.

#### *Immediate Response*

The moment I recognized the student was visibly distressed, I moved into an active listening space and simply let the student share her story. I listened. I moved a box of tissue toward her. It took a few minutes for the student to disclose that she was in an emotionally, and sometimes physically, abusive relationship. She described feeling exhausted from the relationship, but also from navigating the criminal justice and legal systems. Once she reached the end of her story, I offered words of reassurance such as 'I am sorry that happened to you' and 'it is not your fault'. I also inquired about her immediate physical safety. She reported feeling physically safe at that point in time.

As the student collected herself and was regaining her composure, I asked the student what would be most helpful at this point in time. The student hesitantly asked if I would be willing to give her an extension on the final paper. I agreed to her request and we set a new deadline for her final paper submission. She again apologized for having to ask for the extension. I assured the student there was no need to apologize.

As we concluded our conversation, I asked the student if she would like information about supportive services at the university or in the community. The student declined, but thanked me for offering.

The student submitted her paper, on time, without using the extension provided.

#### *Evolving Response*

Generally speaking, my evolving response to a purposeful (or non-spontaneous) disclosure will continue to resemble the response described above. Active listening and a supportive, believing stance are central to how I respond to disclosures of violence and abuse.

I continue to think about and reflect on the student's decision not to utilize the extension. I wonder if I should have been more proactive in reducing her sense of shame and embarrassment that accompanied her disclosure. At the risk of maternalizing my response, should I have been more insistent that the student utilize the extension? Furthermore, while I inquired about her physical safety, should I have also inquired about her emotional safety and the impact of emotional harms? By only focusing on her physical safety, did I somehow miss an opportunity to provide more meaningful support?

I will also continue to reflect on one particular piece with respect to in-person student disclosures: safety planning. My response would have been quite different if the student disclosed feeling unsafe, fearful, or threatened. Admittedly, I may have assessed physical safety at the expense of a broader understanding of her emotional and psychological safety. With a better understanding of both her physical and emotional safety, it may have shifted my responsibility from simply listening and supporting, to working with the student to think about what protective resources could be engaged such as informal supports,

University resources (e.g., student health centres, women's centres on campus), local organizations that support women who have experienced violence, and/or police.

### **Composite 2: Spontaneous Disclosure in the Classroom**

During a large group discussion on the topic of Feminist Activism, an undergraduate student commented on her volunteer work with a local rape crisis center. In describing the value and impact of her work, the student spontaneously disclosed a historical experience of rape. She shared her story, and identity as a survivor, as a means of illustrating her difficulty accessing resources in her community, at the time she was raped. She indicated she did not know who to tell, or who to reach out to first. She was fearful of not being believed, or worse, of being asked to do something she was not yet ready to do, such as file criminal charges against the known perpetrator. This student shared her story in a very matter-of-fact manner and did not appear to be visibly emotional or acutely upset by sharing her story (i.e. I did not observe tears or a change in her voice or body position, but that is not to say she was not impacted by the telling of her story).

#### *Immediate Response*

This spontaneous disclosure took place during a guest lecture I was invited to give in an undergraduate class within another institution. It was mid-way through their course and I had no previous contact with the class members. This is important to consider, given I had no established rapport, trust, or relationship with any members of the class. In the absence of a relationship, this student still chose to disclose her experience of rape.

When the student completed her thought, I made eye contact with her and briefly nodded, implying my thanks for her sharing her story. I then proceeded to verbally acknowledge her disclosure of being raped. I thanked her for being willing to educate myself and the class by sharing her experience of rape, and problematized the difficulties survivors can face when navigating various support systems. I asked her if there was anything else she would like to say on the matter before I moved on. I proceeded to ask for comments from other members of the class and then moved on with the prepared lecture. At the conclusion of my lecture, I approached the student and again thanked her for sharing her story. I asked how she was feeling and encouraged her to be in touch with her instructor or her support systems, if needed.

#### *Evolving Response*

I interpreted her matter-of-fact tone as an indication of comfort in telling her story. I sensed this was perhaps not the first time she shared her story. This informed my decision to comment on her experience, acknowledge the difficulty of navigating helping systems, and checking in with her before I moved on. If I want to ask follow up questions, I always ask permission and remind students they can choose not to answer. Entering into a quasi-dialogue with someone who spontaneously discloses, in a public space or classroom, is not something I would always do, especially if the disclosure seemed to evoke feelings of discomfort or regret. If a student were visibly emotional during a disclosure – crying, shaken, having difficulty breathing or maintaining eye contact, trailing off during their story – I would check with the student about how they would like to (re)establish some level of control over their story and their emotional response. For example, I would invite

them to breathe, ask them if they would like to continue sharing their story and acknowledge the difficulty of disclosing a personal experience of GBV.

### **Composite 3: Disclosure in a Written Assignment**

An undergraduate student prepared an 8-page written assignment about engaging in helping relationships with homeless youth. The assignment required students to describe various personal values, attitudes, and ideas that might impact a social worker's ability to meaningfully engage in a helping relationship with members of a community (e.g. newcomers to Canada; residents of a long-term care facility; women accessing emergency shelter, etc.).

By way of introduction to the paper, the student detailed his various social locations and lived experiences related to age, gender, ethno racial identity, class, family composition, level of education, sexual orientation, and relationship status. At the conclusion of this section, the student disclosed experiencing childhood sexual abuse. The student also stated he had not previously disclosed this abuse to anyone. Throughout the remainder of the paper, the student frequently referenced his experience of childhood sexual abuse to illustrate his capacity for empathy when working with homeless youth.

#### *Immediate Response*

I had so many questions after reading the disclosure. Why did the student choose this point in time, in this written assignment, to disclose? What meaning did this disclosure hold for the student? Do I acknowledge the disclosure? Do I not acknowledge the disclosure given I did not acknowledge any other pieces related to social location and identity? If I comment in writing, should my tone be empathetic and supportive? Do I only comment on the disclosure in-person? If I were a student, what would I expect from my instructor by way of a response? How could a non-response be interpreted? Or conversely, how could an overly-supportive response be interpreted?

Before making any comment on the paper, I consulted with colleagues outside of my institution (in order to safeguard student privacy and confidentiality) to solicit ideas about how to best respond. I was curious to know if others had experienced this kind of disclosure and how they might respond to a disclosure in a written assignment. Of the three colleagues I contacted, none could recall an instance of a student making a disclosure of abuse in a written assignment. Some described students identifying as survivors, but not a disclosure. Another likened a disclosure of abuse to experiences of structural violence such racism or homophobia. The suggestions I received varied from non-acknowledgement of the disclosure (because the act of disclosing was not a weighted component in grading the assignment) to direct responses provided only in the paper and/or in both the paper and in-person. There was no shared agreement amongst the professors I spoke with about how to respond to this disclosure.

I decided to acknowledge the disclosure, in the written assignment only. Where the student first mentioned experiencing childhood sexual abuse, I made a notation in the margin conveying humility and gratitude for sharing this piece of their story. At various places throughout the paper, I also acknowledged how the student's self-disclosure seemed to inform and shape their understanding of a helping relationship in the context of social

work practice. For example, I commented on how the student understood their experience of childhood sexual abuse as a potential site of connection with youth who may share similar experiences of abuse.

Ultimately, my decision to acknowledge and respond to the student's disclosure was guided by a feminist and social justice ethic. To ignore the disclosure would have been contrary to my social work ethic related to empathy and respect for human dignity. Ignoring the disclosure would be akin to ignoring the perpetration of violence in the life of that student. It appeared to me the student disclosed their experience of childhood sexual abuse as means for establishing their identity as a survivor. If the student felt the need to disclose abuse in order to claim survivorship, a lack of acknowledgment could have been interpreted as silencing and perhaps dismissive of the student's emerging identity as a survivor. Finally, the act of bearing witness to the deeply harmful impacts and consequences of abuse is one of the least things we, as professors and public intellectuals, can do when we receive disclosures of violence or harm.

#### *Evolving Response*

I considered inviting the student to speak with me in-person; however I did not extend this invitation in my comments on the paper. This is a departure from how I would engage with a spontaneous disclosure in a classroom context, as I would typically invite a student to attend office hours or speak with me further should the student deem that to be a helpful resource. Reflecting on this decision, I was uncertain how to navigate a written disclosure, and therefore was uncertain whether and how to further engage the student in a supportive way.

Reading a disclosure from a student is much different than responding to a disclosure in-person. In-person, I can rely on non-verbal cues to communicate empathy, support, non-judgment, and concern. If appropriate, I can ask direct questions about student well-being, intention, and needs. Without the benefit of direct interaction and being in dialogue with the student, responding to a disclosure in a written assignment opens up the possibility of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Even with these limitations, I remain uncertain that my response was adequate. Should I receive future disclosures in a written assignment, I would like to create more space for in-person dialogue. This could look like a notation in the feedback I provide in the paper (e.g., to visit my office hours or to connect with me in some way if that would be helpful) or a private conversation with the student to simply acknowledge the disclosure and affirming my supportive stance.

#### **Composite 4: Triggered, Non-Disclosure**

In an undergraduate course about gender I include at least one week (total of three hours) that focuses explicitly on the issue of SV. I also leave flexibility in the course schedule to extend this discussion if the class is engaged in the material, and if the classroom space feels relatively safe for these conversations. I am aware that many of the students have not previously had an opportunity to discuss SV or GBV in a classroom setting. A student taking this course asked for further information about the trigger warning I had provided verbally prior to the week on SV. Cautionary statements about the material for that week were also in the course syllabus, and on the web-based course management system. I answered the

student's questions as best I could, but also emphasized that I could not say exactly what topics would be covered because I was going to encourage class discussion. Other students could bring up topics I was not anticipating, and I was unable to guarantee the space would be entirely safe and non-triggering for any specific student. I affirmed that any content required for exams/assignments would be summarized and available via the on-line course management system. The student came to class that week. However, as the weeks went on in the semester the student attended fewer and fewer classes.

After classes were completed, and prior to the exam, the student requested accommodations for the final exam based on health reasons. The student came to my office and we spoke about what accommodations were needed. We never talked about specific experiences or health conditions, but more broadly about the student not feeling well. My sense was that the student was conflicted about the conversation we were having, although I cannot be sure. There were a large number of pauses and silences throughout the conversation, and I felt unsure of what I should ask about. However, the student stayed much longer than I expected and did not take the first few opportunities to leave. The student did *not* disclose any experience of violence.

#### *Immediate Response*

During my conversation with the student I was fighting a desire to ask the student directly about whether the class discussions may have been triggering, or what experience had caused distress. I felt conflicted about whether this would be helpful to the student in terms of broaching a topic that appeared to be difficult to discuss. I wanted the student to feel comfortable, and I wanted to be able to provide comfort by saying the things I would normally say during a disclosure, such as "I believe you" and "it was not your fault." However, even though I felt it was likely that the student had experienced GBV, I did not know for sure. No disclosure of violence was ever shared.

What I did know was that the student needed accommodations in relation to the course. We worked together to identify the best possible accommodations that recognized the student's needs, while also fulfilling course requirements. While we never discussed GBV or SV explicitly at the very end of the conversation, right before the student left, I decided to give the student a contact card for the local sexual assault support service. The comment I made while handing over the card was something like "I am not sure whether this is the appropriate support service, but I just want you to have this and know that they are excellent in terms of providing support."

#### *Evolving Response*

In reflecting back on the experience, I think my desire to know about the causes of the students' distress was more about my own comfort than the student's wellbeing. A key principle of healing is that individuals who experience harm are able to make decisions about their life since the ability to decide was taken away from them in the moment of violence. The student who came to my office did not disclose. I do not know if that student experienced SV or GBV, and I should not know unless the student wanted to tell me.

Perhaps what fuelled my desire to know more was to move out of ambivalence, and into a space where I could rely on my training and experience. After many years of receiving

disclosures, I feel (in relative terms) comfortable with providing support. The student who had been triggered by something, but did not disclose, forced me to stay in a place of uncertainty. I did not know what to say, and so at the end of the conversation I defaulted to providing the information I usually provide, which was a referral for the local sexual assault centre.

Yet, I wonder if this was the right choice. With every trigger warning I provided (in the syllabus, verbally in class, and online), I had also given all of the students information for local support services. Thus, the student had ready access to this information if needed and it is possible that by providing the student with this information in the context of our conversation, I placed her in a position where she may have felt compelled to either confirm or deny what were clearly my assumptions about what had happened. When taking the card, the student simply said thank you, but I am concerned that my well-intentioned actions could have resulted in a different outcome, or had an unintended and unknown impact.

In summary, we have detailed our immediate and evolving responses to illustrate how one might respond to a student disclosure. However, these strategies are not offered as static, one-size-fits-all solutions when responding to a student disclosure. We hesitate to endorse responses that require instructors to respond in prescribed ways (e.g., reporting all disclosures to police). What we do want to encourage is survivor-centered responses. For example, if a student wants to report to police, an instructor could support this process by seeking out contact information, connecting the student to a local advocacy group who can accompany the student to make a report, or an instructor may feel comfortable accompanying the student to make a formal report (either inside or outside the Institution). Upholding survivor choice and supporting student decision-making are key features of our responses, and anchor the recommendations detailed below.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Based on the autobiographical data and critical reflections presented above, we provide five general principles for post-secondary instructors to consider when receiving disclosures of SV and GBV from students. While based on our collective experiences, these principles are also in keeping with previously identified strategies for responding to students in crisis as put forth by Durfee and Rosenberg (2009):

(1) Assume there are survivors of GBV in your class.

Given the statistics (recall Senn, et al., 2014), there will be students who have experienced sexualized violence, intimate partner violence, childhood abuses, and other forms of GBV, in your class/lab/tutorial. When crafting lesson plans, lectures, assignments, and other activities, know that you will have survivors attending your lectures, participating in class discussions, and working on the assignments you created. Reviewing one's course structure and content with the assumption that survivors will be in the classroom may have an immediate impact on how to approach the class. For example, one may want to consider the possibility of trigger warnings or cautionary statements (see Author & Author, 2016) or add information about local support services to the syllabus. For other course materials, the connections may be

less obvious, but we still encourage instructors to look at their courses through the lens of addressing GBV. Durfee and Rosenberg (2009) provide a compelling argument for (and a comprehensive review of strategies) attending to our responsibilities as instructors when designing courses and learning spaces that mirror experiences in students' lives.

(2) Adopt a believing stance.

A disclosure from a student about GBV should be treated with sensitivity, and most importantly, as a story to be believed. Minimizing, denying, blaming, or questioning the student's disclosure is not acceptable. Even if you feel unsure that you are the best person to provide support, it is important to not shut down the conversation. At a minimum, professors should engage in active listening when a disclosure is made and be willing to offer academic accommodations. Disclosures of any kind of harm are often difficult to hear; difficult to respond to; difficult to navigate. But nonetheless, we have a collective responsibility as members of our university communities to address and respond to GBV on university campuses – especially when our students are directly impacted. Adopting a believing stance can be conveyed with simple statements, such as: “What you’ve told me is awful”, “I’m sorry that happened to you”, “What can I do to help?”

(3) Bear witness as an act of solidarity.

Be prepared to listen, acknowledge, and if appropriate, denounce the acts of violence disclosed by a student. The act of creating and holding space for a student to share their experience can be a meaningful act of solidarity. There are few spaces where survivors feel safe enough to share their stories. The act of bearing witness to the deeply harmful impacts and consequences of violence is one of the most valuable things we, as professors and public intellectuals, can do when we receive disclosures of violence or harm. This can mean simply nodding in agreement, offering phrases such as “take your time” or “I’m listening”, or offering a small reassurance such as “I’ll do my best to help.”

(4) It is okay to be unsure about how to respond in the moment.

There is no ‘perfect’ or ‘one-size-fits-all’ response to student disclosures. A response that conveys empathy, belief, and genuine concern can be very helpful to students. Instructors need not be an ‘expert’ in GBV in order to provide a supportive response. It is more important to demonstrate empathy than expertise. For example, when you sense a student is distressed, but they have not yet disclosed, ask them: “Are you okay?” or “Is there something I can help with?” When a student does disclose, and if you are unsure about how to respond, simply be honest. For example, if you feel stuck you might say, “I want to help; I’m just not sure how at this moment” or “what would be most helpful to you right now?” Instructors should be knowledgeable about potential supports, including local sexual assault centre crisis lines and institutional sites such as the wellness centre and/or equity offices, and having resources from these organizations on hand can be helpful in uncertain moments.

(5) Notice paternalistic/maternalistic tendencies.

When faced with a student disclosure, the search for an appropriately sympathetic, outraged, or supportive response can result in unintentional harms. It is important to allow students the space to direct their own course of action – which can sometimes look like ‘inaction’ to outsiders. Keep the following in mind when thinking about how to respond to a student’s disclosure of GBV:

- Do not primarily express pity, horror, or shame –survivors have enormous strength and constantly engage in strategic resistance;
- Do not assume survivors need immediate crisis intervention;
- Do not insist on reporting to police, nor assume a formal investigation is wanted (i.e., the act of disclosing is distinct from the act of making a report or criminal allegation);
- Do not assume it is your role to seek out resources for someone without clear consent and a request from the student.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we suggest instructors must be prepared to respond to disclosures of SV and GBV, especially in the current context of increased institutional attention to the issue of sexual violence on campuses. Based on autobiographical data, we have provided composites of typical student disclosure scenarios and reflexive examinations of our immediate and evolving responses as instructors. In addition, we have provided five student- and survivor-centered principles to help guide instructors who are less familiar with addressing GBV and student disclosure including: the importance of adopting a believing stance, expecting survivors in the classroom, bearing witness, and avoiding reductive responses. While this paper gives an initial place to enter into the conversation about the impact of student disclosure on teaching, we encourage all post-secondary instructors to continue seriously considering their own relationships between teaching, learning, and providing supportive responses and classroom environments that take account of student experiences of SV and GBV in ways that contribute to healing rather than replicating harm.

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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