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**Women's healing journeys:  
Exploring and strengthening  
inner resources**

**by**

**Anna Flo Arcas**

Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

City University of London  
Department of Psychology

**March 2018**

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## Acknowledgements

To Beth, Claire, Emily, Kate, Lucy, and Sarah (pseudonyms). It has been a privilege. I thank you again for sharing your experiences and part of your story with me, and for providing me with your beautiful feedback at the end of this project. This work would not have been possible without you. I hope it has honoured your words.

To the IPTTs at South London and Maudsley (NHS) and the London Counselling Psychologists Blog. Thank you for supporting and giving voice to my research and helping me to recruit my participants.

To Daphne, my supervisor. Thank you for your thoughtful comments and for supporting and encouraging me through this project, even when I doubted it could become a reality. Now it has! Thank you!

To my parents, Montse and Pep, and my sister Eva, gracies per tot el vostre amor i suport, incondicional, i per sempre creure en mi. No seria aqui sense vosaltres. Gracies!

To Walter. You have seen the shadow side. Thank you for your hugs, for your encouragement, for your songs, and for always making me laugh. Thank you!

To the Superwomen, Mariam, Tess, and especially to Laura. Thank you for all your support and encouragement, for sharing struggles and celebrations with me, and for helping me so much without knowing it. I am so glad we met!

To all those who have helped me and provided pockets of support and encouragement along the way: extended family, friends, colleagues – thank you!

To Erin, Kate, and Anna. Thank you for guiding me through the journey of becoming a counselling psychologist and helping me find my path. I will always be grateful.

## **Declaration**

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## Preface

This portfolio is made up of three distinct pieces: an empirical research, a publishable journal article, and a clinical case study, all of them required for the fulfilment of the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. These three components can be understood solely on their own; however, they can also be linked with one another through three different threads.

First, they all focus on women: women are placed at the core of each piece, and what is explored and presented is particularly relevant to us. Throughout the history of psychology, women have barely been acknowledged. Within the American Psychological Association (APA) list of eminent psychologists of the 20th century, only six women can be counted; five of them within the last thirty positions (APA, 2002). Widely used psychological models are not always rooted in our experiences (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung & Updegraff, 2000), and issues that are of particular concern to us have been marginalised in renowned journals. Perhaps, in a way, this portfolio is also a wink to all the women who have not been acknowledged in this field.

Second, these three pieces reflect, and are framed, within women's healing journeys from traumatic experiences. It is through power imbalances between men and women that the society we live in places women in a subordinate position, creating a conducive context for violence against women (Kelly, 1988), and portraying women as weak and passive, even when they endure and heal from traumatic experiences, continue with their lives, and often excel at their passions. These three pieces reflect the experiences of women, and depicts them as the active agents they are. In addition, this thread is also a reflection of an important part of my training within specialised gendered violence services, and of the work I have undertaken with women in other services as they started their healing journeys.

Finally, these three pieces portray women's healing journeys through exploring, acknowledging, and reinforcing their inner resources, and thus, becoming stronger and more compassionate with themselves. This term is explored in relation to sexual violence in the research project, understanding how women experience it, and making this abstract concept more tangible through the expertise of the participants. The

journal article focuses on the battles women wage long after sexual violence, and how they use music, their bodies, and other objects to assert their agency. The case study shows my work in the therapy room within a Schema Informed Therapy model, and thus, with inner resources.

This final thread also reflects a personal journey, as it has been through my training as a counselling psychologist, my various placements, supervision, and undertaking this research project, that I have become more aware of my inner resources, as a practitioner, as a researcher, and as a woman.

The first component of this portfolio is a qualitative research study that explores women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault. In the United Kingdom, one in five women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16 (Office of National Statistics et al., 2017), and even if data attests that women's described experiences after sexual assault or rape are common, most of the literature continues to depict women who have suffered sexual violence as damaged or in need of (external) fixing. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the factors that influence the process of recovery or healing from sexual violence; however, none of the studies reviewed for this project focuses on the internal factors that women count on throughout this process. Literature on inner resources is scarce, and thus, following the definition of inner resources from Van Dierendonck, Rodriguez-Carvajal, Moreno-Jiménez and Dijkstra (2009) – “a reservoir from which one can draw in times of need, giving a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day to day living” (p. 750) – and through the interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2004) of the rich interviews of six women, this research has provided further understanding that will help to fill this gap. My aim with this study was to place women and their experiences at the centre, not only in the analysis but also in the discussion of the findings, as they, too, are experts in their experiences. Through identifying three overarching themes – the “*Will to Live*”, the “*Warrior*”, and the “*Growing Self*” – I hope to have contributed to the literature and theory in this field, and to enriching and informing the practice of counselling psychologists when working with women who have experienced rape and/or sexual assault.

The second component of this portfolio is a publishable journal article, which was inspired by the above research study. This article places a strong emphasis on the long-term battles women undertake, the creative ways they regain and maintain their agency, and how they not only seek to improve their own lives but also the lives

of those around them. Furthermore, this theme was linked to the #metoo movement by some of the participants -a movement that helped to demonstrate the widespread prevalence of sexual assault through social media-, and it is my hope that, through presenting their voices, it will provide a deeper understanding on how women experience this movement. I decided to write this article for *Feminism & Psychology*, as it is placed at the interface of feminism and psychology, a delicate position I have found myself in while undertaking the research and throughout my training. In addition, this journal fosters the development of a feminist psychology through articles that integrate research and practice, and that provide insights into gendered realities. I believe this intersection provides a fertile ground for the publishing of this work.

The final component of this portfolio is a clinical case study that exemplifies my practice as a counselling psychologist. This is an assignment that was submitted during the final year of my course, while undertaking a placement at a secondary care NHS service, where I was able to practice Schema Informed Therapy. I undertook the work I present here with a woman who presented with high levels of self-criticism and self-punishment, and who wanted to understand various traumatic experiences to improve her life. We worked to limit and modify her longstanding schemas, and to uncover and strengthen her inner resources so she could better meet her own needs. Our work led me to question my assumptions, deepen my understanding of the model and its practice, and thus consolidate my identity and practice as a counselling psychologist.

Finally, taken together, these three components reflect the unique and versatile position counselling psychologists stand in as researchers and reflective practitioners, and the multiple ways in which this profession can bring fulfilment to those who practise it. They also represent different areas of my development as a trainee, and thus give an insight into my identity as a counselling psychologist.

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## **Part One: Doctoral Research**

**Life after sexual assault: exploring women's experiences of inner resources. A phenomenological approach**



## Abstract

Sexual violence affects one in five women in the UK, has vast consequences, and affects all areas of an individual's life, from the relationships with significant others and with the world to the most intimate part of the self, as it crosses the boundaries of the body. Yet the literature in this area is mainly quantitative and relies on legal definitions and medical models that depict an image of a damaged woman in need of fixing. Qualitative studies have recently focused on the process of sexual assault recovery; however, few studies explore the inner resources – those that come from within – that women draw on through this experience.

This study explores women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape from a feminist phenomenological standpoint. Six women participated in semi-structured interviews using object elicitation – facilitating the communication of their experiences through an object – which were then analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data: "*The Will to Live*" captures the drive that keeps women alive and moving forward, is experienced as inherent to them, and continues to resurface in times of need. The "*Warrior*" depicts the ongoing battles women fight, with themselves and against external opponents, to regain and maintain control over their lives, and to improve the lives of other women. The Growing Self<sup>1</sup> portrays the ways in which women create nurturing and safe spaces in which to process and transform, and in which they consolidate and validate their sense of self by continually learning and developing.

In the Discussion section, the findings are reviewed in relation to the wider literature through a feminist lens. This study adds to the understanding of inner resources as inherent parts of women's self, thus constantly interacting and developing. Through providing insight into how women acknowledge, develop, and create their inner resources in their healing journey, this study contributes to the research and practice of counselling psychology, and will hopefully be helpful to those who work with women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape.

---

<sup>1</sup> Only themes that reflect participants' words have been presented within quotation marks throughout this work.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*“People, they can hold your hand while you walk on your journey, and it’s nice, and it’s comfy, and then it’s really lovely, and it hurts when there is none there to hold your hand [takes air]. But whether somebody holds your hand or not, you walk your feet. Only you can do it” (Sarah, 861).*

## 1.1. Introduction

---

Sexual violence has vast consequences and affects all areas of an individual’s life, from the relationships maintained with significant others and with the world to the most intimate part of the self, as it crosses the boundaries of the body. Research has shown that it is highly prevalent amongst women and girls, and in the United Kingdom one in five women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16 (Office of National Statistics, 2017).

*“Rape disrupts the sense of autonomy, control, and mastery over one’s body. The body’s boundaries are violated, orifices are penetrated, aversive sensory stimuli cannot be escaped, motor and verbal functions are controlled by the assailant, and not infrequently, autonomic nervous system responses such as nausea and vomiting, urination, defecation, and syncope occur.” (Rose, 1986, p. 820, in Smith & Kelly, 2001, p. 338)*

It was not until the beginning of the 1980s that the first academic research started to report on the high prevalence of rape and sexual assault experienced by women (Campbell & Wasco, 2005). The shocking numbers reported in studies that followed also highlighted how underreported this experience was, and still is (Campbell & Wasco, 2005). This led to a prolific time in which the rife impact it had on women’s lives became the focus of interest, and only relatively recently has this interest moved towards the recovery and healing process.

Culturally, rape and sexual assault have always been taboo, and carried, and continue to carry, great consequences for women who “dare” to disclose them, regardless of their decision to report or even name the perpetrator(s) (Ahrens, 2006). However, it seems a shift is starting to happen, as a part of society seems to be willing

to listen and learn, and more and more women decide to share and voice their experiences. Some of these women remain unknown to most; others are famous and in more powerful positions. It was during the completion of this thesis that the #metoo movement started – a hashtag spread virally since October 2017 – in which women describe their experiences of sexual violence, helping to demonstrate the widespread prevalence of sexual assault. The shock of an enormous part of society is helping to increase awareness and facilitate empathy, and has promoted a more open dialogue to change laws and policies, and further challenge social norms, including holding men accountable for their actions.

There are different ways of understanding sexual assault and/or rape, and this thesis is guided by a feminist understanding, as will be shown throughout the text. It is through power imbalances between men and women that the society we live in places women in a subordinate position, creating a conducive context for violence against women (Kelly, 1988). From a feminist viewpoint, sexual assault and/or rape are understood as a way in which these unequal power relations are reflected, and thus, a way in which men exert their power over women (Brownmiller, 1975), and women, as a group, are oppressed and controlled. Rape and/or sexual assault are understood as an extension of a patriarchal system (political level), that has a direct impact on women's bodies as men deprive women of the sovereignty of their own bodies (Whisnant, 2007). This viewpoint acknowledges that sexual assault and/or rape is a common experience amongst women, which is often perpetrated by men they know.

The following sections consider the impacts of sexual assault and/or rape, women's experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, and their journeys of recovery and healing from it, as well as what is understood by the term "inner resources". The research aim and question are then presented, and contributions to counselling psychology and some personal reflections are outlined.

## **1.2. The Experience of Sexual Assault and/or Rape**

---

There are several definitions of sexual assault and rape, mainly depending on the context, i.e. law, social, or the country from where it originates. In addition, there are several discussions surrounding these definitions, mainly around their lack of a

clear description of consent, force, or coercion (Brown & Walklate, 2012). For several reasons, which I expand upon on page 32, this thesis will be guided by the World Health Organisation's definition of assault: "Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts or traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2002).

This definition was chosen as it is one of the widest available and thus is able to encompass a variety of forms in the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1988), from the most subtle and unseen – a look or a touch – to the most obvious and recognised – stranger rape. In addition, it is also able to encompass the sexual assault experiences women endure throughout their lives, including childhood sexual abuse, as this too has been linked to an increased likelihood of victimisation and further sexual violence (Van Bruggen, Runtz & Kadlec, 2006). Besides, I felt that the widest definition would also be able to encompass all the different experiences women and my participants experience, and thus, the different names they give them.

### **1.2.1. Measuring the impact of sexual assault and/or rape**

Most literature on sexual assault and/or rape has been drawn from quantitative studies that describe the physical and psychosocial impacts of sexual assault and/or rape, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD, major depression, and substance use problems, as well as other social adjustment problems, or deliberate self harm. Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders and Best (1993) suggest that sustaining injury or threat to life increases the likelihood to experience PTSD, and Foa and Rothbaum (1998, in Campbell & Wasco, 2005) have stated that rape survivors are the largest group of people with PTSD.

Traumatic memories, such as those experienced after rape and/or sexual assault, are located in the emotion centres of the brain – hypothalamus and amygdala – rather than the cortex, and thus are not associated with a specific time and location, and are harder to express in words as they take the form of images, smells, or bodily sensations (Van der Kolk, 2014). PTSD is diagnosed after those that have experienced trauma describe experiencing intrusive memories or dreams, flashbacks, and difficulties in recalling memories of the assault; intense anger or irritability,

hypervigilance, or sleep difficulties, as well as detachment from their minds and bodies, or feeling they are in dreamlike surroundings (APA, 2013).

Women who report rape with high levels of violence are more likely to suffer major depression episodes, and are three times more likely to experience PTSD compared to women with no experiences of sexual violence (Zinzow et al., 2010). Women who report substance-induced rape – ingesting the substance either knowingly or unknowingly – and thus express that parts of it are out of their awareness, are twice as likely to suffer PTSD (Zinzow et al., 2010). Zinzow and her colleagues also suggested that the paths that lead to PTSD may be slightly different, perhaps being mainly led by experiences of fear, threat, and violence, or an increased and more pervasive lack of control.

An increase in PTSD severity has been related to a diminished perception of control after the assault (Zinzow et al., 2010), maladaptive coping (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014) and negative social reactions from others (Najdowski & Ullman, 2011). In contrast, a decrease in PTSD symptoms has been linked to remembering the event (Zinzow et al., 2010), the expression of emotions, having social support (Najdowski & Ullman, 2011), and receiving positive social reactions to assault disclosure (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). In addition, the experience of mental defeat during sexual violence – when a person gives up in their own mind and loses the sense of being a person with her/his own will – has also been linked to an increase in PTSD symptoms, as it prevents the understanding of rape or sexual assault as a time limited and past event (Ehlers et al., 1998), and challenges the person's sense of worthiness and competence (Dunmore, Clark & Ehlers, 2000).

Experiences of sexual assault and rape have also been linked to an increase in self harm and suicide attempts (Creighton & Jones, 2012), alcohol abuse, and drug abuse (Zinzow et al., 2012), and an increase in alcohol and drug consumption irrespective of previous habits (Kilpatrick, Acierno, Resnick, Saunders & Best, 1997). However, it is important to note that Ullman (2016) suggests that it is not the experience of PTSD that leads to alcohol abuse, but the experience of re-victimisation: “Any sexual abuse or assault subsequent to a first abuse or assault that is perpetrated by a different offender to the initial victimisation” (Stathopoulos, 2014). In addition, women with experiences of sexual violence are more likely to experience more acute and chronic physical health problems, such as chronic pelvic pain, gastrointestinal disorders (Goodman, Koss & Russo, 1993), altered pain thresholds (Golding, 1994), or headaches (Golding, 1999).

Women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape also experience flashbacks, sleep disturbances, withdrawal, or loss of trust (see Smith & Kelly, 2001), as well as higher levels of fear, anxiety and intrusion, lower social adjustment – including economic, social and leisure adjustment, an increase in obsessive-compulsive thoughts and symptoms, long term sexual problems, and a lower self-esteem, likely linked to self-blame, that affects their physical self, their social self, and their own identity, in the short and the long term (Resnick, Calhoun, Atkeson & Ellis, 1981; Resnick et al., 1993).

Furthermore, the impact of rape and sexual assault goes beyond women who directly experience it. It also affects those around them, and therefore their relationships. Families of women who have experienced sexual violence report an increase in their stress levels, significant others do too, and friendships strengthen or are hindered after such events (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). Professionals who work with those who have experienced sexual violence are also impacted by it, and can experience “vicarious trauma” (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) – long term changes in their cognitive schemas that impact their feelings, relationships, and life. In addition, practitioners also report more PTSD-related symptoms and more disrupted beliefs related to the goodness of others, regardless of their own experiences, but directly proportional to the number of clients they work with who have experiences of sexual violence (Schauben & Frazier, 1995).

The proliferation of quantitative studies has fuelled vast knowledge in the area of sexual violence, rape, and sexual assault in particular. There are some authors, however, who argue that quantitative studies are not able to fully capture the nature of sexual assault and/or rape (Wasco, 2003), and that by focusing on the specific and measurable variables, and on diagnostic categories and symptoms, researchers will not be able to fully capture these experiences, nor the dynamic and complex processes through which adults heal from sexual violence (Draucker et al., 2009; Sinopoli 2009). They highlight the need for more qualitative studies, not only to diversify methodologies in this area, but most importantly, to be able to answer process questions, and thus capture these complexities (Campbell & Wasco, 2005). It is precisely due to this complexity that they suggest studies would benefit from including the expertise of practitioners, advocates, and survivors (Campbell & Wasco, 2005).

Besides, most of the quantitative studies in the area of rape and sexual assault are based on medical models and follow legal definitions, mainly from the United

States, that tend to be far from women's words. As shown in the literature, women struggle to define and label their experiences as sexual assault or rape, as the labelling process is often a long one that is triggered by social support (Harned, 2005). It depends on the circumstances of the assault, the amount of force used by the perpetrator, if the perpetrator was known to them or not (Khan, Jackson, Kully, Badger & Halvorsen, 2003), the ages of victim and perpetrator, and the emotional impact it has had on the women (Donde, Ragsdale, Koss & Zucker, 2018). Quantitative studies, then, can depict an image of a damaged woman who needs fixing, and some label women's experiences as out of the ordinary, even if data attests that, unfortunately, they are really common.

As a response to this, feminist theorists and researchers argue that women's reactions to rape do not indicate pathology but normal reactions to traumatic and difficult experiences that invade and violate the self, and have proposed various alternative explanations to these reactions (Burgess, 1983). The most relevant was the Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) proposed by Holmstrom and Burgess (1974) after analysing the rape experiences of 92 women. Holmstrom and Burgess (1974, 1975) suggested that immediately after the rape, women undergo an acute or disruptive phase in response to the stress, in which they experience chaotic thought processes; they may not express any affect at all, or experience extreme anger, sadness, or shame, amongst other reactions. A phase of reconstitution follows, in which women want to disregard anything related to their experience of rape or sexual assault, as they feel physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted. They are able to do so by focusing on their jobs or surrounding themselves with family, or perhaps turning to drugs and alcohol to distance themselves from the experience. Finally, they reach the integration stage, in which women start the long-term healing process by incorporating the rape or sexual assault into their life story. This later stage, Herman (2015) has stated, often includes experiencing intrusive symptoms, describing their experience, and reconnecting with a new sense of self.

In addition, they and other authors also describe the experience of pre-assault discomfort – the feeling that something is not right – which tends to increase self-blame and guilt later on (Sinopoli, 2009), and the anticipatory phase (Koss & Harvey, 1991), in which women mentally prepare to do anything to survive the rape, often including dissociation due to the emotional and physical shock.

Quantitative studies have linked sexual assault and/or rape to PTSD, self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse, acute and chronic physical health problems, lower self-esteem, flashbacks, or long-standing sexual problems. Feminist scholars argue that women's reactions to rape do not indicate pathology but are normal reactions to traumatic experiences that need to be incorporated into women's life stories, and thus several authors suggest that qualitative studies are better able to describe the complexity of these experiences.

### **1.2.2. Understanding the experience of sexual assault and/or rape**

Rape has been described as a violation against the individual sense of safety; against the belief in a just, non-malevolent, and meaningful world; and a violation against the belief in oneself as an autonomous and good person (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). Several women, such as Patricia Weaver Francisco (2000), Susan J. Brison (2003), or Aspen Matis (2016), bravely describe in their memoirs their experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, their aftermath, and their different journeys of healing, helping us to better understand these experiences from their point of view. In addition, a number of qualitative studies have focused on exploring and understanding how women experience sexual violence, how it affects different areas of their lives, how they construct meaning of their experiences, how they cope, or what processes they use to manage these experiences.

In a study undertaken by Draucker and Stern (2000), women who had experiences of sexual assault and/or rape described the need and difficulty of overcoming long-term shame and guilt to be able to tell others about their experiences, and how, through taking this action, they felt not only reassured and validated, but also that some "repair" had been done. They described how identifying gender-role stereotypes or the victimisation of women in society helped them to stop blaming themselves, and how fighting against these stereotypes and attending therapy helped them increase their self-esteem and undertake a process in which they felt they deserved a good life. Furthermore, they felt society's oppression of women was a factor in making them vulnerable, and some defined their personal history as a factor in not allowing them to develop skills to protect themselves. In addition, women depicted feelings of loss, sadness, and loneliness, and having to grow up quickly, but also finding strength and wisdom. They described how they moved on through reclaiming their "animating force", grounding themselves, or connecting their spirits



with God, and wanting to make others' lives safer too. Finally, women also explained how finding the inner resources they needed allowed them to start over, by discovering their inner strength, creating safer lives, and seeing themselves as successful, self-sufficient, confident, and/or competent individuals (Draucker & Stern, 2000).

In a phenomenological study undertaken by Kalmakis (2010), women who had been sexually assaulted while intoxicated described the struggle and difficulties in managing their feelings of betrayal by those who were supposed to support them, blaming themselves and wondering if they could have prevented what happened. They expressed their difficulties in managing the fear of not knowing how their experiences of sexual violence would affect their lives in the future, not only emotionally, but also at a practical level, e.g. their jobs or their children's custody. Women also described struggling with substance misuse and previous victimisation, and feelings of loss related to their relationships and their safety, or their sense of self. This internal struggle, self-blame, and fear of judgement were identified by the author as factors that prevent women from disclosing their experiences of sexual violence. Similarly, Heath, Lynch, Fritch, McArthur and Smith (2011) suggested that narratives of women who remain silent usually include a variety of rape myths that fuel this self-blame. Rape myths are "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134), and that serve to deny or justify sexual assault and/or rape by trivialising them or suggesting they did not occur (Franiuk, Seefeldt, Cephress & Vandello, 2008). Some examples of rape myths are: women's physical appearance provokes rape; partners cannot commit rape; the woman did not say "no", or did not physically fight back. In addition, Lynch, Fritch, McArthur and Smith (2011) have stated how rape myths also make women question whether the event is really a rape, and increases both their fears of not being believed, and the belief that familiar perpetrators cannot be rapists.

Rape affects women's minds and bodies – their whole self – and several quantitative and qualitative studies have identified this link: the impact sexual violence has on the sense of self or personal identity. Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes how it is not only our mind but also our body that filters our experiences through structuring them within the world, which allows us to give meaning to our existence. James (1890) described the body as the core of the self, and as being in constant interaction with the social and the spiritual, and Giddens (1991) illustrated how the "threats to the self" – situations that increase fragmentation and uncertainty – challenge our sense of security and continuity.

Even if several studies describe the impact of sexual violence on the sense of self or women's identities, only some have focused exclusively on the link between them. Chaudry (2012) undertook a phenomenological study with women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, and how this had affected their personal and social selves. Women described a sense of fragmented identity, struggling to connect to their true self, which they felt was distant from their portrayed one, they were feeling vulnerable and experiencing poor self-worth. They described a lack of wanted intimate relationships as they could be experienced as triggering and evoking negative feelings, and they perceived a change in their body image, covering their bodies to protect themselves. Women also described feeling isolated and disconnected from others, not feeling completely understood, struggling with physical proximity, having a diminished sense of trust, and experiencing difficulties in forming meaningful relationships. However, they also developed a profound feeling of compassion towards others in a global sense, and an increased interest in social justice and the prevention of suffering in their communities. Finally, women also described growing and changing, having a stronger and tougher sense of self that integrated their vulnerability, and having a greater capacity to confront adversity and cope with challenges. They described wanting and regaining control, experiencing hope and optimism for the future, a new sense of having choices, connecting with spirituality, and finding contentment, as well as acknowledging how their developing journey and work on self-esteem or confidence would be a long one.

In her thematic analysis, Phuong Thao (2016) explored women's experiences of bride and/or sex trafficking in Vietnam, and how women coped and managed the impact this had on their emotions, their sense of self, and their social relations. Women described inhibiting their emotional expressions to reduce physical and psychological abuse or punishment, or blocking their thoughts and memories to avoid emotional struggles or fear, almost as a way of regaining some control over a situation. They described constantly creating opportunities within their constraints, and resisting, by attempting to escape despite the risks, or appearing to accept specific situations to continue to be alive and manage their suffering and psychological pain. Even if women acknowledged events were out of their control, they also held themselves responsible for their actions and situations. Finally, women's cultural schemas and spirituality clearly impacted on their sense of self, by motivating them to engage in good behaviours through their belief in karma, or starting work to continue to contribute to the family's economy.

Qualitative studies have opened the doors to a greater understanding of sexual assault and/or rape by exploring each individual's unique experience, and how these experiences impacted on their sense of self. However, it is only relatively recently that they have started to focus on the process of sexual assault recovery or healing. As I will present in the following section, and as suggested by Giddens (1991), individuals are required to reflect, work, and revise their personal biography in this process, which often includes the use of coping strategies, such as denial or avoidance (Breakwell, 1996), to finally gain meaning, acceptance, and a stable sense of identity. To do so, as Conboy, Medina and Stanbury (1997) have suggested, a focus on embodiment is essential, as this is the point where the personal and the social converge.

### **1.2.3. Recovery and healing from rape and/or sexual assault**

Authors such as Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), Joseph and Linley (2005), or more recently Malkemus (2015), suggest that women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape will be attempting to adapt to the new and highly negative circumstances, and thus will always be moving towards improving their lives.

Holmstrom and Burgess (1974) first described recovery as the moment when the physical impact of the trauma reduces and the frequency of the memories decreases, becoming less intense and allowing the woman to leave the pain, fear, and memories behind, and to feel calm. Later, the ecological model, described by Harvey (1996), included more than the reduction of symptoms by also addressing the difficulties of managing shame or self-blame, focusing on self-esteem and cohesion, trust within relationships, the assignment of a new meaning to the trauma, or repair.

However, Smith and Kelly (2001) wanted to explore what women who had experienced sexual violence and rape understood as recovery, and what they believed facilitated it. Women experience recovery as a cyclical and progressive process, as they feel they have to revisit and confront their feelings of fear, anger, and revenge over and over again, and they sometimes describe the beginning of this process as a choice. They describe starting their healing process by isolating themselves from others in a safe space, as well as by reaching out to others to feel supported and less alone. This allows them to return to their routines, talk about their experiences, be in control of their obsessive thoughts, and feel free in their environments. It is at this point that women start to feel more independent from others and reframe their experiences by seeing the positives on their recovery – being alive, reducing the self-blaming –

and gaining a new perspective on life, even if they no longer consider the world a safe place. Women then feel able to redefine themselves through self-love and forgiveness for themselves and the perpetrator(s), and find inner peace and understanding, which includes regaining what was lost and acknowledging personal growth.

Some authors have described how telling others about personal experiences may serve as a way of maintaining control (Draucker & Stern, 2000), and how social resources and resources acquired from past experiences also facilitate the process of positive life change after sexual assault (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger & Long, 2004). Draucker et al. (2009) suggest that the recovery process, or healing from sexual assault, is affected by active and avoidant-oriented approaches, so individuals avoid memories but seek them at the same time to fill the gaps and understand what has happened to them. They avoid relating to others but seek them to deal with difficulty; they seek safety, but learn that the world will be never completely safe, and sometimes they feel responsible for the violence but are able to restore and redefine their sense of self. Both active and avoidant approaches are then present during the women's healing process (Draucker et al., 2009), which is unique and individual.

It is along these lines that the empowerment or feminist model is framed, as its emphasis is on the individuality of the healing process, allowing survivors to take control over their body, their choices, and their own recovery process. Its focus is on empowering women, in enabling them to obtain access to resources and develop skills and self-esteem, as they are then able to achieve what they need and want (Ullman & Townsend, 2008). Our role as professionals is then to support women navigate their recovery process through mirroring, empathy, and non-directive practices, and contextualising and acknowledging the power and the social, structural, and situational factors that limit their empowerment (Ullman & Townsend, 2008).

Kingi and Jordan (2009), in a mixed method study, explored women's experiences of sexual violence, as well as experiences of reporting to the police, undergoing a medical examination, going to court, and their healing process. Women mentioned therapy and support from specialised agencies as the most helpful in their path to recovery, as well as feeling supported by them, and people they valued. They also described the hardest part of their recovery as having to face those who might judge or blame them, telling their experience for the first time, shifting from the victim to the survivor position, admitting and accepting what had happened, and learning to manage the fear and anxiety in the aftermath, or the loss of trust and the inability to sustain intimate relationships. Furthermore, women found it difficult to assess to what

extent their healing and recovery process was complete, as they continued to work on aspects of their self-esteem or experienced flashbacks. Some women understood this as a continuity of their victim status, while others felt it was part of their life as survivors. Some women thought the journey would never be complete, while others felt they had already healed and recovered, as they had been able to move on with their lives, process difficult emotions, or were doing things they wanted to do. Finally, some women also described feeling more aware, stronger, and resilient, and having increased their self-knowledge after these experiences.

Bryant-Davis, Cooper, Marks, Smith and Tillman (2011) explored the sexual assault recovery experiences of women after war in Liberia, in an ethnographic examination from a feminist psychological and theological standpoint. Within this article, the authors highlighted the difficulties women experience talking or even thinking about their assaults, and thus avoiding conversations with others as a way to cope. At the same time, they also seek safe community spaces – church gatherings or trauma-focused workshops – where they are able to find a safe forum to express their feelings, find relief, and receive support. As the women’s experiences of sexual violence were known in the community due to the setting in which they occurred, participants and authors indicate that acknowledging and addressing sexism in society, addressing women’s sexuality, health, self-awareness, and empowerment are priorities for women’s recovery. Moreover, they suggest there is also the need to challenge hierarchies of power and privilege in society.

From a feminist perspective, rape is a way in which men keep women under constant fear, keeping them oppressed, and thus is about power and control (Brownmiller, 1975). However, Becker, Skinner, Abel, Axelrod and Cichon (1984) also highlight the importance to not disregard the sexual aspect of rape, as it does indeed also involve sex, and sexual dysfunctions can be considered the longest-lasting problems after surviving rape. In her phenomenological work, Sinopoli (2009) focused exclusively on better understanding women’s first sexual experiences after rape or sexual assault. Within it, women described these experiences as a way to regain a sense of control and power or to retaliate, as an experience of a wanted and healthy sexual interaction, or as a re-enactment of the assault. Women referred to their difficulties in labelling their experiences, the discrepancies between the internal experience and the self portrayed to the world after the assault, or the importance of support and acceptance from significant others, which allowed the start of reflexive processes. Women described difficulties in enjoying sexual relationships and in

managing flashbacks with their sexual partners. They expressed worries regarding future relationships, or a fighting spirit linked to wanting to get back what was taken away. Finally, women described feeling stronger and empowered through voicing their experiences in community settings, learning about feminism, and starting advocacy work on behalf of other women with similar experiences, to be and bear witness.

Rape and sexual assault have an impact on all areas of a woman's life and are also experienced in the body, thus, at times, it may be difficult to find words to describe and express these experiences. Callaghan (1993) suggested that memories on the body level have to be treated therapeutically on the body level to achieve a reintegration, by focusing on body movement and, for example, repeating movements associated to past events, to help establish a new relationship with the body. Fuchs (2012) describes the different types of body memories, including traumatic memories, and how they are expressed in the present, most times without our awareness. The importance of focusing on the body when working with those who have endured traumatic experiences is clear within sensorimotor psychotherapy (Ogden, 2006), an integrative mind-body approach that focuses on the embodied experiences and uses body-oriented interventions, or in somatic experiencing (Levine, 2010) that proposes that, as trauma memories are not yet processed in the mind, they need to be treated in the same way they are experienced, at the body level.

Finally, body and creative art therapies have appeared to help individuals communicate at a non-verbal and/or pre-verbal level. Aside from words, these therapies use drawing, sculpting, music, theatre, movement, and dance, as these forms of communication are often used within various cultural contexts and thus can be experienced as less threatening when expressing difficult experiences (Koop, 2002, in Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009). However, as some authors suggest, they can also be retraumatizing for those with experiences of rape, as they are required to reinhabit their bodies (Meekums, 1999). Koch and Weidinger-von der Recke (2009) present the use of art therapy as a complement to verbal therapy, through working on the links between trauma, body, emotion, and cognition, using "a language that does not require translation" (p. 295). This holistic treatment, the authors state, supports the reintegration of the body image, and thus the self, through the strengthening of the client's resources.

As stated, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the factors that influence the process of recovery or healing from sexual assault and/or rape. Several studies refer to the inner resources, personal resources, or growing personal factors

that are already present in the individual, or that have derived from these experiences of violence; however, none seem to exclusively focus on nor describe these internal factors that women count on throughout the process of recovery or healing.

### **1.3. Inner Resources**

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The term “inner resources” appears in several studies linked to sexual violence, the impacts of rape and sexual assault, its healing and recovery process, the impact on the self and women’s identity, or even in models of psychological practice when working with those who have experienced sexual violence. However, this term, which is widely used within research and practice of (counselling) psychology, is rarely defined or described.

#### **1.3.1. Resilience, post-traumatic growth, and resources**

After the interest in the prevalence and impact of sexual violence in the 1970s and 1980s, the literature turned its focus in the 1990s to the positive outcomes after traumatic events, and concepts such as resilience or post-traumatic growth began to be increasingly discussed (Lawrence, Cahoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Resilience is understood as the capacity to mobilise internal resources that existed before the traumatic experience. Positive or adversarial growth manifests after it, as a result of having overcome the trauma (Harvey, 2007). The two concepts appear to be in an intertwined relationship, as resilience is a requirement for traumatic growth, and traumatic growth is a sign of resilience (Harvey et al., 2007). Inner resources are then precursory to resilience and traumatic growth, and are those that allow them.

At the present time, resilience is considered a multidimensional phenomenon, as individuals who may be seriously impaired in a specific domain of functioning are able to show an incredible strength in another, and they may secure the recovery of an area through accessing the strengths of another (Harvey et al., 2007). It is through resilience’s multidimensionality that we are able to see women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape as resilient even when they are distressed, to see them suffering and surviving at the same time, and understand them as active agents capable of influencing themselves and their contexts (Harvey et al., 2007).

Post-traumatic growth has also been described as the subjective experience of a movement beyond the individual's previous position; a positive psychological change reported as a result of the struggle with trauma, such as increased appreciation of life, setting new life priorities, a sense of increased strength, a positive spiritual change, or closeness in interpersonal difficulties (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These positive outcomes can be reported as a direct result of the traumatic event, or as a learning that occurred while coping with it (Park, 1999, in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006).

The theory of conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989) defined resources as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual, or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (p. 516), and personal resources as "those that aid stress resistance" (p. 517), which also include social support. Various authors have referred to this theory when understanding the effects of PTSD – mainly in war veterans – as it states that individuals naturally obtain, retain, and protect their resources, and stress is described as fuelling the loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Following the interest in resilience and personal growth, Walter and Hobfoll (2009) explored this link with women who had experienced sexual assault and/or rape. They described resources as material resources: money, transport, tools, energy or financial assets; non-familial interpersonal and family resources: loyalty of friends or intimacy; and personal resources: self-efficacy or a sense of control. They stated how limiting the loss of resources after the event was linked to a reduction in women's reports of PTSD symptoms six months after the traumatic event, and suggested that the more resources individuals have, the more likely they are to gain more, which will, in turn, further decrease PTSD symptoms.

However, it is from the existent literature on women's experiences of rape and sexual assault (see previous section), that we know that women with similar external resources have different experiences of the aftermath of these events and their healing process, thus informing us that it is essential for studies to distinguish and delimit inner resources from external ones.

As stated, inner resources are indispensable for individuals to be resilient and thus grow, as they are at the core of resilience and traumatic growth definitions. Articles exploring these two concepts constantly refer to inner resources; however, they do not delimit nor explore them, and thus do not allow the deepening of our understanding.



### **1.3.2. Inner resources**

Inner resources are understood as resources coming from within the person, from inside rather than outside, and their origins are strongly rooted in spirituality. Following Vaughan's work (1986), which suggests inner resources are used for self-healing and to renew a sense of meaning and purpose of life, Howden (1992) defined them as the process of striving for wholeness, discovering identity and a sense of empowerment, which manifests through "feelings of strength in times of crisis, calmness or serenity in dealing with uncertainty in life, guidance in living, feelings of ability, and being at peace with oneself and the world" (p. 15).

With an increased interest in psychological wellbeing at the beginning of the century, and also linked to various studies undertaken in resilience, Gibson and Parker (2003) defined inner resources as the inner aspects of a person that are used to effectively cope with a stressor, promote health and wellbeing, provide an individualised awareness of one's inner self, and a sense of connection to a deeper spiritual dimension.

More recently, Van Dierendonck's work has described them as a "reservoir from which one can draw in times of need" (Van Dierendonck, Rodriguez-Carvajal, Moreno-Jiménez & Dijkstra, 2009, p. 750), thus providing a sense of control over a situation (Van Dierendonck & Mohan, 2006) and linking it to a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day-to-day living (Van Dierendonck et al., 2009). These authors suggest that people with inner resources are better able to manage life difficulties and challenges, as they have a greater trust in their capacity to positively affect their future. Furthermore, they understand inner resources as a "universal capacity" (p. 750), and thus inherent to every human being and recognisable across different cultures.

Even if most of the literature on inner resources is linked to spirituality (see Woods, 2007, for a recent example), other authors have also focused their attention on them in relation to parenting (Kochanska, Aksan, Penney & Boldt, 2007), and Davis (2002) focused exclusively on the inner resources that women who have experienced domestic violence use to leave the abusive relationship and heal. In her phenomenological research, Davis conceptualised inner resources as a part of women's coping strategies, as adaptive responses to stressful life events that women used to regain control, emotional, mental and physical safety, and to retain their self-identity. She identified three main inner resources: the first being strength, which women used to work through abusive experiences both while they were occurring and

after, including reporting to the police and undergoing a court case, as well as learning and educating themselves to be able to sustain themselves. The second is resilience, which was depicted as a sense of humour, spirituality, hope, or the support of external systems such as family members, friends, the community, or different agencies. The final resource is protecting the self, which most women described as an intuition that informed them of their surroundings, and allowed them to protect themselves physically and emotionally. Many women described it as a bodily sensation, as well as self-love, and linked it to writing in their personal diaries or writing poems, as this could exemplify the importance of their journey. Davis (2002) suggested women are constantly engaged with their inner resources, even if this is not apparent to those who surround them, such as friends or professionals. Interestingly, it seems researchers have mainly focused on resilience, the only inner resource that is described in this study as not only drawing from the women themselves but also from those around her.

Literature on inner resources is scarce however, and even if Davis' (2002) work focuses exclusively on exploring inner resources with women who have experienced gendered violence (being close to the aim of this thesis), the most recent literature has further deepened our understanding of resilience, inner resources, or the impact of sexual violence on the self. It is for these reasons that, following on from the most recent work, this thesis will adopt Van Dierendonck and his colleagues' definition of inner resources (Van Dierendonck et al., 2009, p. 750) : "a reservoir from which one can draw in times of need, giving a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day to day living", as it encompasses a wider meaning of what inner resources are, while exclusively focusing on what is drawn from within, from women themselves.

#### **1.4. Research Aim and Question**

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As indicated through this chapter, it has been relatively recently that researchers have become interested in the scope and pervasive impact of rape and sexual assault against women, as well as their repercussions on the sense of self, and the healing and recovery process. Quantitative studies have provided ample and valuable information on the impacts of sexual violence, and qualitative studies have deepened our understanding of the experience from the women's perspective, allowing us to better comprehend its complexities and impacts on their lives and sense

of self. Furthermore, new therapeutic models that support women in regaining control and feeling empowered (Ullman & Townsend, 2008), as well as including the body (Ogden, 2006, Levine, 2010, Van der Kolk, 2014) and diverse ways of expressing what sometimes cannot be expressed (Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009), have appeared in recent years. This new interest in wellbeing and the healing journey after traumatic events has also encouraged a proliferation of work on resilience and post-traumatic growth, in which inner resources are described as paramount for their existence and are at the core of their definitions (Harvey et al., 2007).

Within this literature, several studies refer to the personal factors or inner resources that women display, gain, or draw from in their recovery from sexual assault and/or rape; others describe how it is the mobilisation of inner resources that allows their growth. However, none of these studies focuses exclusively on these inner resources and how they are experienced by women in their journey of healing after sexual assault and/or rape.

This study aims then to fill this gap in the literature, and explore how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape by answering the question: How do women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape?

## **1.5. Definitions and Language**

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As stated, the definition by WHO (2012) for sexual assault (see p. 17) is one of the widest available, and was chosen precisely for this reason, as it is able to encompass a variety of forms in the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1988). In addition, I felt the widest definition would be able to embrace the understanding that women who took part in this study had of their experiences, as well as the different names they gave them. During our interviews, when asked directly how they wanted to name their experiences, participants referred to them as follows: “rape”, “A and B”, “assault”, or “what happened to me”. In addition, during the interviews, they also referred to them as “the R word”, “the stuff”, “what happened”, “something very bad”, “instance(s)”, or “incidence”.

Some authors suggest that by describing rape as assault, we obscure the harm of rape, as sexual touch is different from other kinds of touch and rape can occur without

the use of physical force, the main focus when an assault occurs. Other authors suggest that by referring to rape as sexual assault, we are reinforcing its violent character and sexual nature (Brown & Walklate, 2012).

Thus, the decision to write sexual assault and/or rape throughout this thesis was taken for several reasons. On one hand, and aside from the methodological considerations discussed in Chapter Two, many academic and non-academic texts draw a distinction between rape and sexual assault, perhaps because in popular culture the word rape carries more power, as it is often considered to be at the most violent end of sexual assault. Thus, it was important to capture this violence within the words used in this thesis, by constantly writing rape and/or sexual assault. On the other hand, and only symbolically, by writing two distinct words, this thesis will also reflect how women use a variety of words to name their experiences, rather than one, as often done in legal texts. Further, I have decided to include “and/or” to also reflect how most of the women who took part in this study – five out of six – described having more than one experience of sexual assault and/or rape, and often gave these experiences different names.

Finally, and as a consequence of this last point, I have used the words aggressor(s) or perpetrator(s) partly in plural, to reflect women’s described experiences. Moreover, the grammatical gender of these two terms is always masculine. First, all those who attacked the women who took part in this study were men, and therefore I honour and stay close to their experiences, and second, because the majority of perpetrators of sexual violence are men, and it is important for this research to also reflect this.

## **1.6. Relevance for Counselling Psychology**

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Rape and/or sexual assault have pervasive effects in all areas of a woman’s life. It affects women’s bodies, minds, emotions, and spirituality, their jobs, their behaviours, their relationships with others, and/or the relationship with their own self. Unfortunately, many women will experience sexual assault and/or rape in their lifetimes, and thus it is highly likely that counselling psychologists – knowingly or unknowingly – will work with and support them in their everyday practice.

New research and therapeutic models stretch the importance of the individuality and uniqueness of each woman’s healing journey, the relevant role inner resources

play in this journey, and the need to empower and support women in regaining control over their lives. Counselling psychology places a strong emphasis on facilitating growth, supporting and empowering clients from a non-hierarchical relationship, prioritising the clients' experiences, and understanding them in their social, economic, and cultural contexts, as well as providing them with psychological knowledge, and a flexible and responsive space that tailors to their needs and their unique and individual healing and recovery process (Cooper, 2017). Exploring how women experience their inner resources in their journey of healing after sexual assault and/or rape may bring to light new knowledge that will improve our clinical practice, and thus allow us to better support our clients.

## **1.7. Background of the Study**

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I became interested in how people overcome difficult life situations while studying forensic psychology and victimology in Coimbra and Barcelona universities, as part of my BSc in Psychology. Later, I immersed myself in the area of violence against women, and sexual violence in particular – neglected for so many years in academia – while undertaking an MA in Women and Child Abuse from a feminist sociological perspective. While researching the links between migration and trafficking of women in China, I realised how power relations and women's "space for action" (Kelly, 1988) are intertwined with the society we live in.

After working with survivors of sexual and domestic violence in different organisations, I collaborated with the project "Stand with survivors of sex trafficking", which aimed to raise awareness of sex trafficking during the 2012 London Olympics. During this time, I worked closely with survivors of sex trafficking, and was able to witness transformation through dance therapy, as well as their immense sensitivity, strength, and passion for life.

During my training as a counselling psychologist, I continued to work with women who had experienced gendered violence, in specialised women's services working from a feminist perspective, as well as in the National Health Service (NHS) secondary care services, where sexual violence was often a part of women's journeys.

All these experiences touched me deeply. I was, and I still am, amazed by these women's strength and resilience, and their capacity, passion, and determination to

continue with life after such events, reclaiming it and making it their own. Yet, at the same time, I feel there is a lack of acknowledgement and recognition of these women from society and from the field of (counselling) psychology. It is, then, this fascination and the belief that a more egalitarian world is possible, that has guided my choice of undertaking research in this specific area.

Researching sexual violence and its prevalence – higher amongst women than men – awakens unsettling thoughts in me as a woman and as a counselling psychologist. The world is not a completely safe space, and anyone, including myself, could face sexual violence. Nonetheless, research in this area suggests that happiness and life are possible even after undergoing extremely difficult events, and that a person may have more resources than s/he thinks. Besides, an essential part of my job is to provide a safe space, and to facilitate my clients' growth and access to their own resources, and I want to do this as best as I can.

Sexual assault and/or rape have pervasive and long-term impacts on women's lives, minds, and bodies, and thus, relations with supportive organisations, family, friends, and partners are important during the process of healing (Kingi & Jordan, 2009; Najdowski & Ullman 2011; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). However, we also know that women with similar external resources – networks, social support, or access to services – have different experiences of its aftermath (Draucker & Stern, 2000; Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger & Long, 2004; Kingi & Jordan, 2009; Sinopoli, 2009), and it is this knowledge that inspires and guides this research.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

After a critical introduction of the research carried out to date, and the specification of my research question in the previous chapter: How do women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape?, I present here the rationale behind the choice of qualitative methodology, the description of my conceptual framework and particular standpoint, and the choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis over other approaches. This is followed by the description of the recruitment, the interview, and the analytic process, as well as considerations around validity and ethics. Finally, I share some of my reflections.

### 2.1. A Qualitative Approach and a Relativist Ontology

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As previously stated, I was interested in looking at personal experiences of sexual violence; in particular, in exploring women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape. A qualitative research methodology was used in this study, as its aim was to explore the participants' unique, individual, and different experiences, and the ways in which they make sense of them, as well as to bring to light new areas of an under-researched subject.

As reflected in the critical literature review, quantitative paradigms have been, and still are, the dominant ones within psychology and the study of sexual violence against women, and they establish direct links between sexual assault and/or rape and post-traumatic stress disorder, substance misuse, and self-harm. Positivism, which underpins quantitative research, understands knowledge as impartial and unbiased, and states it is possible to directly describe the world as it "exists independently of the researchers' and participants' views or knowledge about it" (Willig, 2013, p. 15). In line with what Popper proposed in the late 1950s, I believe that positivism does not take into account the exceptions that derive from direct relations of causation, and that our perception is selective and, therefore, our understanding of the world incomplete (see Chalmers, 1999; or Kandel, Schwartz & Jessell, 1999).

Besides, and as Smith (2015) suggested, quantitative approaches quantify the relationships between variables, and thus largely reduce psychological phenomena to numerical values.

In addition, positivism and the scientific method, including hypothetico-deductivism, do not acknowledge the role of historical, social, and cultural factors, and in line with the feminist critiques of the 1960s and 1970s, they do not take into account how the researcher is always within the world that s/he describes, and is always related, somehow, to the participants s/he is learning from and, thus, the phenomena s/he is exploring.

On the contrary, qualitative methodologies assume that there is no simple and direct relationship between the world and our experience (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008), and adopt a relativist ontological position. Human experience and interaction are considered fluid and complex processes, and as Howitt and Cramer (2011, p. 297) describe them, “far too complex to be reduced to a few variables” that only miss essential aspects. Qualitative methodologies search for depth of understanding through rich data, providing a more complete view of the phenomena they study, and acknowledge a diversity of interpretations. They aim to understand how individuals experience events and the way they make sense of the world. They are interested in asking questions about the social and/or psychological structures and processes (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008), and thus require knowledge about the individual’s life story, social and cultural context, and the participant’s situation at the time of interview (Willig, 2012).

Qualitative approaches state that the analysis of data is always “mediated” by the researcher (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008), hence acknowledging that the researcher’s identity and standpoint will inevitably impact on the way s/he represents and makes sense of participants’ material. As a consequence, reflexivity and language – the vehicle that we use to describe experiences and represent them, while also contributing to them – are essential dimensions in qualitative research.

In addition, and in line with feminist approaches, qualitative methodologies are able to work in a bottom-up fashion (Willig, 2012), giving a voice and a forefront space to participants’ perspectives and understanding, as well as challenging existing psychological theories and traditional research in light of participants’ accounts and data (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

Furthermore, and taking into account the phenomenon studied in this project, it was important to select a method that focused on a sense of respect between the



researcher and participants. Different authors describe the research interview in qualitative methodologies as an intimate process, and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 123) consider it “an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest”, situating participants and researcher in a more equalitarian position by recognising knowledge on both parts. At the same time, qualitative methodologies also acknowledge the power asymmetry that exists between researcher and participants, and are concerned with reflecting upon the role of power in the production of interview knowledge, as this cannot be eliminated (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

A qualitative methodology then aligned with the sensitive research subject of this project, and with the need to create a safe and intimate space to be able to explore it. Moreover, it was consistent with the aims of the project, and with my personal preferences and professional identity as a counselling psychologist.

## **2.2. Epistemological Standpoint**

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The relationship between methodological and ideological considerations is of importance in qualitative research (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008), and this relationship was essential to this project, as my epistemological position will frame the way I understand and think of the knowledge I produce (Riley & Reason, 2015).

Determining my epistemological position was challenging for different reasons. First, some authors, as well as feminist researchers, argue that qualitative research always serves a political purpose, as it challenges or supports the status quo; however, other authors, including many phenomenological researchers, suggest that research should only focus on the specific ways in which a particular method can shed light on a specific process or phenomenon, giving to research the single purpose of increasing understanding. As Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008, p. 19) suggest, “most researchers will choose a position somewhere in between the two ends of the continuum, and it is likely that one’s position evolves over time”.

Second, qualitative research can be carried out from a realist, phenomenological or social constructionist framework, but these, as Willig (2012) suggests, can be complementary, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of

human experience. In addition, I also consider myself a feminist, but this epistemological position is mainly considered and described as separate, and rarely situated or integrated within the three main frameworks.

### **2.2.1. Overview**

The purpose of this research is to “provide a space within which to engage with and reflect on a particular experiential phenomenon” (Willig, 2012, p. 4), understanding it from the point of view of those who live it (Ponterotto, 2005). I take a relativist position regarding my data, as I do not question the validity of my participants’ accounts. I am interested in how they make meaning of their experiences, and thus in their rich and detailed accounts, as they will help me gain better understanding on how they construct these meanings. Besides, I take a relativist position regarding my analysis, as I believe I am not able to offer the (unique) “truth” but my own reading of the data (Willig, 2012).

In essence, I am a phenomenologist, as I believe that reality is constructed by each individual through her/his subjective experience. I am a critical constructivist, as I believe people construct reality and that this reality is shaped by the opportunities and positions that society constructs for us, and I am a feminist, as I believe that I live in a patriarchal society where women are continually disempowered.

In addition, I believe that my participants are informants and experts with a privileged position, who are able to describe a clear picture of the phenomenon (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). As a consequence, I believe that, as the relationship between the researcher and the participant involves collaboration, it is essential for the researcher to reflect on this relationship, her/his own involvement with the research, and the ways s/he asks questions, interprets, or presents the findings, as well as describing her/his choice of words, or the ethical challenges s/he undergoes (Gergen, 2008; Sprague, 2005). Furthermore, as a counselling psychologist, I believe that it is through reflexivity that the person is able to construct unique meanings, make sense of their experiences, and transform (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), and thus, insight allows individuals to transform their lives (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Finally, I consider that language is extremely important when describing our experiences, but has its limitations. For example, certain words with a very specific meaning that exist in one language may not exist in others, such as the word “*seny*” in Catalan, or “*saudades*” in Portuguese. Moreover, even if a specific language may

have different words to describe an object or feeling – snow in Inuit languages, for example – those words may not be refined enough to describe the unique and exact experience of a person, and its particularities.

### **2.2.2. Phenomenological position**

I strongly align with this epistemological position as I believe the “same” event can be experienced in many different ways, and therefore, there is more than one world that can be studied (Willig, 2012). Phenomenology is concerned with exploring experience on its own terms (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and the researcher within this position wants to understand the meaning of the lived experience from those who experience it (Ponterotto, 2005). Phenomenological research is idiographic and emic (King & Horrocks, 2010), particular to the individual. The researcher wants to step inside the “participant’s shoes, and look at the world through their eyes” (Willig, 2012, p. 7), capturing something that exists – the participant’s feelings, thoughts, and perceptions – yet not claiming relationships with other aspects (Willig, 2013). In addition, and through the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962), phenomenology takes into account the embodied nature of our relationship with the world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This position aligns with the aim of this project of exploring how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault, attempting to understand, as phenomenology does, the different experiences and maps of women’s worlds, rather than searching for the external causes or fundamental laws that may (partially) explain their behaviour.

The role of the researcher within phenomenology has been compared to that of a person-centred counsellor who listens to individuals’ accounts of their experiences “empathically, with unconditional positive regard, and without questioning the external validity of what the client is saying” (Willig, 2012), which reflects my practitioner position when working with women who have experienced gendered violence.

Descriptive phenomenology is interested in capturing the experience as it is, staying close to the data and extracting its essence. By contrast, interpretative phenomenology, to which I adhere, states that pure description is not possible as there is always a certain amount of interpretation: our own choice of words already shapes the meaning and concept of what we explain, and therefore, the researcher is always adding meaning to the data. Interpretative phenomenology, then, goes a step further and seeks to understand participants’ experiences, how these experiences are

facilitated by the context within which they occur (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), and their meaning within a wider social, cultural, theoretical, and psychological context (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006), thus also providing a critical conceptual standpoint.

In addition, Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008) describe different levels of interpretation, ranging from the empathic-descriptive, where the researcher tries to “stand in the shoes of the participant”, producing a rich description, to the critical-hermeneutic, where the researcher builds an alternative narrative to that of the participant, assuming they may not be aware of all the processes involved in their experience, and intending to offer a deeper understanding without producing certainties or facts. The work of the researcher, they conclude, requires balance between revealing new dimensions of the phenomenon, whilst not imposing meaning nor falling into preconceived categories or theoretical formulations.

Interpretation has gained importance through psychodynamic and feminist perspectives that have wanted to understand rather than to explain (Dilthey, 1976, in Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Interpreting, as I do within therapeutic work, means amplification, exploration, and clarification, and includes presences, as well as absences, as new discovered aspects bring clarity, richness, and meaningfulness to the phenomenon (Cohn, 2005). Authors such as Frosh and Young (2008) suggest that thick and detailed description of accounts should be followed by interpretation based on psychological theory to better explain and enrich the understanding of the phenomenon. Further discussion on the choice of methodology, as well as the description of its application, can be found in later sections.

#### 2.2.2.1. *Feminist Phenomenological Position*

I strongly adhere to this position within phenomenology, as it brings under-researched areas – and specifically female lived experiences (Levesque-Lopman, 2000) – to careful description through phenomenology. This critical current (Oksala, 2004) does not question or alter the phenomenological method and concept, but serves as “a critical and corrective complement of expansion” (Käll & Zeiler, 2014, 2014, p. 6) that enriches our understanding of human experience by not only challenging men’s experiences as universal and essential (Oksala, 2004), but also demonstrating that “neglected regions of experience do not fall into categories of pathology but belong to the everyday lives of women” (Käll & Zeiler, 2014, p. 6).

Feminist phenomenology can engage with different interdisciplinary perspectives (Käll & Zeiler, 2014) and applies a feminist framework to the interview

situation (Fisher, 2010). This standpoint has a special interest in the interrelations between self and other as part of the subjective experience, and understands and explores women's experiences at the intersections of different identities and structures of power, privilege prejudice, and social and cultural practices (Käll & Zeiler, 2014; Oksala, 2006).

In addition, feminist phenomenology has a special interest in embodiment (Oksala, 2006), including the experience of oneself as other – described by many women – and clearly stated in Beauvoir's work: "woman is her body as man is his, but her body is something other than her" (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 41). Following on from the works of Cahill (2001) and Käll (2009) on sexual violence, I believe the feminist phenomenological position greatly aligns with the aim of this project: exploring how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault.

### **2.2.3. Epistemological reflexivity**

Understanding my epistemological position was not easy. I first understood epistemological and ontological stands as an absolute, with no leeway or middle ground, and felt I could relate to all of them somehow, maybe in the same way I can relate to different clients once I understand where they stand, and what their story is. As I deepened my understanding within the different epistemological positions, I found it hard to draw specific lines between them. Where does the social constructivist position end and the critical realist start? How do we decide that the way we are situating an experience within a social and historical context is in a social constructivist or interpretative phenomenological way? I have found this extremely difficult, and I have therefore looked at the overall and main bases of each paradigm to describe myself – being aware, however, that part of the subtleties of my positioning may be lost, even if I have tried my best to describe them.

Besides, and coming from gendered studies with a strong focus on the feminist approach, I found none of the psychological standpoints discussed, nor the main sections of different books resonated with this personal and strong view, as even if Ponterotto (2005) includes feminist approaches within the critical ideological position, they are not developed within it. However, I found some references to feminist standpoints and methodologies in separate book chapters to those of methodology or epistemology, in introduction or "special" sections (see Silverman et al., 2004; or Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, for example) or special articles (see Eagly & Riger, 2014).

This felt quite significant to me, as it appeared there were no “guidelines” on how to interlink this “foreign” position with any of the others. There was no feminist standpoint situated in the main continuum normally provided from realist to radical relativist – it was missing.

Thus, determining my epistemological position has been a long struggle, in which I have felt at times really conflicted and not belonging anywhere. Reflecting upon this project, through further reading and different conversations I had with my colleagues and supervisor helped me to understand how, even if I am strongly committed to critical and feminist values, my aim with this research has always been to focus on women’s experiences, on their stories, on their voices, and placing them at the centre, rather than in questioning how their cultures or their languages determined and “narrated” these experiences, or on the power imbalances and structures in which their stories were embedded. Furthermore, the reason for focusing on women’s experiences came from the feeling that, as many critical studies explore how language determines women’s stories, or how social structures and power imbalances limit women’s lives, women’s voices seemed to be lost and relegated to a second or third position, rather than a central one.

It has been towards the end of this thesis, through discussions with experts in the field and through further reading, that I have realised my epistemological position has been aligned and resonates with the niche feminist phenomenological position. I feel validated and hopeful, as I was not alone in believing that women’s lived experiences needed to be at the core of our work, but most importantly, that feminism and phenomenology could come together, and that by intersecting, they created a whole that was more than the sum of the parts.

I have, then, been able to find my place; one that, as feminist phenomenology, first positions women’s experiences and voices at the centre without questioning them and also takes into account my different sensibilities (as illustrated in the following section), and that later allows me to bring my critical lens, thus becoming quite similar to the work I do in the therapy room.

## **2.3. Method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

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In this section, I describe my choice of methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was guided by my epistemological position. As previously stated, I share many pivotal points with phenomenology and feminist epistemology, and I felt that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis resonated with these, and could be attuned with my different sensibilities.

### **2.3.1. Roots of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Even if Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis appeared in the mid-1990s (Smith, 2004), it has its roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics, and a bond to symbolic interactionism.

Spinelli (1989, in Eatough & Smith, 2008) argues that if the soul and original purpose of psychology is to understand human beings, then its starting point has to be the study of experience. Phenomenology is based on the work of Edmund Husserl and is interested in the study of conscious experiences. Its basic assumption is that reality is subjective, and not independent of human experiences, as it is made up of events and experiences in the way they are consciously perceived by the participant (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). For IPA, there is nothing more fundamental than experience. It intends to describe how the world is formed and experienced through conscious acts, and its primary concern is to uncover, express, and illuminate the individual subjective experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

IPA is also linked to hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, as it considers the individual is linked to its context, which is socially and historically bound, thus dissolving the Cartesian dualism of person-world, mind-body, subject-object (Eatough & Smith, 2008). IPA explicitly attends to what Heidegger called “hermeneutics of tactical life”, as it understands events and objects by investigating how they are experienced and given meaning by the individual (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Moreover, IPA states that we establish a circular hermeneutical relationship with the world, as our understanding of an event or object is always mediated by an already existing knowledge accrued from experience, as well as stating that this understanding is constrained by cultural context, opening up the hermeneutic circle to the possibilities for new understandings (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Hermeneutics consider that the interpretation of a text is influenced by the person interpreting it, making the meaning of the text different from the original one, and therefore considering deconstruction (or bracketing) essential (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). Interpretative phenomenology goes beyond description by giving a deeper meaning to participants' experiences. In IPA, the researcher attempts to interpret the interpretations of each participant. The researcher is, then, only able to approach the personal world of the participant, but can never entirely know it.

Likewise, IPA is linked to symbolic interactionism, as it is interested in the meanings that individuals give to situations through words or through the body. Symbolic interactionism is based on the idea that mind and self emerge out of social interactions involving significant communications with others, and that what is social is understood and explains the psychology of the individual. It considers language as the path through which we learn and establish meaning, and regards conscious and unconscious gestures as an important part of the conversation. Communication is then an act involving two individuals where "there is a sender, receiver, and a consequence of the communication (...) the same as there is the therapist, the client, and the relationship in the therapeutic room" (Howitt & Cramer, 2011, p. 386). Symbolic interactionists, like feminists, understand human beings as creative agents who, through intersubjective interpretative activity, construct their social worlds and their sense of self. If humans are linked to reality (Hacking, 1999), then they are able to be part of its creation despite the limitations imposed by material, biological, social, and linguistic processes. They do this by appropriating, changing, or discarding the linguistic conventions and discursive practices of their cultures (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

### **2.3.2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

As previously stated, I am interested in looking at personal experiences of sexual assault, and in particular, in exploring women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape. For this purpose, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis has been chosen as it focuses on, and is concerned with, understanding people's lived experiences, in a particular context, in a particular time (Willig, 2013). Within IPA, the individual intentionally interprets and gives meaning to the world, and the lived experience is embodied, and socioculturally and historically situated (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)



Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was developed by Jonathan Smith in 1997. It is interested in how participants experience an event, instead of focusing on the truthfulness or correspondence of the perception of the event with an external reality. IPA does not separate description and interpretation, as it understands that the experience of the participant is interpreted by the researcher through the analysis, and it does not leave aside presuppositions and assumptions about the world, but them to produce knowledge and understanding (Willig, 2013). IPA, like critical constructionism and feminist research, understands that sociocultural and historical processes are central to how we experience and understand our lives, and that, via intersubjective communication and language, we construct meaning. However, it maintains that it is not possible to describe people's lived experiences solely as a linguistic and discursive construction, as discursive analysis does, sitting, as Willig and Stainton (2008) suggest, at the light end of the social constructionist continuum.

IPA provides detailed descriptions and interpretations of lived experiences, assumes that people try to make sense of their experiences, and wants to describe how they do it and what it may mean, by interpreting the psychological processes that may underlie these experiences (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). In addition, IPA places great importance on the contextual setting of the participants, and at the same time wants to engage with the process of making sense of their own experience (Eatough & Smith 2006). In line with feminist phenomenology, IPA values the importance of connection and avoids alienation between researcher and participant (Fisher, 2010). IPA, like feminist research, emphasises the value of reviewing findings with participants to ensure the accuracy of their reported experiences, allowing the participants to feel a sense of equal collaboration, as they are seen as experts on their experience (Sinopoli, 2011).

Moreover, like feminist research, IPA places a strong emphasis on ideography, focusing on the particular rather than the universal. It addresses the subjective, as well as the links between human emotion, thought, and action, to better understand phenomena. Warnock (in Eatough & Smith, 2008) suggests that by deeply studying the individual, we are close to the universal, and at a practical level, IPA does just that: it analyses each individual before attempting cross-case analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2008). In addition, IPA questions its own findings as well as psychological literature, taking, as feminist research does, an interrogatory stance that challenges the dominant standpoint position and challenges power (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Finally, as I intend to shed light on a complex and under-researched area, I am taking Smith and Osborn's (2003, p. 53) suggestion in adhering to IPA, which they describe as "especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process, or novelty".

### **2.3.3. Uniqueness of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Other qualitative methods share with IPA the identification of themes in participants' accounts, and the assumption that reality lies in the participants' accounts. Therefore, I here the reasons why IPA was the selected method of analysis for this research over Discourse Analysis and Narrative Analysis.

#### **2.3.3.1. Differences on the function and importance of language. IPA and Discourse Analysis**

Discourse Analysis (DA) was a qualitative method that I considered when undertaking this project for its emphasis on language, and on the social, historical, and personal contexts where the accounts take place. Social constructionism and phenomenology share the claim that sociocultural and historical processes are central to how we experience and understand our lives, including the stories we tell about these lives. Furthermore, they agree on the importance of language, and on the essential place of intersubjective communication in the understanding of the self. However, as previously discussed, IPA's particular form of social constructionism is closer to symbolic interactionism than to the post-structuralist thought evident in recent discursive methods. IPA positions itself, then, at the light end of the social constructivist continuum, by stating that it is not possible to describe people's lived experiences and their sense of self solely as a linguistic and discursive construction (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

DA's emphasis on language seemed to me to be from the inside to the outside, placing great value on how language is used instead of how it aids the process of meaning making, and emphasising the social constructions extracted from the data analysis (Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997), instead of focusing on the personal and individual experiences of the participants, which clearly distinguishes it from IPA. I believe IPA looks inwards by placing its interest in understanding what participants experience, and using language as a medium through which the researcher can learn about individuals' experience, instead of becoming the focus of the analysis, helping

reveal the subjective realities of consciousness (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). In a similar way, Wetherell (1986; in Howitt & Cramer, 2011) suggests that feminist methods focus their attention on the linguistic repertoire, culture, and its ideological implications, rather than on the unique individual.

Finally, IPA shares with DA its interest in the action-oriented nature of talk, people's aim to achieve interpersonal objectives in conversations, and the idea that reality is constrained by the language of one's culture (Willig, 2003). However, IPA suggests that this represents only a partial account of what people are doing when they communicate, as the lived experience is much more than historically situated linguistic interactions between people, and it suggests that when people tell stories about their lives, they are doing more than drawing on the culturally available stock of meanings (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

#### 2.3.3.2. Differences on the participant active role. IPA and Narrative Analysis

Aside from the importance of language, IPA and Narrative Analysis (NA) share the emphasis in exploring how the world is experienced. NA is interested in how narratives are constructed, and holds cultural information that helps people find their place in social groups and find meaning in their lives. This is relevant, and in accordance with a feminist approach, when working with minority groups that do not have much involvement in the creation of these stories, as for example, women who have experienced sexual violence. However, NA, compared with IPA or other feminist approaches, does not see the tellers of these narratives as active participants of the narratives, but as simple spectators without agency or ability to influence and change the narratives (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Finally, other research methods less used in psychological research were considered, such as the socialist feminist research. However, and as my main concern was in understanding the personal and unique experiences of each one of my participants, I felt again that this approach, and others in which a structuralist view of society predominates, would not provide enough individual depth, as they mainly focus on the social function of the participants' accounts.

I have carefully considered the ideological and methodological implications of my research in this section, and in line with what Willig (2012) suggests, my research (1) has an important political dimension, and desires to give voice to an

underrepresented social group: women who have experienced sexual assault; (2) works bottom-up, as it allows the voices of the research participants to be heard through their accounts and their feedback on my work as part of my discussion of the data; (3) is inductive, as it does not impose existing concepts and categories, and allows a space for the participants to define different terms, such as sexual assault, being part of an empowerment agenda; and (4) is participatory and collaborative, as I challenge established power relations between myself, the “expert” researcher, and my expert participants through conversation and feedback on the final table of themes, and its inclusion in the discussion of my findings.

## **2.4. Recruitment**

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This research was interested in exploring women’s experiences of inner resources after sexual assault, thus women were purposefully sampled following specific criteria: they needed to be 18 or older, with at least one experience of sexual assault and/or rape as adults, but with no restrictions on marital status, ethnicity, or cultural background. Due to the sensitive matter of the study, individuals were required to have had talking therapy since their experience of sexual assault and/or rape to avoid them disclosing for the first time, and to be undertaking therapy at the time of the interview in case new issues arose and they wished to explore them further. Individuals experiencing psychological distress, such as high levels of anxiety or low mood, and/or undergoing a court case at the time of the telephone screening, were not included in the study, to protect them from potential harm and psychological disturbance, as well as to not interfere with the outcomes of their case.

I also decided to limit my sampling method to women who spoke English fluently, as, on the one hand, it was important that participants were able to express themselves comfortably and freely for the purpose of analysis, and on the other, I was aware that the process of translation from another language to English during the transcription process could, at times, distort, or not exactly represent, participants’ words and experiences, and therefore also alter the analysis stage.

Within IPA, participants are required to have experienced a particular phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), and therefore, purposive sampling (Gobo, 2004) was carried out. As the initial recruitment process proved more

challenging than initially expected, multiple recruitment strategies were used (see challenges, below). Participants taking part in this research project were recruited through the Integrated Psychological Therapy Teams (IPTT) in Lewisham and Southwark, part of the South London and Maudsley (SLaM) NHS Foundation Trust, where I was undertaking a placement at the time, and through the London Counselling Psychologists Blog, an online community where my project was advertised through an online advert (see Appendix 1).

After complying with all the necessary procedures and gaining ethical approval (see Ethics section), my research project was presented during a team meeting at IPTT Lewisham and at IPTT Southwark respectively, where I provided psychologists and psychotherapists with the research leaflets and consent to contact forms (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). If deemed appropriate, professionals informed clients who fulfilled the inclusion criteria of my study, and gave them the leaflet. If participants were interested, clinicians invited them to contact me directly, thus giving them full control over their decision whether to take part in the study. Clinicians also offered women the possibility to complete and sign the consent to contact form, which was then given to me, allowing me to contact participants directly.

In addition, a Facebook page was created as a means for potential participants to know more about my project and myself, increasing possibilities of response. The page displayed the research advert and the aims of the research, as well as a picture of myself and the consent form. Participants were recruited on a first come, first served basis.

Participants were contacted, or contacted me, via email and over the phone, and a convenient time for a short telephone screening was agreed upon.

#### **2.4.1. Challenges**

At the beginning of my recruitment process, I contacted organisations that exclusively offered psychological services to women who had experienced sexual violence, such as those forming the Consortium of Violence Against Women, or were part of the Ascent project. Later, I also reached out to organisations that offered a range of psychological services to the general population: survivors' forums and online groups, and organisations that coordinated conferences related to gendered violence in London (see email in Appendix 4). Unfortunately, most of the organisations did not reply to my requests. From the ones that did, some reported having strict policies of

not advertising any type of research, others considered they were not an appropriate platform, and some considered their clients to be too vulnerable. A few, such as the AVA project or Mind THN, published my research advertisement within their premises and online on their website and mail lists.

In addition, I discussed my advertisement material with supervisors and colleagues, and I advertised my research through posters displayed in public and private spaces in London, such as supermarkets, hairdressers and nail salons, libraries, bookshops, museums, cinemas, coffee shops, tattoo and piercing parlours, universities, train stations, and advice and voluntary centres (with permission from owners and managers). Six potential participants contacted me through social media, text, and email. Due to living abroad or being in the middle of a court case, two were not able to participate. Unfortunately, the other four attempts were fruitless.

Throughout this long and arduous process, I reflected on the difficulty of finding participants for my project. I wondered if being a trainee and not a qualified practitioner, or not being part of an established and known organisation, did not provide enough confidence and security to potential participants to want to take part in this project. Once I started recruiting participants within the NHS, I realised the importance of having a renowned organisation supporting my project (structural security), the importance of colleagues explaining my work to potential participants, as clients (mainly) trust their therapists, and the impact these might have had on the vision potential participants had of my advertisement.

Through the responses I received from organisations, I also reflected upon the view organisations have of women with experiences of sexual violence. At times, it seemed to me those that claimed to be empowering to women had a generalised view of them as helpless and fragile. Some, as previously stated, expressed this directly. Others appeared to maintain this view in a more subtle way by having, for example, a general rule of not participating in research. By believing they protected the majority of women in their services by doing so, and/or not investing (or having) resources and human power that would allow a case-by-case decision, they seemed to continue to reflect this view. This brought to my attention the difficulties in finding the limits between protecting and disempowering or patronising, and the impact this may have on the women we work with, which is further discussed in the final chapter.

#### **2.4.2. Telephone screening**

A telephone screening (see Appendix 5) of approximately twenty minutes was conducted by the researcher with all potential participants. The purpose of this initial contact was to discuss the project and answer potential participants' questions, collect basic information, and build a bond, taking into account the sensitivity of the subject. It also included a risk assessment, which screened for suicidal activity, self-harm, eating and sleeping patterns, and energy levels, as well as women's social network, links to services, involvement in court cases related to the assault or rape, access to therapy, or any current distress in the participant's life. Potential difficulties or unexpected reactions – such as anxiety, flashbacks, or feeling sad – and women's needs during the research interview, were discussed in advance, and plans for responding to them agreed upon with each participant, such as for me to say “I am listening” or “I heard what you said”, reflect on body fidgeting, or provide reassurance by, for example, saying, “It is okay if you feel anxious”.

At the end of the screening, and if deemed appropriate, a date for the interview was set, inviting them to bring an object that they linked to their inner resources (picture, music file, fabric, etc.) on the day of the interview (see below). An email containing the agreed date and time, the participant information sheet (see Appendix 6), and consent form (see Appendix 7) was sent to participants after the screening, to allow them to carefully read all the necessary information regarding the project, and discuss with significant others or the researcher if wished, prior to the interview. Participants were informed of the true nature of the study at all times, as well as possible risks and benefits from involvement. Participants were also encouraged to contact me if any questions or concerns arose before the interview date.

Of the seven women with whom I established contact through IPTT and the London Counselling Psychologists Blog, one was not able to take part in the study as she reported experiencing sexual assault as a child, which was directly discussed with her over the phone. Another woman reported experiencing sexual assault at the age of 17, and during our discussion concerning the study's inclusion, she stated being really keen to share her experiences with me. After consultation with my supervisor, careful consideration of the grey areas within United Kingdom law in matters of consent and sexual offences<sup>2</sup>, and of the woman's explicit wish to take part in the study, a decision was made to include her in the sample.

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<sup>2</sup> An 18-year-old is considered an adult in the UK; however, the age of sexual consent is 16 (NSPCC, 2017; Sexual Offences Act, 2003).

### **2.4.3. Participants**

In accordance with my epistemology and methodology, and following the participant range suitable for the scope of practitioner doctorate research as suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), namely between four and ten, I recruited six participants. This sample size is in line with a range of phenomenological studies that explore women's experiences of sexual violence, such as Smith and Kelly's (2001) seven participants, Kalmakis's (2010) eight participants, Sinopoli's (2011) five participants, or Chaudry's (2012) ten participants.

Due to the sensitivity and intimacy of the phenomenon explored in this project, and to protect my participants' identities, I have not included a table with participants' demographics in the Appendices, and have instead described them in this section. The six women who took part in this research were white, with five of them referring to themselves as White British. They all reported living in London, and English was their first language. Their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-forties, with four of them younger than thirty. One participant reported being in a relationship but not being married, and even though five of them referred to themselves as single during the telephone screening, during the interview, one reported having a partner. For one of the participants, the experiences of sexual assault and/or rape had occurred a year prior to the interview; for two of the participants, between three and five years prior; between five and ten years prior for one of them; and more than ten years prior for two of the women. Information regarding their academic qualifications or employment status was not requested; however, during the interviews, four of the participants reported working within a field related to mental health, with two of them reporting Masters and Doctorate qualifications.

## **2.5. Interviews**

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Semi-structured or in-depth interviews were the main method of data collection, as they are exploratory, encouraging the participants to talk about their experiences, and they aim to provide rich detail (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). They allow flexibility at the same time as providing structure, resembling IPA methodology, as they are formed by a list of topics that the participant can develop, guide, and explore (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). At the same time, they allow the researcher to guide this process without



imposing, and to bring new questions during the interview, if necessary, to explore new events not previously anticipated.

To construct the interview schedule, I drew from diverse interview examples, as well as asked of each question “what it really meant”, if it would provide me with the information I needed, and if it was necessary. In addition, I made sure questions were presented in an accessible language, and pilot interviews were helpful in confirming and allowing me to adjust the schedule before interviewing my participants, as well as making sure questions were understood as I intended (see below).

In addition, being inspired by what are considered feminist epistemologies and research methods such as ethnography and action research<sup>3</sup>, and particularly by the work of Coy (2009), as well as by my own use of objects within the therapy room, I decided to include the exploration of an object in my interviews. Sexual assault and rape cross the boundaries of the body, the most intimate self, and as Coy (2009) suggests, it is difficult to explore embodiment through talk. Therefore, I wanted to offer participants a different way of expressing themselves and representing their experiences. I asked participants to bring to our interview “something” they related to their inner resources: an object, a picture, a song, a poem, a smell, etc., anything they wanted. This “object” would allow the exploration of their experiences in a “language” and manner of their choice, and following my epistemology and methodology, would co-construct the interview process, creating a truly two-way conversation. In addition, it would bring closer together my identities as researcher and practitioner.

### **2.5.1. Pilot interview and revised final interview**

I decided to carry out a pilot study of my interview format for different reasons. On the one hand, I wanted to check if my interview questions flowed and were understandable, as well as to make sure they provided me with the rich and detailed accounts I needed. On the other hand, and as suggested by Willig (2013), I wanted to become more comfortable in the role of the phenomenological researcher, which was new to me, by experiencing what a research interview would feel like. Finally, and due to the sensitivity of the subject, it was important for me to receive feedback on how a participant would feel about the questions I was asking: Were they intrusive? Were

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<sup>3</sup> See Jackson, Vapes & Gill (2013) or Pink (2007), for example.

they sensitive? Was my style too directive or maybe too careful? I also wanted to get a sense of the general feeling participants would be left with at the end of the interview.

To do so, I decided to carry out a pilot interview with two people: a colleague from my course, who could bring valuable information both as a “participant” and as a trainee counselling psychologist, and a friend who was not professionally related to the psychology field, to ensure my interview questions were understandable to a wider public. During the pilot interviews, we referred to the experience of a significant yet not distressing life event, so they would be able to have “a feel” for the interview as well as provide me with feedback that was not overcome with their own emotions.

Both pilots were useful to me in diverse ways. First, they made me realise my interview did not follow the natural timeline of the interviewees’ events, as questions made them move back and forth on their stories and in time, stopping a natural flow. I then changed the order of my questions to allow this fluidity and obtain richer data during participants’ interviews. Second, they made me feel more comfortable and confident with my questions and my style, as well as in the way I managed the interview as a whole. For example, I realised that information that naturally came up while undertaking the first interview, such as “there are no right or wrong answers to the questions” or “take as much time as you need to think about them”, was extremely important, and therefore needed to be said at the start of all my interviews and included on my notes. Finally, I felt surprised and encouraged when both persons told me they had experienced some transformation during the interview and felt in a “better place” (pilot interview 1). They told me how the interview helped them “question new things” and make “new links” (pilot interview 2), and felt “more aware of the resources” and “strength” they had (pilot interview 1), feeling at the end of it “more confident” and content with themselves (see the revised final interview in Appendix 8).

As Howitt and Cramer (2011) point out, my interview schedule transformed to allow participants to express themselves, and allow flexibility of exploration. Moreover, between my third and fourth interviews, I noticed how I started to feel uncomfortable with questions three and four of the Inner Resources section. Through clear participants’ responses to those questions (Emily, Kate), it seemed the way I was asking them allocated the value, control, and capacity of change to sexual assault and/or rape instead of on women themselves, thus not validating or acknowledging their efforts and achievements, nor the control they had. It was for this reason that on my last two interviews, I tentatively added, before these questions, that participants might not have experienced or felt that they could draw anything from the experience.

In this way, and without compromising my methodology, I started to acknowledge that it was women's actions and not the experience of violence that changed them, thus validating the women who took part in the interviews by reflecting a sense of self that was often missed by others, and perhaps starting to counteract the power imbalance.

### **2.5.2. Interview setting**

Interviews were carried out within IPTT and City University premises, in therapy and meeting rooms respectively, depending on room availability and participants' preferences. These settings were used as they provided a confidential, safe, and private space, as well as being neutral environments, allowing participants to express themselves and account for their experiences without interruptions and as freely as possible. Besides, they also ensured physical and psychological safety to the researcher (King & Horrocks, 2010), as interview rooms needed to be booked, and therefore reception, security, or university personnel were aware of my location and of the times I would enter and leave the premises.

In addition, a contact outside IPTT and university premises was made aware of the times of the interviews, and was contacted a maximum of two hours after each interview. Further, undertaking interviews within these premises allowed me the possibility to debrief with colleagues and supervisors if needed. Last, and during the whole process, I reflected on the work and feelings that arose from this study in a personal research journal. I also maintained regular contact with my supervisors at City University and at the NHS, and I continued to make good use of personal therapy.

### **2.5.3. Interviews**

A non-recorded brief prequel to the interview was carried out with participants to discuss any further questions they had, ensuring they were fully informed and reviewing any change in their circumstances, including a risk assessment (which continued throughout the interview and debrief), reviewing their consent on the use of an audio recorder, and signing the consent forms, keeping a copy for themselves.

At the beginning of the interview, confidentiality and situations in which it might be breached, such as harm to self or others, were explained. Plans of action had been put in place in advance for such an eventuality, as well as in case of unexpected disclosure. These plans included a discussion with the participant's therapist,

attendance to A&E, as well as a discussion with my supervisor of the next steps on a case-by-case basis. Participants were reminded of their right not to answer my questions, of the possibility of taking a break if needed, and of their right to terminate the interview at any given time without consequences. Participants' wellbeing was a priority in this project, as was their sense of safety, agency, and control.

The interviews lasted between 66 and 118 minutes, providing the rich and textured accounts necessary for a phenomenological analysis. My experience as a trainee counselling psychologist, specifically assessing and working with women who have experienced sexual violence and other gendered violence, aided me through this process of exploration with the participant, which Howitt and Cramer (2011) describe as the start of the data analysis.

The first interviews I undertook were challenging, as I found myself torn between the researcher and the practitioner in me. I wanted to explore and work with what women described experiencing, as this was my role in a therapeutic setting and what I instinctively moved towards, and it was important for me to continually remind myself that I was, at this point, immersed in a researcher role. From the researcher's perspective, I also experienced a battle, as, on the one hand, I was not sure my data was rich enough, and therefore I wanted to continue to ask, unpick, and understand women's experiences, while on the other hand I felt at times that I was moving too far from my planned schedule and prompts, and worried that women's accounts would be too distant and I would not be able to analyse them correctly. Furthermore, I worried that I would then be doing a disservice to the women who had participated and had taken time to let me into their accounts and experiences.

A non-recorded debrief followed the semi-structured interviews, to ensure the wellbeing of each one of the participants when leaving the premises, and briefly discuss the interview experience. Interviews were scheduled with generous time to allow this. In addition, the debrief was an opportunity to give participants a list of different resources and links to organisations that work with women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape (see Appendix 9), which participants found helpful. Moreover, a £20 voucher was given to each participant in appreciation of their time and expertise.

One4All gift cards were chosen as they could be used in a wide variety of shops. As suggested by Head (2009), I carefully considered the implications of paying my participants, as there are no explicit guidelines. Following similar studies (see

Campbell et al., 2004; or Walter & Hobfoll, 2009), an appropriate and similar reward was worked out. Similarly, and as stated by Largent, Grady, Miller and Wertheimer (2012), payment in the form of a voucher produced a lower concern amongst ethic experts about coercion or undue influence, and providing money to patient volunteers was seen as acceptable by the majority. In addition, feminist traditions and later studies suggest that gift giving or making payments starts to balance the uneven power relationship between participants and researcher, as it acknowledges and values participants' effort, time, and expertise (Head, 2009).

Finally, if participants had previously agreed to provide feedback on the table of themes of the study as a whole (further discussed below), they were asked about their preferred method of contact.

#### **2.5.4. Transcription**

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, as the inclusion of pauses, repetitions, or tone of voice are relevant for psychological interpretation (Kvale, 1996). Transcripts, therefore, included vocal utterances such as mh, ahh or err, and broken words, as well as extralinguistic features such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language within square brackets.

I carefully considered the best method to transcribe interviews, as I wanted to be as accurate as possible, and carefully reflect the whole conversation I had had with my participants on paper and through words, yet I also wanted a method that was understandable for my participants, and for those not trained in or skilled with specific transcription methods, such as the Jefferson Transcription System (see Potter & Hepburn, 2005, for an example). Following other qualitative studies such as Smith (2010), I used the underlining of words in my transcripts to indicate they were emphasised or spoken louder than others by participants during the interview; I indicated short pauses with three consecutive points (...), and indicated silences within brackets. I listened to the interviews over and over while following the transcripts, to obtain the remaining information and recreate the "whole" conversation while analysing them.

All transcriptions were done leaving wide margins at the left and right of the text to note thoughts and impressions, as well as identify various themes.

## 2.6. Ethics and Data Storage

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Due to the intimate and sensitive experiences explored in this study, and following Kvale & Brinkmann's (2009) suggestions, ethical implications were carefully considered at all stages of the research project, and therefore, they are reflected upon and discussed in context in the different chapters and sections of this thesis.

This project was conducted in line with the British Psychological Society, Health and Care Professions Council, and City University Codes of Ethics and Conduct (2009, 2010, and 2010 respectively), as well as the Code of Human Research Ethics from the British Psychological Society (2014). Ethical approvals were granted by the Department of Psychology at City University (see Appendix 10), and by the NHS Health Research Authority (Appendix 11). I also received a Confirmation of Capacity and Capability from the Research and Development department of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. These approvals required my project to be explained in detail and reviewed by different groups of experts in two separate research ethics committees. Even if these processes felt arduous at times, they helped me think about all aspects of my research in advance, thus making me feel more secure and confident in the value and integrity of this project.

Throughout the duration of this project, I have complied with all requirements from City University, NHS Health Research Authority, and R&D department at SLaM, which included recruitment reviews, regular progress reviews and reports, and end of study reports, as well as regular updates and scheduled meetings with supervisors at City University and on NHS premises.

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants was ensured by providing each participant with a pseudonym chosen by the researcher. Prior to the interviews, the most common names for women in the United Kingdom were sought, and listed in alphabetical order to be allocated to participants as they took part in the project. Thus, the first participant to contact and undertake the semi-structured interview was allocated the first pseudonym, Beth, and the second one, Claire. My intention was not only to ensure participants' anonymity, but also for readers to easily identify with and feel closer to my participants, their experiences, and accounts. Allocated pseudonyms were used in all written documents, and the file that contained the participants' names and their assigned pseudonyms was electronically stored in the private network file space at the university (digital server), which was password protected and encrypted, and only accessible by the researcher.

All paper files containing participants' personal data (consent to contact and consent forms) were accessed by the researcher only, and were stored in a sealed envelope inside a locked cabinet at the researcher's supervisor's City University office, which was securely locked.

In addition, and after each interview, audio recordings and pictures of the objects participants had brought to the interview and linked to their inner resources, were downloaded and stored in the private network file space at the university (digital server), which was password protected and encrypted, and only accessible by the researcher. These files were then deleted from the dictaphone and camera. The pictures of the objects have not been included, to protect participants' identities; however, they are presented in Appendix 12 and are described within the Analysis chapter.

## **2.7. Analytic Process**

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Each transcribed interview was analysed following IPA methodology (see Howitt & Cramer, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). First, recorded interviews were listened to several times while reading the transcripts, noting observations, first impressions, and reflections, as well as initial interpretative comments on the left margin of each page. Second, I carefully examined each transcript, reading and rereading it, looking for patterns of meaning and inconsistencies, also noting them on the left margin. Themes emerged as I interpreted the parts in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the parts, and these were summarised in a few words on the right margin of the transcript. They reflected as much as possible the participants' words as well as bringing the analysis to a more abstract level (see Appendix 13 for a transcript extract). I then connected and related emerging themes, clustering them and creating superordinate themes for each interview. However, I struggled at this point, as I felt my data and my analysis were not answering my research question.

I then realised I was attempting to respond to the question of "how" without knowing the "what", as I could not find in the literature any article that described what women considered as their inner resources. Thus, to answer the question, "How do women experience their inner resources?", it was first necessary to

phenomenologically analyse what women understood as inner resources, as an inner resource is also an experience. Smith (2017, p. 303) states IPA is “rigorous and systematic but also has an important role for exploration and creativity”, and thus, after discussing it with my supervisor and according to my methodology and epistemology, I decided to undertake a “two step” phenomenological analysis of the data. The first analysis would answer the “what”, and the second, the “how”.

Following Van Dierendonck and his colleagues’ (2009) definition of inner resources, I analysed each transcript, asking of it: Is this a resource, or is it not? If it is a resource, is it an external resource, an internal resource, or, as suggested by all analysed interviews, a resource that is somewhere on the continuum of inner-outer? This analysis led to the creation of an initial table of resources for each of the participants, which included extensive extracts of the transcript related to inner resources and resources on the continuum of inner-outer, as well as previous notes made on the left and right margins of the selected transcripts, as this would ensure I continued to interpret while staying close to my participants’ accounts (see Appendix 14).

Once the parts of the transcript related to inner and inner-outer resources, and the initial notes made in the margins of these sections were separated in the initial table, the columns of this table were reorganised, leaving the extracts and notes of the transcripts at the centre and moving the labelling of resources column to the right side, and a “second round” of phenomenological analysis was carried out to answer my research question: How?. From each of the extracts, I asked the phenomenological and interpretative questions proposed by Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006): “How has this phenomenon been understood by this woman?” and “What does this mean for this woman in this context?”. I then interpreted the parts in relation to the whole and clustered themes, creating a “second table” with themes and sub-themes (see Appendix 15). This process was repeated for each of the participants.

Finally, I looked at theme similarities and uniqueness amongst the different participants’ tables and transcripts (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012), and a table of themes for the study as a whole was created (see example of overarching theme, table of themes, and table of frequency and participants in Appendices 16, 17, and 18). The following chapter will present these themes in detail.



## 2.8. Participant Feedback

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Phenomenological and feminist methodologies emphasise the importance of collaboration with participants throughout the research process, to establish a more equalitarian relationship. Furthermore, Sinopoli (2011) suggests this collaborative process may help restore a sense of empowerment, as telling one's story may bring strengths, beliefs, and views to the surface. Following my ideological and methodological considerations, I initially wanted my study to offer participants the opportunity to provide feedback on their interview transcriptions, as well as on each individual table of themes. This is normally a long and laborious process, and finally, due to time constraints related to my recruitment difficulties, it was not pursued.

However, feedback from participants regarding the table of themes of the study as a whole was sought. It was important to continue to maintain a "conversation" with participants, and, as suggested by the literature (see Draucker & Stern, 2000; or Kalmakis, 2010), loss of control or loss of parts of the self are experienced after rape and sexual assault. Therefore, it was important to provide a space where women were able to continue to raise their voices as experts, and for these voices to be included in the Discussion chapter, before the study was presented to others. In addition, and as suggested by different authors (Bowland et al., 2011; Elbert & Van Dyck, 2004), presenting the results of the study to participants and seeking their feedback can help them consider different approaches and views of their own experiences, providing me with the opportunity to "give back" by answering some of the questions women raised during the interviews related to the uniqueness of their inner resources or healing times.

Additionally, my choice of method facilitated this process, as Howitt and Cramer (2011, p. 394) suggest that "there is a clarity and transparency about data presentation in IPA which is not always emulated in other forms of qualitative research", making my results more accessible and understandable to my participants, and allowing me to receive rich and detailed feedback.

As all the participants had agreed to provide feedback, they were contacted once the table of themes of the study as a whole was completed. The table was sent to five of the women, as after several attempts, one participant could not be reached. The table was sent via email or WhatsApp, providing women with space and time to think about the information received before discussing it with me. Finally, two participants

provided feedback over the phone and one via email. Their words are included in the Discussion chapter.

## **2.9. Validity**

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The ethos of qualitative methodologies is incompatible with fixed universal procedures and standards, as knowledge, “reality”, and “truth” are communally constructed and negotiated through our subjective and cultural perspectives (Yardley, 2000). Validity in qualitative research places value on the analysis rather than on the data (Howitt & Cramer, 2011), and Yardley (2000) suggests four criteria all qualitative research should follow, as reliability and replicability may be inappropriate when attempting to offer one (of many) interpretations of a phenomenon; in this case women’s experiences of inner resources after sexual assault.

Throughout the course of this research project, I attempted to follow these criteria. The first is sensitivity to context, by thoroughly reviewing previous work and relevant literature on my topic within the Introduction chapter, grounding this research in related theory and linking this work to others during the discussion. As it is not possible for the qualitative researcher to remain “neutral” (Yardley, 2000), I have addressed the choice of language, power imbalances, and the sociocultural influences on the study, participants, and myself in different sections, including reflexivity.

Second, I have extensively engaged with the topic and immersed myself in the data to fulfil the commitment and rigour criterion. The extensive interviews I undertook with the participants ensured they were able to supply the information I needed for a comprehensive analysis, even if the sample size was towards the lower end when compared with similar studies. They have provided richness of detail in the data analysis, and I have included “deviant” cases within my analysis to better explain the phenomenon.

Third, I aimed to be coherent with the aim of my research, its question, philosophical perspective, method, and analysis, and I have sought transparency by describing, to the best of my ability and in detail, the process of data collection and analysis. I have also included significant extracts from participants’ interviews in my Analysis chapter to exemplify and support my interpretations, making the data

available to the reader, and perhaps to other interpretations, and as Howitt and Cramer (2001) suggest, making my work open to evaluation.

Finally, I have attempted to fulfil the impact and importance criterion proposed by Yardley (2000), by disseminating my findings through publication, and (hopefully) opening up new ways of understanding sexual violence by bringing to light new aspects of an under-researched area: women's inner resources. As a practitioner-researcher, this project has already changed the way I approach my work with women who have experienced sexual violence, making me more aware of the language I use in my therapeutic sessions, as further developed in the Reflexivity section.

In addition, I have sought validation, as suggested by Howitt and Cramer (2011), by paying careful attention to details such as silences and "double" meanings; undertaking researchers' validation by comparing my interpretations of a transcript and themes with those of an expert researcher – my supervisor; incorporating respondent validation by including participants' feedback into my Discussion chapter to ensure the congruence of my interpretations; and reflecting on the research process and my experience of it through a research diary.

## **2.10. Reflexivity**

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Rather than including all my reflections in a unique section, and following Willig's (2013) suggestion, I have included my reflexivity throughout this thesis to keep it in context. However, I expose here several points that I feel need further attention. Having already reflected on my epistemological decisions, and taking into account that the researcher's awareness is an integral part when undertaking a phenomenological analysis (Willig, 2013), I have decided not to separate my methodological from my personal reflexivity, as I feel they are in constant dialogue.

*A note on definitions.* Once I decided to undertake a "two" step phenomenological analysis, I worried I would be imposing the definition I had chosen to describe inner resources on my data, and therefore my participants, since I had not asked them how they would like me to name and define them. However, while transcribing, and listening and re-listening to my interviews, I realised women seemed to describe inner resources in a similar way: something from within that no one could see, or an external object that somehow linked to their internal worlds and strength.

Therefore, I maintained the definition of inner resources I had initially chosen, as it also seemed to reflect the experiences and implicit definitions of my participants.

*A note on language.* The use of language has been an important part of my reflection. First, I decided to write sexual assault and/or rape instead of SA/R to agree with my method and standpoint of not reducing experiences to variables (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Most importantly, I wondered how English not being my mother tongue had affected different stages of the research process. During the telephone conversation and interviews, participants could hear a different accent every time I spoke, and I wondered if this had any influence over the material they chose to share with me. A small majority of clients prefer to see a therapist with whom they share their cultural background (Cabral & Smith, 2011), as this helps them open up and feel understood; however, this can be different when exploring experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, as clients can fear being judged and shamed by someone of the same cultural background, and may prefer someone else. I therefore also wondered if the accounts women shared with me would have been different if I were a native English speaker. In addition, and while transcribing and analysing participants' accounts, I had to search for the meaning of specific words, as I was not sure of their definition or they were completely new to me. I believe at some level that this may have distanced me from my own interpretation of the participants' accounts. However, at the same time, I feel it has opened up and expanded my interpretations, as some of the definitions resonated with me more strongly, thus bringing richness by opening up new interpretative possibilities.

*A note on the interviews.* As earlier stated, I have previously worked with women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, and I have been trained in, and feel comfortable with, exploring difficult or traumatic experiences. This, I believe, balanced the excitement and anxiety I felt when first meeting with my participants as a researcher. In addition, therapeutically, I work from a compassionate stance, and I believe people do the best they can, being ingenious and creative to meet their own needs. During my interviews, I took the same stance: I wanted to understand, and I was there to listen. This greatly differs from the responses from society that women report, such as feeling questioned and judged, neither safe nor believed. I feel my attitude and experience as a trainee counselling psychologist helped me create a safe and contained space for my participants to explore their experiences, and therefore obtain rich and relevant data for my analysis. Moreover, it made them feel comfortable enough to share the reasons they had to take part in the study, even if I did not ask,

such as the need for more research that gives voice and includes patients'/participants' experience and expertise.

*A note on the analysis.* After seeing participants' reactions and answers to questions three and four of my interview, as previously described, I reflected on how I placed the emphasis on women's experiences when exploring change, instead of on women themselves, making them somehow invisible, like their inner resources, and maybe diminishing them. I was aware I had developed my interview schedule following previous research that had also missed this important distinction. Moreover, I was aware that I had grown up in a patriarchal society that diminishes women, and that psychology had also been influenced by it. However, I wanted to address this during my analysis, reflecting my participants' positions and voices.

Therefore, while carrying out my analysis, I tried to be aware of this as much as possible, positioning the women as the active subjects with agency that they were, and placing the locus of change on them. For example, when analysing Lucy's interview (1186):

*"It's part of mindfulness, I try and catch my thoughts now, when I'm having that, and... I try and distract them. And so he is... so when I'm feeling oh shit, and I think well I know what I can do that will make me feel better, I just go and.. stroke [my cat]."*

Initially, my theme was "distractions that make me feel better"; however, I realised that I was putting the emphasis on the distractions, but not in the fact that Lucy had to know what was helpful to her – in this case, what distractions were helpful to her – and then take action. I was making Lucy's action and agency invisible. I then renamed the theme "knowing distractions that make me feel better", acknowledging Lucy as an active agent, and a knowledgeable agent.

Within this chapter, I have presented my relativist ontological position, my feminist phenomenological standpoint, and my choice of methodology – IPA – and I have also described the recruitment, interview, and analysis processes I undertook. In the following chapter, I present the findings of this analysis.

## Chapter 3: Analysis

### 3.1. Overview

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I present in this chapter the themes that were derived from undertaking an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the data collected during the participants' interviews. As previously described, what is presented here is my interpretation of what women understood as their lived experience of inner resources after sexual assault.

The interviews I undertook were extremely rich, and therefore generated large amounts of data. As the scope of this work does not allow a presentation of all the themes that emerged during the analysis, I was required to take difficult decisions regarding the inclusion and exclusion of some of them. To do so, I have attempted to stay as close as possible to the participants' accounts, and I have focused on the themes that seemed to provide a new insight into their experiences or that were more unforeseen. In addition, themes that were experienced by fewer than four participants were not deemed representative enough, and thus were not considered for analysis.

The overarching themes presented are representative of all the accounts given by the women who took part in the study. Their subordinate themes, due to the variety of participants' experiences and their different textures, are experienced by all or the majority of the women (see Appendix 18 for the table of themes and the participants who illustrated them).

The first superordinate theme presented here is ***"The Will to Live"***, which refers to the drive that keeps women alive and moving forward, and is experienced as inherent to themselves even if it is not always acknowledged or seen. This is divided into three sub-themes: *"The Little Will to Live"*, A Strong(er) Self, and Looking Towards the Future. The second superordinate theme is **The *"Warrior"***, which describes the ongoing battles women fight with themselves, and against external opponents, to maintain and regain the control over their lives, and also to improve the lives of other women. This is also divided into three sub-themes: the *"Battle"*, Regaining Control, and the *"Social Justice Warrior"*. Finally, the third superordinate theme is **The**

**Growing Self**, which portrays the ways in which women create nurturing and safe spaces in which to process and transform, search for knowledge, validate, and vindicate themselves, and thus achieve a more secure and cohesive sense of self and increase their agency, power, and control. This is divided into three themes: Space for the Self, Learning and Developing, and “Bridges”.

All superordinate themes, and the themes that form them, are presented in the diagram below to facilitate understanding. They can all be understood on their own; however, they can also be linked and interact with each other.

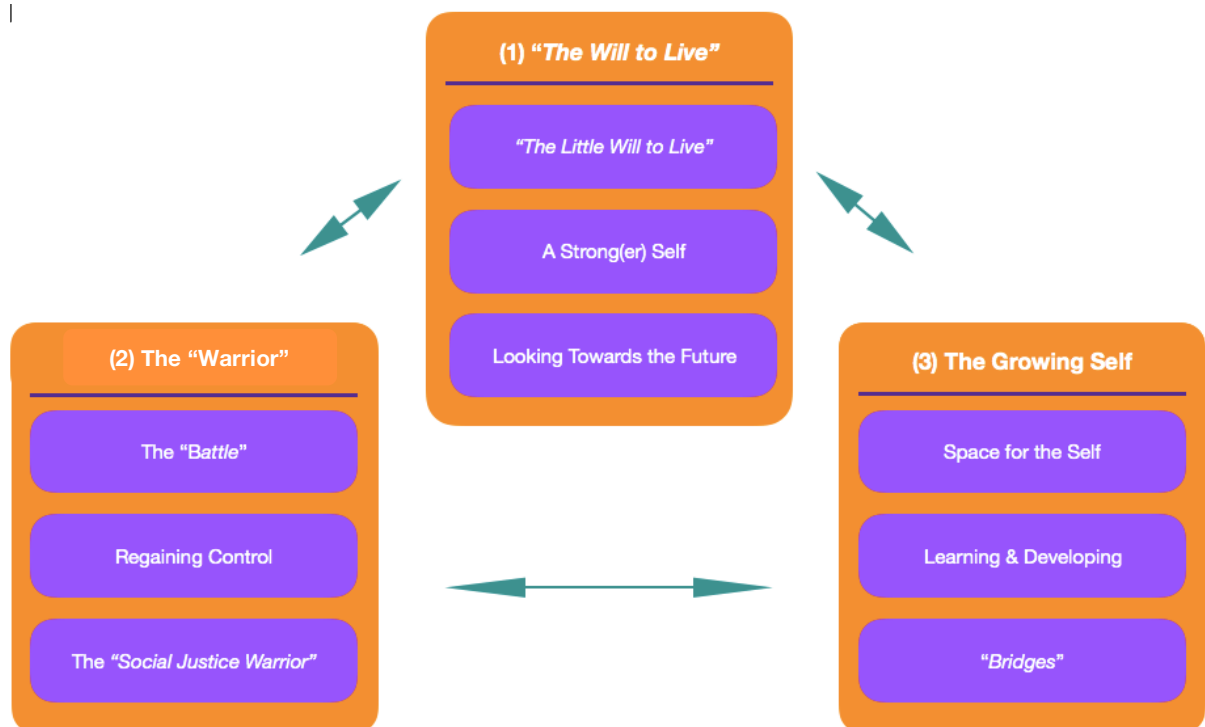


Fig. 3.1. Diagram of overarching themes

In some parts of this chapter, I display a wide variety of quotes that reflect the different experiences women describe. In other parts, I have decided to focus on a unique participant, as I felt she was able to capture and describe in detail something experienced by all of them. To remain fully submerged within IPA methodology and keep the participants' words at the heart of this chapter, linkages between the emergent themes and psychological concepts, previous research, or clinical practice, will be drawn and discussed in the following chapter of this thesis, the Discussion.

As stated in the introduction, throughout this research, and specifically in this chapter, I have tried as much as possible to refer to the experiences of sexual assault and/or rape women experienced by utilising the same words they did, either during our interviews or when directly exploring how they would prefer me to name what

happened to them (see Appendix 19). As the range of words used by women is varied, at times I have also used the term sexual assault and/or rape to describe these experiences, to help understanding and provide continuity of language throughout the chapter. Even if these are not the words most women used, they were the ones displayed on the research advert, and therefore all women who took part in this project felt they somehow identified with them as they responded to it (see Appendix 19 for women's choice of words).

The participants' words are as essential to this chapter as my own. However, to distinguish them and facilitate clarity and understanding throughout the chapter, women's quotations are in italics and in a slightly smaller font. Each quote is followed, within brackets, by the participants' pseudonym and the line where it can be located in the corresponding interview. Words that I have added to the quotes to make them more understandable or situate them within the interview are within square brackets, as well as women's body language, which was directly observed by me during the interview. Finally, words within women's quotes that are underlined are those that women placed a specific emphasis on with their voices during our interviews, and those that are partial words are indicated with a dash at the end.

## **3.2. Superordinate Theme 1: “*The Will to Live*”**

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While exploring their experiences of inner resources after sexual assault, all women described experiencing a drive from within that kept them going. “*The Will to Live*” encompasses the experiences of what participants feel is inherent to themselves but sometimes not seen nor acknowledged: the will that they are always able to count on and that resurfaces in times of need to keep them alive; how their past actions and change over time help them to validate themselves as active agents and remind them of their strength; and how the prospect of a better future continues to motivate them to persist, also reinforcing this will.

### **3.2.1. Theme 1: “*The Little Will to Live*”**

“*The Little Will to Live*” captures the experience reported by all women of an inherent part of themselves, a part that continued to resurface to keep them alive in



times of need. Some participants could only sense its presence, while for others it was a tangible knowledge. A few expressed their surprise and gratitude to it during our interviews.

Claire tentatively describes it:

*"I know that needs to come from me... to feel that I am strong. Um... [silence] [tuts] I don't know, I guess.. there is something.. there's a drop on, like.. there's a drive unbeknownst to me really, because I don't know.. here I am... yeah"* (Claire, 840).

While depicting one of her future goals, Claire implies she is not strong at the present time. After a pause and some time to reflect on it, she seems to challenge her own statement and suggests there may be something with no shape or form that makes her strong, as if it was something separate but within her. Claire firmly links being strong with being alive, as if the latter was proof of the former, as if it was not possible to continue to be alive after sexual assault or rape if one is not strong. It is through deduction that she implies the existence of this force that makes her strong. However, as it cannot be directly acknowledged, seen, or described by her, she seems to need to justify it by acknowledging her own presence in the room, almost already challenging the idea she is not strong.

Likewise, Beth also describes the existence of this force:

*"I don't know. That's the thing. Even, even despite myself. Even despite thinking, you know, I may as well, I may as well be dead. Umm... like.. still.. I'm.. just.. keep going. And.. I can only... You know, I can only assume that there's.. you know.. that I have this, like.. somewhere in me there is this like, this will, this little will to live. Umm"* (Beth, 744).

Similar to Claire and the other women, the acknowledgement of this will is not made directly, but indirectly through its consequence: being alive. Beth experiences it as dynamic rather than static. In addition, it seems her *"Will to Live"* is more powerful than any of her thoughts, including those related to her death, which were depicted as particularly strong during our interview. This *"will"* seems to also be portrayed as something separate from her, and that is even more powerful than Beth herself, as it overrides her by taking her control away and almost forcing her actions: to continue living even when it is really hard. Yet the emotion transmitted here through her voice is not of violence and aggression – as it occurs in experiences of rape and sexual assault when the perpetrator takes the control away – but one of protection and care that comes from the deepest layers of the self. Finally, her repeated emphasis on the word *"despite"* seems to reflect the amazement she experiences at still being alive, as well as the power of this *"will"*, which she further explains:

*“Yeah.. even if I don’t, even if I’m not, I’m not actually like, actively engaging with it, even if I’m not having this like conversation with myself, like: ok you gonna do this, you gonna do this, don’t do this, don’t do that”* (Beth, 932).

The relationship between Beth and the “*Little Will*” does not occur at a known level to her, but a much deeper one, and thus it seems that she does not consider herself an active part in it. However, she is not passive either; she seems simply unaware of or unable to access this depth, and, therefore, almost sidelined when the decision of continuing to be alive is taken.

Like Claire, Beth and most women linked this drive to their strength:

*“There’s been plenty of times where I’ve just been like.. like wanting... wanting to stop. Wanting... to die, wanting... it just to come to an end. But you know I keep going.. and keep going, and keep going... and... [silence] Even again, you know, against my will, I keep going. So, it’s just sort of like.. that in itself... is a strength that I don’t know where it comes from, I don’t know...where it is. But it’s there”* (Beth, 725).

Beth defines and gives value to the will to live by not only linking it to her strength, but also conceptualising it as such – as a capacity to prevail in front of difficult circumstances. This sense of constancy and continuity is echoed by the verbal tense she uses, present perfect, giving the idea that she started to “*keep going*” in the past and she still does in the present, but not knowing when this action will stop if it does. Besides, she also locates this will somewhere within herself, but is unable to trace it back to its origins or components. Maybe, for this reason, she uses the strength of her voice to validate its existence and its value during our interview, as if saying it with conviction and hearing it several times was helping her believe in it.

Furthermore, she experiences the “*Little Will to Live*” as something permanent, as she provides, in this quote and during the whole interview, several examples of instances when she did not want to continue living but she did. On the one hand, this maybe helped her remember how much she can trust that the “*Will to Live*” will keep her alive; on the other, maybe she needed me to become the witness of her own existence, and, therefore, of the existence of the will. This permanency was further described by her:

*“Even when you think.. it, it needs to be all over... is sort of like.. there’s still a part of you, no matter how small... that’s like “carry on”, and I guess that, that part of me is always... is always there. Is.. is that is, it’s the reason I guess that I am still here”* (Beth, 898).

In this later quote, Beth describes her “*Little Will to Live*” as an element of herself that is permanently present. It is hidden or cannot be seen, yet it is strong and

powerful enough – even when small – to oppose the deathly thoughts that invade her, becoming bigger as those thoughts lose ground. It is precisely this invisibility, and its changing and dynamic nature, that makes it so difficult for Beth, and other women, to clearly identify its nature, and perhaps for this reason some described it as a part of themselves, while others considered their own selves. Nonetheless, Beth holds it in high regard:

*“So.. it’s.. it’s there I think it is just.. me. I wouldn’t identify any... kind of part of my personality that is.. is that.. that is strong. It’s just like... It’s just something.. something is there that.. is keeping me going. And I [smiling] am very grateful [laughing] for it” (Beth, 777).*

She seems to clearly recognise it and almost consider it as the reason she is still alive. During our interview, she expressed her gratitude to it while smiling, looking at me grounded and strong, with her body straight as if she was not afraid to take the space in the room, and looking at me with a fixed gaze as if she was not afraid of what I may see. Finally, she laughed warmly, as if she had remembered all the great things she has been able to experience while being alive.

Even if Beth’s words are a clear illustration of what most women experienced, women described different textures and shades of the *“Little Will to Live”*. Lucy experiences it as a concrete part of herself that she named *“the angel”*:

*“It’s almost like having a..... a... an angel and the devil on your shoulder and... to have, you know, the imagery of them whispering into your head [smiles]... and.. um... it, it, it’s like having.. the.... a... You know, the devil is the nasty thoughts, and the angel are the, are the, the.. the strong thoughts the... the self-love thoughts [takes air] um... the self-compassion” (Lucy, 2078).*

As in many religious writings, Lucy’s experience of the angel is in contrast with that of the devil, the antagonist, perhaps helping her better delimit and understand this part of herself. She appears to position herself in between the two while having her own mind, and smiles when suggesting a rather comical image of two tiny figures talking to her at the same time. However, it seems the fun of her smile does not match the sadness of her eyes, maybe hiding the difficulty of holding two different and opposite sides of herself: the battle between the good and the bad, life against death.

Lucy’s *“devil”* seems to be understood as bad, harmful, and having malice. She strongly links her sense of self to the *“angel”*, the caring and warm part, by, for example, describing it not as love but *“self-love”*, thus blurring the lines between the two. This may contribute to the vision of herself as someone good, pure, even after what happened, and thus deserving of good things – a feeling most survivors of sexual violence struggle with.

Emily's experience is slightly different from the others, even if she also conceptualises the "*Little Will to Live*" as possessing good qualities:

*"I've always had sort of consistent feedback about having a warm, empathic and compassionate sort of stance of working with clients um.. but I would like to be able to use that towards me. That's there somewhere [smiles] somewhere inside me. Um... I'm not very good at accessing it for me. Can give it all out to everyone else. Am.. I guess that's not really the question... I guess that's something I do know I have.. but I don't use regularly"* (Emily, 1698).

She is the only participant who describes how other people are able to observe and acknowledge this goodness within her. What is more, it seems that it has been through interacting with them that she has gained knowledge of its existence, even if it has been permanently there. This benign and warm element is removed from her self, and almost described as a tool that can be "*used*" when needed. It can be "*given*" away to others as if it was a present, yet she struggles to access it and thus provide it to herself. This may reflect Emily's wish to be seen as good and as someone that does not deserve, nor deserved, harm, hence protecting herself from it, or perhaps it reflects her own self-doubt and hesitancy in believing she is good, and therefore not really deserving of the benevolence of her own self. Nonetheless, her remarks express the frustration she feels in front of this difficulty.

All participants appeared to describe the existence of the "*Little Will to Live*". However, the experience of its manifestation and women's trust in its strength and accessibility was varied. Again, Beth clearly expresses what most of them felt:

*"Like.. it's just like a latent, I guess a latent feeling"* (Beth, 861).

She describes it as existing but maybe hidden or dormant until the circumstances require its manifestation. Similarly, Lucy stated:

*"It was there.. and it definitely, in, it definitely came out when I needed it um... [silence] and... I think, you know, it's al-, it's always these parts in someone, but it's just that sometimes I, I, I wasn't listening, or I couldn't hear the voice"* (Lucy, 2135).

She depicts it as inherent to each person, a core part of the self. At the same time, she seems to depict it as a separate entity, as, through the repetition of the word "*definitely*", she shows she has no doubt this part will come out when needed, to help or maybe rescue her when she is not able to do so herself. The "*Little Will to Live*" is then a reliable part, even when it cannot be seen. Besides, she raises the difficulty experienced by all women of being aware of it, wondering if it was something she did not or could not pay attention to, clearly displaying her ability to reflect and challenge herself.

Other participants experienced it as something more tangible, and thus they were more able to access it:

*“Um... but ultimately, no matter what happens, I know some way I’ll find a way of surviving [silence]. I’d like to do more than just survive, but I know that I will always survive. And I don’t, I don’t doubt that. So, it’s given me an internal strength to know that, no matter how bad it is, I can overcome it, I’ve been through worse...” (Sarah, 907).*

Sarah is completely aware of her *“Little Will to Live”*, which seems to manifest in the form of knowledge. It has been through overcoming diverse challenging situations that she now appears certain of its existence, and she implies a symbiotic relationship with it: she trusts it will keep her alive in any circumstances – in the present and future – and the *“Will to Live”* makes her feel stronger when facing them. The *“will”* meets the essential need: being alive, while it seems this allows Sarah space to think about higher needs: improving her quality of life. At the same time, and through her use of language, she seems to integrate the *“will”* into her sense of self, shifting from herself to the *“will”* as subjects through the extract.

Furthermore, it is also this tangible knowledge that Sarah seems to tap into in difficult situations:

*“In front of bad things I think: I will” (Sarah, 925).*

These two words seem to capture this strength in a tangible way, almost summarising the experience described above, and they seem to provide her with hope as the action is situated in a future where she has already accomplished the challenge she is facing in the present.

The *“Little Will to Live”* is an inherent and permanent part of the self that continues to resurface in times of need, keeping women alive, and at times providing the resilience and strength needed to conquer difficulties. This is further explored in the following theme.

### **3.2.2. Theme 2: A Strong(er) Self**

In the previous theme, Sarah was the only participant to report how overcoming several difficult experiences in the past led her to not doubt the knowledge and effectiveness of her *“Little Will to Live”*. However, all participants described feeling validated and gaining strength from overcoming difficult situations in the past, as well as increasing the belief they had in their ability to overcome a difficult situation in the

present or future, by telling themselves they had already overcome “*the worst*”: sexual assault and/or rape. This theme captures and depicts these experiences.

As already stated in the Methodology chapter, I feel it is extremely important to highlight here how the focus of this theme – the source of validation and strength women experience – does not come from the difficult past experiences per se, but from the actions women took when confronted with them, how they managed and overcame them, and from the women themselves.

During our interview, Kate did not doubt her capacity to overcome difficult experiences:

*“Kate.- Yeah, I think that is me. I think psychology is... [silence, tuts] the study of humans who’ve...you know.. been hit by trucks and...*

*Anna.- mh mh*

*K.- and just.. walked away. You know.. maybe had a crawl or two in between but... kept walking*

*A.- Is that how you feel?*

*K.- Yeah [smiles, laughs]*

*A.- [laughs]*

*K.- Yeah [smiling] it’s just like they hit you with an 8-wheeler, and then I was like.. ok.. I may as well get up and... keep walking*

*A.- mh mh*

*K.- Um... so yeah...*

*A.- mh*

*K.- yeah.. [smiles]*

*A.- [smiles, silence]” (Kate, 3323).*

Kate describes the magnitude and heaviness of what happened to her by comparing it to being hit by an object that is big, heavy, and cannot be stopped when coming directly at her. The powerlessness sensed from this image is rapidly contrasted with the power of her response to it. First, she does not doubt her capacity to continue to move forward, even if she struggles and is slow at first, thus acknowledging the difficulties of doing so after such an event. Second, it seems the acts of standing up and continuing to move forward in a variety of ways are ones that require no effort for her, and, therefore, are understood as another choice within an equally “simple” pool of options.

It is also important to reflect here how Kate distances herself from the phenomenon by switching from talking about herself to describing what psychology is, and only then describing her experience. Following that, and only once I return the focus back to her, she answers personally, smiling and then laughing as if she nervously recognises herself and her experience, and can then validate and own it, somehow celebrating that she got up and “*kept walking*”.

Smiles and laughs were present during all the interviews I undertook and, as in the above fragment, it appeared they had different meanings and functions. On the one hand, smiles and laughs were used by women as a way to distance themselves from the difficulties, from parts of themselves, or from their aggressor(s) and experience(s), and sometimes to counteract apparently opposite emotions. On the other, they were also an expression of women's joy, pride, or validation when acknowledging their achievements and capacities.

Aside from not doubting her capacity to "keep walking", Kate is also certain of her strength:

*"I guess I see myself... [silence] as somebody who's been through a lot but come out the other side. Um... [silence] and... I think... [sighs] I see myself as stronger than a lot of people. Um... but having suffered more. So sometimes it doesn't look like I'm... quite strong [silence]"* (Kate, 3286).

The vision she has of herself is of someone capable, able to endure hardship, and to overcome difficulties and experiences that most people will never face. Interestingly, it is precisely because she has been challenged at these extreme levels that she appears to be more certain of, and to rely on, her strength. Furthermore, once she moves the focus from the internal world to the external, she tells me how her strength is not always apparent, and therefore is questioned in her everyday life. This doubt and hesitation, as reported by most of the women in this project, sometimes comes from within, but mainly from other people. During our interview, Kate told me about different circumstances in which this occurred. The following extract is her response to a group of professors she felt questioned or failed to acknowledge her strength and capacity to undertake a challenging course:

*"It's still.. it's like... it's a fucking walk in the park [smiling]. Compared to things that have happened to me in my life. And so... when you have someone question that.. [laughing and smiling ironically] it's just like.. [silence] What?... I'm sorry?... But unless you survived... ten years of suicidal thoughts... piss off! [laughs]"* (Kate, 2722).

In the face of demanding situations, the dichotomy between a strong and capable vision of the self women have, and the doubts others express, seem to exacerbate, as the position from where they judge the difficulty of a task is completely different. What is considered difficult by others is understood almost as a mundane task for Kate, as it is clearly not harder than some of her past experiences. Her laugh and smile, as well as the rhetorical questions, seem to reflect her frustration and incredulity when faced with the questioning of her capability and strength, and her

irony and the language she uses may reflect the anger she feels at not being valued by others. Finally, Kate adopts a position of power, depicting others as not knowing, and thus not having the right to question her.

Likewise, Beth reaffirms her strength:

*“I’m much more like.. you know, well the worst has already happened to me, so, like, you know, I’m gonna.. I’m gonna keep going, because, I’m still here, so.. you know.. I’ve, I’m obviously strong enough to come back from that...”* (Beth, 1152).

Her experience of sexual assault is conceptualised as *“the worst”*, something shared with other women (Sarah, 1181). However, it is interesting to note how, similarly to Kate, Beth describes surviving the assault and continuing to be alive as an anecdote rather than something she wanted or fought for, maybe reflecting some incredulity around her survival. She also seems to imply she felt lost when this occurred, but has searched and developed to find and connect with herself again. Being alive and overcoming assault seem to become irrefutable proof of her strength.

Furthermore, Sarah expressed:

*““But actually I am [strong], because all that happened to me and I am not a wreck!”* (Sarah, 1447).

Thus, for her, it is not only being alive that validates her strong sense of self, but not having been completely crushed and perhaps destroyed by her experiences of sexual violence – as some women she knew and referred to during our interview had been – implies she had managed them well and was able to overcome them.

In addition, Lucy’s strong sense of self is not only linked to overcoming the experience of sexual assault:

*“I realise I’m an incredibly strong person. It, it takes, it takes... when I tell people that.. how... [takes air] I was ridiculously scared, and yet I still had the strength within me to go to the police, on my own, in the middle, in.. in the capital [takes air] um... and that I had the conviction to do that, and I got through this experience, um... I think fucking hell!! That was... what I did was incredible! [opening her eyes widely]”* (Lucy, 1995).

Her strength is also linked to overcoming various internal and external difficulties linked to her experience that required her courage, strength, and determination. She clearly locates the strength within herself, yet she seems to be amazed and surprised by her own capacity, which is reflected in her use of language, use of exclamation, and wider opening of her eyes, accompanied by several pauses that helped her reflect on it.



Participants also described gaining strength and validation through acknowledging change over time. As Beth exemplified:

*“And every year that passes from every one of them, and I’m still here, and probably doing better than I was, sort of.. like, well, then I’ve, I’ve got the strength to continue, have the strength to continue, and I am still going [with a higher pitch tone, smiles and swings her folded right arm towards the front of her body]” (Beth, 1155).*

She acknowledges the constant improvement in her life and links it to the certainty and validation of her strength and *“Will to Live”*, which seem to grow accordingly with time. Her tone of voice changes at the end of the sentence, slowly moving towards a higher pitch, and is followed by a smile and the swing of her arm towards the front, seeming to embody the celebration of her capacity to overcome difficult situations, build on her strength, and validate herself. In addition, her triumphant body language could also represent her victory against her perpetrator’s expectations, and thus prove him wrong.

Kate similarly acknowledges changes over time:

*“I think, I’m in such a different place now, than I was. [silence] Um... [sighs] you know even two years ago now, before I started the course...” (Kate, 1607).*

Kate’s long pause and sigh seem to give her time to reflect on the significant positive changes her life has undergone. She seems rather surprised to acknowledge they all have occurred in a relatively short period of time.

Finally, Emily validates herself and finds strength in acknowledging and valuing her present:

*“Sort of questioning what have I got? And then, going into actually talking: well actually, I’m still alive, I’m a human being, I’ve got my hair, I’ve got my feet, I’ve got my eyes, um... I’ve got my heart [laughs] Um...I’ve got my freedom probably is the biggest thing...” (Emily, 1047).*

She reflects on more existential matters, rather than on everyday activities. Following and reciting the song *“Ain’t Got No, I Got Life”* by Nina Simone<sup>4</sup> – one of the objects she brought to our interview – she does not focus on what makes her different from others: absence, as occurs in the beginning of the song, but on what makes her similar to them: her humanity, highlighted by her voice and her valued possessions, including freedom, which she later equates to *“life”* (Emily, 1246). These may help her feel more connected to others and less alone, hence reinforcing her sense of self. In

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<sup>4</sup> Jazz musician and black freedom activist who experienced domestic violence perpetrated by several of her romantic partners.

addition, as in the song, she seems to be building a mental list of these possessions, which may help her to quantify them and thus experience them as more tangible. Finally, her laugh after referring to her “heart” may reflect the discrepancy she experiences when not feeling alive when she indeed is.

Overcoming rape and/or sexual assault as well as being alive seem to become irrefutable proof of women’s strength. At the same time, they increase their self-belief and validate their sense of self by being able to see themselves as capable beings, which is also explored in the third overarching theme. This allows women to face hardships with confidence, not only in the present but also in the future.

### **3.2.3. Looking Towards the Future**

In the previous sub-theme, I presented how women felt validated and reminded of their strength through surviving and overcoming difficult situations in the past, continuing to improve their lives, and acknowledging change as time went by. In looking towards the future, I attempt to illustrate how they also felt hopeful about the possibilities of achieving their goals in the future and curious about how far they could go, which in turn, seemed to generate the energy and the wish that kept and keeps them moving forward.

*“I guess just the, the potential to build more, and the potential to do things, you know. You, you can’t, you can’t do things if you are dead. So... [takes air] it’s just sort of like, I feel like life has so much.. potential, and so many good things and, I’ve got those good things in the relationships around me, but you know, it’s so much potential for more, umm.. you know.. i, in, in the future... That umm... Yeah, that’s what keeps me going. Encourages me to... like heal, from those, th... things that’ve happened” (Beth, 675).*

Starting from an already satisfactory enough present, Beth seems to hold a vision of a future that is filled with valuable prospects for her, and accordingly, she shows excitement, almost curiosity, about it. She also seems to feel she holds some control over these future possibilities. First, and through emphasising an active verb, she positions herself in the future as a capable agent, as someone who is able to develop and create. This position is also challenging the stillness and passivity death holds. Second, she seems to imply there is a directly proportional relationship between feeling better and improving her future prospects, the former being something she is actually working on, through, for example, going to therapy, and thus increasing the

latter. It is then her own vision of an encouraging future that motivates her to continue to move forward and “*heal*”.

Beth was not the only participant who used the word “*heal*” (become whole) when expressing her experiences of inner resources after sexual assault – Sarah (1256) and Lucy (2401) also did. On all these occasions, participants directly linked the verb “to heal” with having time for themselves in a nurturing environment, and referred not only to overcoming their experience of sexual assault and/or rape, but also to rebuilding a strong and whole sense of self, and living a life free of pain and distress, thus really encompassing every area in a woman’s body and life affected by sexual assault and/or rape.

Emily also looks towards a better future:

*“Um.. I think it helps me hang on to the bit that I think will maybe, th, that I can find some sort of freedom from this [her past experiences of sexual violence]. Because I do have a life, I do have a home, I do have.. like I can support myself I do have family, I do have friends”* (Emily, 1256).

The experiences of past assaults make Emily feel captive. She tentatively describes how she holds on to a small and fragile part that is able to envision a life where these experiences are left behind. Her sense of agency and this future is validated and reaffirmed as the extract unfolds. At the start, she seems to externalise the part she holds on to, to then reassert herself through the use of “*I*”, implying she is the one that will make it possible. Finally, she reinforces the veracity and materialisation of this future by grounding it in the present, where she sees herself as a capable and non-lacking person, as expressed through the strength of her voice on the verbs “*do*” and “*can*”.

Sarah also grounds her wishes of a better future in her present:

*“They [my brothers] do give me hope that... there are decent men out there. That want to have a, a supportive partnership relationship, yeah, and that, they are not all evil, out to get women [laughs] Yeah”* (Sarah, 2269).

Sarah seems to situate her brothers and other men in opposite positions: good and bad. Her laugh at the end of the sentence seems to reflect the release she experiences after expressing her view of men out loud, as well as the downplaying of this same view, as she quickly stops laughing. Her hope for a better future and the possibility of finding a good partner for herself stands from the existence of good men in her life at the present time (her brothers). This perhaps makes the possibility of finding a good partner more tangible.

The idea of a better future is a powerful one, and women continue to pursue it even when it cannot be grounded in their past or present:

*"I've not given up on therapy, just not having... [I] had a lot of therapy... lot of different ones that haven't worked, I haven't sort of given up and thought... clear I'm a lost cause. I think maybe, something will work.."* (Emily, 1786).

Emily details here how, even when past and present attempts at therapy have not proven successful, she continues to trust and believe that change is possible in the future. It is the existence of this possibility, no matter how small, that provides her with the motivation and energy to continue trying, to persevere with tenacity, suggesting that this is a powerful self-generated drive. Later in the interview, Emily named this her "*stubbornness*", and described it as "*something that kind of keeps me going*" (Emily, 1668), giving the impression that it may also be linked to her "*Little Will to Live*", and both may reinforce each other.

All women described how the thought of a better future is helpful in the present. However, this link between present and future seemed to become stronger when the abstract possibilities of the future became concrete ones:

*"I guess is the idea that, if I.. if I stopped... getting on with it.. [silence] you know... w... my purpose is lost. My purpose to... help, children and.. and... and... get to where I want to"* (Kate, 1852).

Kate is quite ambivalent at the beginning of this fragment, as if she wants to distance herself from the idea of her own death. Like Beth, she conceives death as stillness, a lack of movement that would, in addition, rob her of an essential part of what gives meaning to her life, and is linked to her own identity: her "*purpose*". During our interview, Kate spoke about her job working with children and adults with learning disabilities, which she referred to as her "*happy place*" (1662). She also told me about the time when she started working in this area:

*"So it just changed everything. I had a reason, I had something... to look forward to. I had something on the horizon that I could get to..."* (Kate, 2256).

Kate highlights the importance of this time and the tremendous and fast impact it had on her life. Suddenly, she had a cause to pursue, a goal that shifted her vision towards the future. It seems it almost became a reason for her to continue to be alive. Kate uses the word "*horizon*" to refer to her future, as if implying there is more than what we can see, and she is curiously looking forward to it. Claire was also looking forward to achieving future goals:

*“For me the only thing I can do is carry on... Kind of believing in what, what I believe in like, maybe working in.. for a women’s charity or setting one up eventually which I really... would like to do...”* (Claire, 796).

She implies she has no other options but to continue to persevere and hold on to her ideas, which she seems to be content about. Her goals are linked to one of her interests, feminist theory, and even if they are not completely defined, she appears excited about achieving them. Similarly, Emily also has a clear goal:

*“Um.. I think probably, um... [silence] How much I love doing the work that I do. Um... and wanting to continue doing that, I guess”* (Emily, 1365).

Emily describes her present work as a source of validation, interest, and pleasurable feelings, and clearly expresses her intention to maintain it and continue to enjoy it in her future.

Women saw themselves as capable agents of development through overcoming difficulties in the past, and expressed excitement towards a hopeful future, which in turn motivated them to pursue their wishes and purpose.

This first overarching theme illustrates the drive women experience as inherent to themselves, and that continues to resurface in times of need. Women validate their strength and increase their self-belief through overcoming difficult experiences, and conceptualising themselves as capable, confident, and active agents of their transformation. This allows women to acknowledge their achievements and imagine a better future they are excited to experience. As previously stated, the three overarching themes can also be linked and interact with each other, and interestingly, women’s validation and increased self-belief is also present on the third overarching theme, The Growing Self.

### **3.3. Superordinate Theme 2: The “Warrior”**

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This second overarching theme, The “Warrior”, portrays the fighting spirit all women illustrated in their accounts. The first sub-theme, the “Battle”, portrays the long-term and invisible fight women continue to wage in their everyday lives, long after their experience(s) of assault and/or rape occurred. The second theme, Regaining Control,

depicts the different ways in which women regain control over their lives, either by directly taking action or by actively resisting the loss. Finally, the “*Social Justice Warrior*” portrays the responsibility women feel towards other women, and how they want to transform their experiences and the society they live in, to make them better.

### **3.3.1. The “Battle”**

Throughout all the interviews, women described experiencing a continuous and permanent battle that extended long after their experiences of rape and/or sexual assault. This battle was mainly implicit in women’s accounts and rarely described in detail, making it invisible at first. Women described fighting to maintain control over their lives, and felt they were the only ones responsible for managing the consequences of events they did not have any control over. In this battle, continuing with daily activities or goals signifies a win, while stopping or dying, a defeat. As Beth depicts it:

*“Don’t want those things [experiences of sexual assault] to be the thing that stops me from... [takes air] like.. achieving my potential, or whatever, umm... Because isn’t isn’t, is not fair. Like those are things done to me, and.. against my will, and... and... [silence] Yeah, I, I, I, I want to be, I want to.. like... win, in that... in that battle right. ’cause if I don’t, if I don’t keep going then... They win, and I don’t want that” (Beth, 689).*

Her lack of control and power at the time of the assault are clearly expressed here, and are in contrast with her sense of being the one who has to deal with the consequences of it. This imbalance is qualified as unjust by her, almost cruel. The pause in her explanation seems to allow her to shift her focus from the past and what happened to her – the things that she cannot change – to the future and her goals. Being sexually assaulted is experienced by Beth as something that slows and holds her down, taking away her agency and not allowing her to develop her abilities or accomplish her goals. Thus, she experiences her present as being a “*battle*”, a difficult and lengthy struggle in which she is required to be resilient, and where her lack of movement is understood as a defeat. It is through the strength of her voice that Beth seems to tell me she does not want her enemy to win; however, it is not clear who this enemy is: an abstract one, her experiences, the perpetrator, her thoughts, something else, or all at the same time.

Even if Beth describes it as a battle, the fact that it is a lengthy one made me consider naming this theme “the war”. However, I felt describing it this way, not only

would take me far from her words, but would automatically imply that there are many moments in which women feel they can rest between fights. Yet, and as participants describe below, this is not the case. It is a battle – a long-term one – precisely because women feel they have to be constantly aware, always ready to fight and overcome their fears to continue walking.

Some of the participants provided clear examples of this battle in their everyday lives. Beth, for example, while telling me about her struggle with self-harm, explained:

*"[I am] having this like conversation with myself, like, ok, you gonna do this, you gonna do this, don't do this, don't do that. Sometimes I do that, sometimes I have the [inaudible: power?] to fight it with myself, about whether I s-, do... something bad or not, and.. umm..."* (Beth, 933).

She clearly states how this battle is with two different parts of herself: the thoughts that suggest she will be better off dead, "*the voices*" (769) as she calls them during the interview, and the part of herself that wants to live. First, it seems she experiences this combat as an arm-wrestling match, as something visceral. However, she also seems to imply that a rational list of pros and cons is a part of it.

However, at other times, this battle is experienced between the self and an external party:

*"I'm not gonna let this [sexual assault] ruin, this one and only opportunity that I've got to go travelling around [omitted]. He is not gonna take that from me, and I carried on"* (Sarah, 1745).

Sarah seems to distinguish here the effects that the experience of assault on the one hand, and the perpetrator on the other, can have over her and her life. She completely externalises these parties, positioning herself as clearly fighting against them. While the experience of sexual assault seems to have the power to stop her doing something she enjoys, or destroy it while she is attempting it, the perpetrator seems to be able to deduct, almost steal, something from her own persona, from her own self. Nonetheless, she seems determined to fight against both.

For other participants, the battle was about freeing themselves from what had happened, and fighting to restore what had been taken:

*"I think that I should always be.. both events... I need to kind of undo the wrongness that was sort.. put into me. Um... and the only way that I can do that is by... just doing stuff all the time"* (Emily, 1372).

Emily seems to experience her assault as something that tainted her, as if the perpetrator, or the experience itself, had introduced the badness, unfairness, or injustice within her, almost transforming her own self, and clearly reflecting the

violation of her physical boundaries during the assault. As a consequence, she seems to work really hard at separating herself from this invasive part, and thus takes continuous action to free herself from it. Later on in our interview, she further explains:

*“It just... makes me feel that anything I do, um... [silence] is never going... is like I said before, I have, I feel I have to be doing something to redeem myself to prove that I’m not that person that deserves to be spat on. Not that person... I feel quite angry right now... [tenses body] Um... I’m not that person. And I am not a person who... deserves that, or deserved that. Um... so therefore, I need to redeem myself by proving that I am not that person” (Emily, 2133).*

In this extract, Emily compares the assault to receiving someone else’s slime and contempt without being able to respond. She appears to feel disgusted, and needs to restore her purity by freeing herself from the dirtiness and unworthiness; a goal she knows she will never reach no matter how hard she tries. In addition, Emily speaks quickly and stops suddenly to connect with and verbalise the anger she feels – indicated by the emphasis in her voice and the tension in her body – as she also seems to reassert and cleanse herself by separating from the person that was abused, and thus from the injustice and the feelings that arose from it. Finally, I also wonder if her anger is triggered as she realises she is putting all the responsibility on herself, as there is no mention of the perpetrator(s)’ responsibility or acceptance of wrongdoing during the interview.

Similarly, Lucy also experiences the need for something to be restored:

*“I really needed to [inaudible: start?] re-humanising myself in that sense, that.. it, it it’s, it’s... Um... [silence] no I won’t let this happen. I won’t let people get away with this. I, I’m worthwhile. Um... [silence] and that’s, that’s what it’s about. Is about getting myself back of really, a, a voice, and, and demanding the space for myself in this world” (Lucy, 2651).*

Lucy felt less human after what happened to her; however, similarly to Beth, who or what is responsible for this is not clear. It is also unclear to what she refers when stating she has to regain her humanity: if she is referring here to her condition as a human being, her essence as a person, her self, or if she is referring to her goodness or kindness; qualities that are taken into account when valuing women within the society in which she lives. Either way, however, she seems to feel her value is unjustly diminished, as is her right to be, something she must restore by punishing this abstract other, reasserting herself by setting clear limits, and cohering her sense of self. In addition, and as for many women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, it seems difficult for Lucy to stay with painful past feelings, which may be linked to moments where she felt impotent, powerless, and worthless. Moreover, it



seems she uses the silences in this fragment to redirect her focus and her speech towards the actions she is able to take.

The sense of something being lost or stolen, or the possibility of it, was experienced by all women, as well as the sense of this being an ongoing battle:

*"I think... my... struggle with intimacy will be... life long. I don't.. foresee it ever being... perfect. Um... so I struggle... day to day to be.. softer. And kinder. And... not as... [silence] controlling, and... trying to move away from intimacy. It is... not something daily, but something that happens quite often. Um.. [silence] and it... in the line of work we are in... when people talk about their own experiences it always comes up [silence] so it's always there... And whether or not it... affects me deeply... or... improves my understanding, and... you know, affects because of the posi-, positively, it always affects me... in some way. And it's always gonna be there. Um... I think... [silence] is not that I've accepted... that the events in my life... with that in particular, will always affect me. I've not... accepted it [silence] but I know... that it will"* (Kate, 3053).

Kate seems to assume there is a unique and ideal way to be close to others, and even if she seems to imply she will never achieve it, she continues to attempt to connect with parts of herself that can bring her nearer to it, portraying herself as a resilient person. She gives the idea that these parts are in opposition to more rigid and protective parts of herself, thus they are maybe more vulnerable, and consequently require her to be courageous and brave to connect with them. Kate also describes feeling that these experiences will affect her life permanently, making this battle a long-term one. Finally, she makes an important distinction between accepting and knowing. By *"not accepting"*, she gives the idea she is resisting, as accepting here seems to imply not fighting, and losing the battle. However, by *"knowing"*, she seems to be acknowledging and validating the everyday efforts she makes to minimise the impact these experiences have on her everyday life, including her work.

In this battle, women feel slowed down and held back due to the consequences of someone else's actions, and are required to be resilient. The battle, no matter who against, or against which parts of the self, is a long one, and is about women regaining or maintaining their agency, power, and control – over themselves and their lives – and freeing themselves by regaining their worth, voice, and space.

### **3.3.2. Theme 2: Regaining Control**

This theme portrays the diverse ways women found to regain and maintain control over their lives, their bodies, and/or their minds. As illustrated by participants' accounts, at times they counteracted with direct action to regain this control. However, at others, they focused on maintaining the control they had by actively resisting its loss.

*"I was crying almost every day, am... I couldn't go to my course, like... I, I couldn't concentrate on anything um... And so... it is kind of.. was bizarre that I could sit down and read a book, because I couldn't do that with any other book [laughing] Um... [tuts] and then just seemed to... And it was, it felt quite soothing. Mmh..." (Claire, 553).*

Claire describes a rather chaotic time when she felt she had no control at all, and she still seems to not believe or know how she was able to find some calmness within this turmoil by reading a book. Claire's disbelief appears to be accentuated by her language, as she describes something that has already happened as if it was not real. The book, *"Not That Kind of Girl"* by Lena Dunham, describes an experience of rape and its aftermath. I wonder if seeing some of her feelings and struggles reflected in it helped her to feel more connected and less strange to those around her, as she described later on in the interview feeling *"less alone"* (427) when reading it. In addition, I wonder if her laugh hides the sadness she experiences at acknowledging she was not able to undertake activities she enjoyed and wanted to do at the time, almost as if she had also been robbed of something else.

As many other women with similar experiences, Claire also described using drugs during this time of her life to improve her mood and feel more in control (1349), and similarly, Kate (2984) described feeling in control through sex, during a comparable period of her life. Interestingly, women also described using these resources for a short period of time, and stopped using them as they found other ways to regain control that were not damaging to themselves.

In contrast, soothing was not something that helped Emily feel in control:

*"I think I feel quite a lot of my memories from... what happened... are experienced to hit like in my body here [pointing towards her legs with her fingers]. Um... And I just hate feeling relaxed. I hate feeling that sort of just... um... that describe it, it's like... everything that, say meditation or mindfulness ... or whatever encourages... like soothing yourself, I guess the soothing affiliation system, really. I... I can't access, because it just reminds me of that. Because I didn't have control then. I stayed still, I didn't move. And when I start to talk about it sometimes I feel as if my legs are going again. So, I have to sort of like move [starts moving her legs side to side while sitting on the chair] to make sure I can actually stand up" (Emily, 302).*

She clearly expresses her loathing for calmness by repeating the word “hate” and highlighting it with her voice. She seems to be aware of the reasons behind this feeling, and distances herself from it through utilising jargon, as if adopting her professional role. The quote also emanates some sadness related to not being able to experience the stillness as soothing, and the difficulties she experiences when attempting to. She appears to move away from this sadness, and thus the stillness, by taking action, almost as if checking that her body still responds to her, that she is in control, and that she can escape any possible threat and stop this feeling.

Kate, like other participants and many women reliving experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, also described using her senses to regain control:

*“Sometimes when I’m with my current boyfriend, I start to think it’s... my ex, I get this weird feeling, and I can’t get it out of my head and I need to focus on him, and how he feels, and how he smells, and what he looks like” (Kate, 2409).*

Her feelings and thoughts are clearly connected and influence each other, almost making it difficult to distinguish which one she is experiencing: her thoughts or her feelings. Reflecting this, and to counteract the loss of control she starts to experience, she does not only anchor herself in the present through her senses – smell, touch, sight – but also through another person, and possibly through the emotions he brings up in her.

Aside from experiencing the loss of control and power as a sudden occurrence in which memories, thoughts, or feelings would take over their minds and bodies, several participants also described experiencing this loss as a gradual process that started as something small and weak and developed into something big and powerful, making it harder for them to stop it as it progressed. This knowledge allowed them to regain control at the beginning and in the middle of the process, as Emily exemplifies while explaining how and when the song “*Ain’t Got No, I Got Life*” was helpful to her:

*“So if I’m at that point where I think that I could tip over into... [silence] I don’t know, ruminating or... getting stuck in just... don’t know... being anxious, I don’t know how to explain it, is almost like... [silence] I guess going back to sorts of trauma symptoms and getting... triggered more easily, I do, I don’t know how to explain it. Is like a see.. is like a seesaw... sort of like that, um and.. If I feel that I’m heading towards having a bad day, or a bad week” (Emily, 1112).*

Emily seems to sense the advancement of this process as she describes noticing changes in her mood that stop her from moving forward smoothly. She appears to experience this process as swaying from one side of herself to another; from the side

that is certain and has the control, to the one that can lose it at any moment, in a movement that apparently cannot be stopped. However, and as previously described, this song reminds her of what she possesses, which seems to help her hold on to the side where she feels in control and thus stop the swaying.

Songs, and music in general, are powerful instruments that are used in many cultures to connect with and evoke different feelings. Beth also brought music as an object to our interview, the album “*Lemonade*” by Beyoncé, and she, too, describes using it to regain her agency:

*“So I will always, I’m looking for kind of happy... or positive... songs... Ummm. When I’m down to bring me up, I guess”* (Beth, 582).

She creates the impression that she is able to establish the mood she wants to be in, positioning herself already in a powerful position. She describes using “*Lemonade*” to change her mood. As a consequence, this may not only make her feel more in control, but also help her reassert her belief that she is able to change her mood. It is interesting to note how she links a higher position with happiness, and a lower position with probable sadness, blame, or pain, as it is from higher physical positions that we can have a better view of what is happening around us, which may contribute to an increased sense of control. Likewise, Sarah also uses a song, but in combination with her body:

*“Cause that’s me putting, ’cause when, when you feel down and depressed, you can kind of end up sinking down and [sinks upper body down], you get neck ache, ’cause you are looking down too much, and your shoulders are hunched. And then I hear that, and you, just reminds you... do you know what? You may not see it, but there is something really strong in there. And suddenly the shoulders come back, and the head tips up, and you look around and just changing your posture, actually makes you feel better. [Takes air] Um.. Is probably a mindfulness technique somewhere [smiling] but um... it does make you feel better, and you don’t generally do it. But that song makes me stand up like a daffodil, all over again and just remind yourself... [silence] that is in there”* (Sarah, 1141).

Sarah clearly describes what occurs in her body when difficult feelings are present, and what occurs when she regains the control of her emotions, as if her body could select her emotions. Her body and the music seem to be working together to help her. The music seems to activate a part of herself that reminds her of her strength, which, in turn, generates a response in her body. She seems to increase her sense of power and control by changing her posture like a flower looking for the warmth of the sun, opening it up and taking more physical space, and observing her surroundings,

possibly feeling more present and connected. She also describes moving her head upwards, maybe to facilitate her gazing, but also maybe implying she is not afraid of looking around, nor ashamed of who she is. In addition, the song Sarah refers to, “*Something Inside So Strong*” by Labi Siffre, is an anti-apartheid anthem that also reflects the difficulties of being a black gay man in British society in the 1980s, possibly reflecting her feelings of oppression and a wish to win an unjust battle.

Aside from regaining control by directly counteracting with an action, women also described maintaining their control by actively resisting its loss. After describing intrusive and bullying thoughts with a masculine voice, Beth described:

*“Is.. whether is reaching out for help, at that moment or.. whether it’s doing someth-, just something, doing something to distract yourself, I’ve just been chain smoking, which I know is bad for me, but like.. keeps my fingers busy, keeps my mind occupied that’s what got me through the last couple of days, was just.. the.. ability to take myself, sit down, and just being with myself.. and just.. you know, distract myself.. cigarette, whatever. Umm.. used to be Solitaire that I would do [laughs] and I just stopped playing Solitaire, and I get these urges to kill myself, and just play Solitaire until I got through it” (Beth, 836).*

Beth described needing to divert her attention to something external to be able to stop these pervasive and intruding thoughts taking her control away, almost as if she had to relocate herself outside of herself, in the activity she was doing, and thus disappear from the battle that was occurring in her body and mind; as if she were not there, she would not lose the control she had and give in to the impulses. Beth was able to divert her attention from the invasive thoughts on her own, and by actively asking for other people’s support, by, for example, going to A&E or speaking with friends, as she told me during the interview. Her laugh seems to symbolise the amusement and celebration she experiences when describing how the simplest distraction – playing a game – can have a great effect: saving her life. Likewise, even if she continuously acknowledges that smoking is not good for her health, she suggests that this is better than dying.

Lucy also distracts herself with something external when struggling to maintain control:

*“It’s just something that’s, um... external.... [silence, takes air] yeah... it can take me out of... out of the... introspection negative introspection and the negative thinking. [takes air] Um.. because, you know when I’m sat there feeling shit... I could really ruminate. And go around, and round, and round, and round, and round, and.. you know, it’s part of mindfulness, I try and catch my thoughts now, when I’m having that, and... I try and distract them. And so he is... so, when I’m feeling oh shit! And I think: well I know what I can do that will make me feel better, I just go and.. stroke [cat’s name]” (Lucy, 1167).*

Like Beth, she seems to be able to take an external position to observe herself. From that vantage point, she is able to monitor her thoughts and maintain control by being vigilant of any intrusion, taking action when needed. Her intrusive thoughts seem to be experienced as unpredictable and spiralling, making it harder and harder for her to maintain control as the spiral grows, and thus urging her to quickly react when they appear. In addition, stroking her cat is an action she executes with her body, which may also help her distance from the battle that seems to occur in her mind. Finally, I also wonder if the furriness of her cat mirrors the softness and warmth she needs to counteract: the thoughts and feelings she describes in this extract.

Similarly, Emily, while telling me about her safe space of drawing, expresses:

*“When I’m feeling so... shit, and thinking... about all the things, the stuff that has happened and.. you know how it was my fault, or yeah the voice in me saying to myself that it was your fault and I can kind of go there and.. [looks at drawing] I don’t know, be a bit nicer to myself [smiles]”*  
(Emily, 480).

Emily describes herself as a thinking and feeling being, and at first, she also depicts the punishing voice as internal. However, she rapidly externalises it, almost describing it as an intruder within. At the end of this fragment, she seems to compensate with a smile for all the horrible things that this voice tells her, and that she has just described out loud to me, maybe also hinting at some shame. However, I also wonder if her smile shows her acknowledgement and celebration of her capacity to be kinder to herself when she most needs it, and of her ability to enhance this capacity by looking at her drawing. During the interview, she describes her safe space as a comfortable and warm place, that cannot be intruded upon by anyone or anything, and is filled with things she enjoys, and it seems that it is a conducive context for her to connect with the gentler parts of herself.

This theme captures the different ways in which women regain and maintain their control. As it is not always experienced as dichotomous, losing or regaining control occurs in a gradual process; women are able to identify changes in their mood and patterns that signal the beginning of this process. As holders of this knowledge, women see themselves in an advantageous position that allows them to prepare, either preventing the loss of control in advance, or actively resisting it. Within this battle, women also find spaces to celebrate their capacity to take action and support others, as further described in the following theme.

### **3.3.3. Theme 3: The “Social Justice Warrior”**

Participants’ accounts did not only portray women as warriors who fight for themselves to regain and maintain their control and agency, but also as warriors who feel they have social responsibility and fight to improve the lives of other women, transform their experiences, and build a better society.

*“It was also this... you know, just social justice warrior um... in me, which is like [changes to a lower tone of voice] it’s not just for you, but for all the women in the future you need to do this. [changes voice back] Um... and... [changes to a lower tone of voice] this is wrong. [changes voice back] So... Um... [silence] the... yeah... That’s really, helps me get through um... I think when I... [takes air, silence, tuts] focus on s-, on social justice issues has just got stronger after this experience. My feminism is, just got stronger, um... yeah, from this experience for sure” (Lucy, 2105).*

Lucy experiences the “Social Justice Warrior” as a part within herself, a part that acknowledges the wrongness that has been done to her and the imbalances and inequalities in society, and that fights for a wider group of women rather than just herself. This part also seems to encourage her and amplify her strength during difficult times, as if all the women she fights for were somehow also supporting her. This may be reflected in the lower tone of voice she adopts when personifying this warrior, as if this warrior is someone bigger than her and comprises the voices of all the women it represents. At the same time, she seems to be in a symbiotic relationship with this part, as the more inequalities she is aware of, the stronger this part becomes, and, as a consequence, so does she. Moreover, it is through the “Social Justice Warrior” that she is able to transform her experience:

*“I can now... have a deeper level of... of emotional awareness around this. And I... I just hope that one day I’ll be able to help, use that, to help other people... In that way, I would have sort of changed what’s this really negative experience, into something which has a purpose and a meaning yeah, I think that’s, that is really important for me [laughs]” (Lucy, 2034).*

Lucy refers to herself as the active agent of the transformation of her self, through having increased her knowledge, the experience, and its meaning. She positions herself as holding the power and control, and refers to the experience itself almost as if it was a tool she could use when she wanted, for the purpose she decided. Her laugh at the end of the quote seems to hint at a mix of feelings: hope that she will one day achieve this goal, as well as the acknowledgement and maybe sadness that she experiences while feeling she is not there yet and has a challenging journey ahead. Claire further explains these challenges:

*“As hard as it is to b-... to be so aware of like... [takes air] gender issues, like I'm a massive feminist, and that really has... I mean, is depressing 'cause you think... you look at the kind of... um... how often this happens and occurs, and how nothing happens, or t-, there's no consequences to it for the perpetrators. But for me, the only thing I can do, is carry on... Kind of believing in what, what I believe in, like, maybe working in... for a woman's charity or setting one up, which I really... would like to do” (Claire, 785).*

Similarly to Lucy, Claire's emphasis on social justice is intimately linked with her feminist ideas. The sense of injustice she feels is wide, and not only relates to her sexual assault experience, but also to the imbalances between women and men in the society she lives in, and especially to the lack of punishment for the offenders, which is strongly stressed by her voice, as if emphasising their full responsibility. At the same time, the quote exudes a sense of sadness and surrendering to this injustice, which seems to be in contrast with the motivation Claire feels when focusing on her wish to work with and for other women.

Kate also describes similar experiences during our interview:

*“And the type of social responsibility, we think we have, you know... to get out there, and help other people. And I guess... [silence] that's always been part of it. To get out there and help other people” (Kate, 1872).*

She seems to strongly believe her actions can benefit other people, and seems to experience it almost as a duty, as if surviving what happened to her had placed her in a position of advantage, and thus required that she put her knowledge at the service of the society she lives in. In addition, she does not only speak for herself, but seems to assign this duty to all the women who have survived sexual assault and/or rape. Her silence seems to reflect a moment in which she realises and corroborates that this has always been one of her objectives.

Finally, Sarah also told me about her wish to become a support for other women who may undergo similar experiences:

*“And is not my job to protect everyone. However, as a woman, as a survivor it, I'd like to be able to help other women that [have] been through the same thing. So, this, it, it... gives me an opportunity to do that, so for that, I feel a bit of like... well done Sarah you've given back a little bit” (Sarah, 189).*

Sarah clearly delimits her obligations towards others, and unlike Kate, she does not experience her social responsibility as a duty, but as a wish. She strongly defines herself as someone who continues to be alive in a journey where others have perished, as highlighted by her voice, and therefore assumes a privileged position that



implies she is strong, capable, and valuable, as she holds important knowledge and qualities. It seems to be this powerful position that allows her to support others. However, even if she celebrates and praises herself for assisting others, her lukewarm tone seems to depict some regret at not having done so earlier, perhaps because she could not, as she describes needing time to focus on herself to be able to heal. Besides, I wonder if this tone also hints to an apology for being the one at the receiving end of the support.

The “*Social Justice Warrior*” then, is strongly linked with feminist ideas, and acknowledges the wrongness done to women and the responsibility of the perpetrators. Women see themselves as active agents of transformation who hold relevant knowledge and are in a position of power and control. It is from this advantageous position that they are able to transform their experiences and support a wider group of women; an action that, in return, encourages and motivates them.

In this second overarching theme, the experiences of women as warriors who fight within themselves and against external opponents, who fight for themselves and for others, and who fight to regain and maintain the control and power over their lives, have been illustrated. However, women’s accounts also depicted women as active agents who also fought to be more empowered and nurturing, which is explored in depth in the following overarching theme.

### **3.4. Theme 3: The Growing Self**

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This third, and last, overarching theme encompasses what was required from women who took part in this project, to nurture, grow, and empower themselves. *Creating the Space for the Self* depicts how women found and expanded the space for their self emotionally, spiritually, and physically. *Learning and Developing* portrays how they continually work to be better able to express their voice and take their righteous place in the world. Finally, “*Bridges*” illustrates the connections between the internal and the external parts of the self, and therefore, how women felt validated and vindicated by those around them.

### 3.4.1. Space for the Self

Most women described the need to create and widen the space they had for their own self, to be able to process their experience, and thus allow their self to grow and develop.

*“Inside the tree house is almost like I can be me.. and I can... um... [silence]. I don’t know I’ve got things I really just.. like. Um... I don’t worry about anything when I’m in there, I can just be.. separate from all of the crap going on outside” (Emily, 460).*

Emily describes accessing a safe space for herself through her colourful drawing. She suggests this space is free from interruptions, others, and their problems, and maybe from the awful things that occur in the world, almost as if it was pure and clean, so allowing her to focus on herself and her wellbeing.

Claire describes what occurs within this private and calm space *“in between friendships”* (1275):

*“When I started meditating more, the thing is... the emotions that I suppressed from the first assault, and definitely the second to some extent, kind of... alarmingly came to the surface, but I knew I had to deal with them. I was like, I cannot deal with them. And I have dealt with them, and I am still dealing with them, but meditation helps at, because it means... you are aware of.. you don’t suppress anything and I think that’s a lot more healthy to do things that way and to deal with them. And you can deal with them while on your own. In a space of meditation and reflections, which means you don’t need other people’s advice or opinions..., I guess, yeah...” (Claire, 1369).*

Claire describes how these emotions flooded her when they were finally expressed, as if they had been waiting under increasing pressure without her knowledge. She distinguishes here between what she believed and what she really is capable of doing, validating her own sense of self and increasing her confidence in this process, and conceptualising her own persona as someone strong and capable. Moreover, she implies that the process of managing emotions is a long-term one that requires everyday work and consistency. In addition, she seems to understand meditation not only as a positive way to create space for herself, but as a process enabler within this space, that also facilitates and accelerates her development. Finally, she hints that this space offers some advantages, such as being able to understand relying solely on herself.

However, she also acknowledges how others can be invited into this space:

*“But for me I need to be able to talk about it... and... I don’t know... Because it is part of who I am I guess, as much as you don’t like that it is, but it is. Um... [clears throat] I need that open space and that like... nurturing space to talk about it” (Claire, 1565).*

She seems to understand this space as an expansion of her own private space. It is not enclosed, but she still feels cared for and protected there, which allows her to continue to understand what happened to her and its aftermath, perhaps in a different way. Similar to what she felt with her emotions, she suggests she had initially barred herself from talking to others about her experiences of sexual assault, and perhaps walled off a part of herself that felt alone and isolated. I wonder if accepting this part she wished could be erased allowed her to verbalise it, making it more tangible, and prevented her from re-veiling it.

Aside from carefully inviting into this space others who supported and helped them, women also found other spaces where they could share:

*“And I remember putting up a review... of the, I’m, was like... would have been accepted by then... and I put it up, and I... just had this real sense of fear [takes air] and I... thought, I think I, o-, although this whole writing review is supposed to be me having a chance to say it, to just say what I’m ready to say. I think I may have over exposed myself in this review [takes air]. [I] think I may have written too much detail for, that random strangers I’ve never met before could read” (Lucy, 1346).*

Lucy found that the internet provided a space where she could express herself, and, as she told me during the interview, warn others through making her experience public. The space needed for herself appears to be amplified on the internet, as the message recipient is not seen and cannot interrupt, judge, or question Lucy. In addition, a review site can be read by many, and thus can become a space where, not only is a wrongdoing made public and acknowledged by others, but is a place where the perpetrator, and those who support him, can be exposed and perhaps shamed. In addition, I wonder if the permanency and palpability of Lucy’s written words helped her validate her story, making it more tangible, despite the lack of acknowledgement of any wrongdoing by Lucy’s perpetrator and those who supported him when confronted by her. Furthermore, her quote also highlights her struggle in finding the right balance between sharing information with others and keeping some to herself, to continue to feel safe and minimise any possible further harm or threat.

Likewise, during our interview, Kate told me how she felt she could not speak with anyone about her experience of assault, including someone within her educational institution, and referred to it as a lack of space or place for herself (1202). She created this needed space by starting her personal diary, perhaps as a tangible space for the conversations she wished to have with others, either friends or professionals, and maybe also for her own emotions, as a diary is a physical and private object, something that could not only be seen and interacted with, but could

also be filled with her words any time she wanted. She illustrated the meaning of this space:

*"It's like you... you shed a skin, is like a... like a... well, how I see it, like a snake or reptile, you shed the skin... and you go on, and you move on. So... [silence] I guess what... kind of parallels that... and my journal entries is... is, you are putting a part of yourself in here... and then, you move forward... And you, and you... [silence] and you can be... a version, a newer version of yourself" (Kate, 1326).*

Kate describes her diary as a transformational space where she can leave old parts of herself to be able to move forward. Interestingly, she compares this process to a snake shedding its skin, perhaps reflecting her own feelings and physical appearance at the time, as this is a stressful event in which snakes feel scared and hide more than usual, showing a duller colour on their skin. In addition, by "*shedding a skin*", snakes remove parasites and allow further growth, perhaps reflecting the way Kate experienced her assault and the process that followed. The diary then becomes a safe space where she can leave unwanted and old parts of herself behind, parts that have already served their purpose and do not need to be carried any further, to become a renewed, lighter self.

Sarah too, describes her own space as a transformational one:

*"Put the song on, put it out loud, have a good sing along, um.. 'cause having a really loud sing is almost as cathartic as having a good cry [silence]. 'cause it, it releases some emotions, so I'll probably play it two or three times back to back, quite possibly go back to it over the next few days or weeks and, and play it a bit" (Sarah, 1084).*

Sarah's safe space is created through sound, and specifically through the song "*Something Inside So Strong*" by Labi Siffre. The song may also reflect Sarah's feeling of being the recipient of wrongdoing and not being understood or accepted. As if the loud volume could reflect the widening of her space, and the continuous listening through time act as a reminder to maintain that space, it seems it is also a place where she can be vulnerable, express her own emotions, and change. Furthermore, she creates space for this actualised self in different ways:

*"So, it was the best thing to do [travel], and it got down the last of the barriers and it enabled me to go and be me. I'm not, nobody knew my story, nobody, at all, um... and it was nice. I just felt I had a blank [inaudible: packed?] canvas. And I could just be me, whatever me was. And it was lovely, and that was the real breakthrough to getting those barriers down that had remained for years" (Sarah, 2941).*

Sarah implies that her usual environment and relationships felt limiting, thus rigidly defining her and not allowing her to grow. She expresses the need to move

away from them to widen this space, which will then be able to hold her full and developed self. She appears to assert this liberated self through the remarks on her voice when referring to herself as “me”, and seems excited about what it actually may be, almost as if wanting to experiment with it like a painter with her canvas. However, unlike with her song, this seems a permanent widening, as once the new self has surfaced, the space cannot be shrunk, regardless of the environment. Later, she tells me how she maintains it through connecting with her body:

*“If you feel bad in your body, where, where do you feel it? Come away, think about it was I feeling anxious? Or.. was I... feeling uncomfortable because of a person? Um.. and just... to be a bit more aware and just take my time, rather than just saying I’ve got so many feelings, they’re overwhelming me, I don’t like them, I’m gonna ignore them” (Sarah, 3151).*

She also seems to use her body as a map that reflects her inner self and emotions. It is through dedicating time to herself, almost as if separating and adopting an external position, that she seems to create the space to connect with and respond to her emotions. In addition, and like many women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, Sarah also describes modifying her body in the past – making it bigger (401) – to protect herself and make this physical space a safe one. Similarly, other participants illustrated how carrying certain objects with them, such as a rock (Emily, 841), made them feel physically and emotionally safe.

As described in this theme, women use different strategies to create and widen the safe Space for the Self, emotionally, mentally, and physically. This space where they transform, and that sometimes includes others, allows them to nurture themselves, develop, and grow, which is explored in depth in the following theme.

### **3.4.2. Learning and Developing**

All women’s accounts illustrated a journey of growth and development that allowed a more cohesive sense of self and an increase in their agency and power. This was a demanding process that required practice and a search for knowledge through different paths.

For some women, there was a clear starting point for this process. While talking about the book she brought to our interview, “*Not That Kind of Girl*” by Lena Dunham, Claire expressed:

*"I think it represents growth... for me. [silence] Yeah, um... [silence] It was felt like a bit of a lifeline at the time. Um... [tongue-clicking] Um... [silence] Yeah, I mean... I, maybe I didn't realise at the time, that I didn't learn the lessons that she was talking of, but like..., it definitely... [silence] On reflection, yes.. it helped.. I don't know if mature is the right word but... yeah, it just definitely represents growth from this place... that didn't want to be in. Um... [silence] and positive change maybe? I'm not sure, mmh..." (Claire, 491).*

It seems obvious to Claire that the book has helped her develop, and she suggests it provided her with the nurturance, care, and information she could not find in her environment and relationships, possibly by reflecting her own experience and feelings. However, it is on reflection that she appears to acknowledge how it also offered what seemed the only means of escape from a difficult space she wanted to leave, and thus, marks the beginning of her growth. Claire sees herself here as someone able to transform and evolve, in the present and the future, as her tentative words at the end of the quote imply that this process may bring further valuable change in her life, even if this has not yet happened. Subsequently, she expands on this process of development:

*"It feels like every day that you're learning because you don't know what's the right or wrong thing to do afterwards. Um... it feels like you are kind of writing a book about how to live your life, like, there's no leaflet. I mean, I'm sure there are leaflets on sexual assault [laughing] but there's no leaflet on how to live your life after this [laughing]" (Claire, 936).*

She seems to describe this process as unknown, bringing feelings of insecurity and anxiety. As if it was different for everyone, this process requires a constant search for information and a process of trial and error that leads to relearning; nonetheless, as an author, she seems to have the power to decide what to write. Her final laugh underlines her wish for this process to be simple, and thus to have a leaflet, whilst also acknowledging the hard work she has been required to do.

Sarah also describes this process as one that can only move forward with her own effort:

*"Psychologists... [smiles] is about learning to understand... the thought patterns, and the emotional rollercoasters that people go on. And when someone can draw it out and say: this is the... the patterns that people do. You start realising your own patterns, and that actually you're normal. You follow the patterns of human beings, because you are one" (Sarah, 3871).*

For Sarah, this process requires awareness and further development at different levels. She seems to suggest that therapists are facilitators who can provide knowledge and a wider perspective by simplifying complicated experiences, allowing

her to see herself reflected in other people's experiences, and thus to normalise and validate herself, no longer separate from others but connected to them. Emily illustrates some of the work she is undertaking in therapy:

*"I'm reading, um... Deborah Lee, Compassion Focused Trauma Therapy, or Therapy of Trauma at the moment, as part of my therapy. But also, 'cause I had the book anyway. Um... and yeah, I can read it, is almost like reading it with two heads. I can read it in relations to my clients, um... but don't work with clients who've had... sexual trauma... I said it! It's easier to say, 'cause I'm not talking it about it to me. Um... be easier that would just be... I can't. Um... but in relations to, you know, other things. Um... [silence] yeah I can connect with it, from a... work capacity [laughs], but can't connect very well emotionally. And I guess again, that's probably what we're working on in therapy [smiles]" (Emily, 1727).*

Emily explains how she distances herself from her experience of assault through adopting her professional role as if it was a different person, not only while reading a book but in her life in general. She seems to illustrate this by taking ownership of the decision to read the book, as if downplaying that it is part of her own therapy. Furthermore, she illustrates this and describes her thought process and what facilitated this after pronouncing the words "*sexual trauma*", showing she is clearly aware of her difficulty around the term, which she had already described in depth at the beginning of the interview, when telling me she preferred for me to refer to what happened to her as "assault", as if hearing the words "rape" or "sexual" made her feel it could "*happen again*" (250. See Appendix 18 for full answer). After pronouncing these words, she appears to celebrate her achievement, yet her broken sentences and fast pronunciation may reflect the anxiety she feels as a result.

Like Sarah and Claire, Emily states that she is someone who can develop and change, and seems to perceive her therapeutic space as a safe one where she can be challenged and thus continue to develop. After a long period of time, Lucy feels she has acquired her "*own internal therapist and believe in myself*" (Lucy, 2068), and describes how she continues to work and validate herself:

*"Is that, just doing things that have, doing this interview, um... you know, talking about it, not... deliberately not being ashamed of what's happened. [takes air, tongue-clicking] Um... these have all been really empowering steps which have really helped me" (Lucy, 2180).*

Lucy implies she experiences unwanted shame related to what happened to her. One of the ways she seems to be challenging this feeling, and thus regain control over her narrative and life, is by recounting her experience and doing it fully aware of this feeling. The pause in her speech seems to highlight this conscious decision, and

her loud inhalation and slight pause at the end seem to hint at its difficulty. By setting challenges to herself, Lucy aims to regain power and thus improve her life.

Sarah also challenged herself to improve her life:

*"I remember eventually, realising that I didn't had anyone touch me for like well over a year. Not even let my mum hug me [takes air] Um.. and I went for a massage with a therapist, um.. that uh... worked with people that don't want to be touched, so, um... I sobbed. It was horrible. But it was lovely at the same time. You need it"* (Sarah, 3220).

Sarah told me how being raped had not only impacted her at an emotional level but also at a physical one. She illustrates the severity of her situation at the time by alluding to the impossibility of physical contact with someone she seemed to be really close to: her mother. Her loud inhalation and short pause seem to also underline her distress and perhaps the acknowledgement of not being able to take in the comfort and care she needed at the time. Sarah describes being cautious and choosing a specialised therapist to facilitate this difficult process.

Interestingly, Sarah and other participants, such as Beth, Claire, Kate, and Emily, told me how their parents or family did not know about (part of) their experiences of sexual assault and/or rape. Some stated feeling they *"couldn't tell"* them either at the time it occurred and/or later on, some depicted it almost as an extra burden they did not want or could not manage, and others questioned the aim of relating it years later.

Women also described how they facilitated their own process of growth, by continuing to learn, develop, and nurture themselves. Their search for knowledge focused at times on feminist ideas, and this was reflected in their everyday life:

*"I just feel like I'm not accepted in a lot of.. [tongue-clicking] I don't accept a lot of... pop culture and I don't er... I don't feel very accepted... in big friendship groups. And I think that's probably... partly because I just see something that so many other people don't see, or are just ignoring, or blind to... And so that does affect your interests and relationships, um.. [silence, tongue-clicking] Yeah, and it's painful to occupy that space, but also I think is kind of enlightening [laughs]"* (Claire, 1881).

Claire seems to reassert a position of power and agency by turning herself into the active subject of her first sentence, rather than the passive one. She does not imply women's inequalities are not visible to others, but that they, passively or actively, do not focus on them, and thus do not consider them a priority as she does. This discrepancy seems to make others want to keep her at arm's length, and even if this also increases her knowledge and understanding, it leaves her feeling disconnected and isolated, almost as if there is a price to pay for her new insight.



In addition, participants also described acknowledging and celebrating the changes derived from this journey of learning and development:

*“You know, but it... it’s funny because I can wait to tell my story now... to people. I’m not sure I have much of a story anymore... I think... [silence] Before, my story was based on a life of abuse [tongue-clicking] and I would gain these relationships with people and friendships with people, and I would.. have this.. overwhelming need to tell them everything, you know, ’cause I just wanted... somebody to understand me, and get me, and get on my neurosis [smiling] and all of that, and.. [silence] I don’t have a need to do that anymore. You know, my boyfriend knows about everything that happened, but I don’t really... have this... need to... justify who I am, ’cause it’s... uh... [silence] I’m not... that girl anymore. [silence] But it will still never go away... yeah, if that makes sense... is really difficult to... say, yeah...” (Kate, 2477).*

Kate explains that she had to work hard to earn her friendships in the past, as if they were a benefit she should be thankful for. She implies she felt misunderstood and could not recognise herself in others’ stories, and thus desperately required their external validation, comprehension, and reassurance, as marked by the inflections in her voice. It is through being aware of a change in her needs – not needing to tell her story anymore – that Kate affirms how she has developed and grown, almost as if wanting to distance herself from her past self, and to validate the work she has done to achieve this, she highlights the words *“not that”* in her sentence. However, she expects what happened to her to haunt her in the future, and she may have to monitor her needs and the return of her old self for the rest of her life.

Finally, Sarah explained how becoming a Reiki<sup>5</sup> practitioner allowed her to connect with herself at a more profound level, and thus nurture and develop in new and unexpected ways – *“Reiki is great for physical ailments, and is amazing through emotional waves”* (3365) – and further exemplified how her life had changed over time:

*“To be... [takes air] having panic attacks on the train [takes air] to being able to let a stra-, a stranger put his head on my shoulder, and think [smiling]: this is amusing! I know [smiling] why he is doing this, he doesn’t! [laughs] and not be freaked out by it. It’s.... er, it’s a contrast I didn’t think would ever come [silence]” (Sarah, 4391).*

Her slight pauses and loud inhalations seem to give her enough time to reflect and be present in the moment she describes, either in the past or closer to the present. Sarah illustrates an important development: how she has been able to conquer past difficulties and struggles, and she believes Reiki has had an important role in it. Her position of power seems to have widened, not only encompassing and affecting her

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<sup>5</sup> Reiki is a non-intrusive therapeutic healing system that originated in Japan. It provides and enhances the body’s own capacity to balance at a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level.

own being but also those around her, if she so chooses. Her laugh seems to reflect the playfulness and pleasure she experiences in the moment she knows something others do not. Finally, she also seems to suggest that she had never imagined she would be able to achieve these changes, appearing almost perplexed by her own capacity. Her silence at the end of the sentence seems to be a moment for her to reflect on that, almost expressing gratefulness.

Women described continually learning and developing, and thus nurturing at a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual level; normalising and validating themselves, and thus achieving a more secure sense of self. They also expressed feeling validated and vindicated through other people, as the next theme illustrates.

### **3.4.3. Bridges**

Some of the women's accounts also described a wider sense of self, one that could be reflected upon and experienced through others:

*"He's very much... everything I project onto him. [He] is a projection. [takes air] You know, all the feelings and all of that. I'm like: Oh! Look at him! He's feeling this way. And I'm like.. is he really feeling that way? Or is it just me... that wants him to feel that way? [takes air] But... [silence, tongue-clicking] he also is... something external from me, you know. He has his... he definitely has his own mind, then he has his own will, and his own way, and... um.... [takes air] yeah... so... yeah... It is definitely that bridge between the two..." (Lucy, 1263).*

Lucy appears to be able to extend her self outwards onto her cat. At times, she seems to experience a blurred boundary between her self and his, as though some parts of herself were hidden and she could not identify them as hers, and thus not know what belonged to who, perhaps mirroring her wish to feel close and connect with others when feeling alone. Yet, it is through questioning herself that she uses her reflection on to her cat to identify these hidden parts, her own feelings and needs. At the same time though, as indicated by the emphasis on the word "*definitely*", she experiences her cat as completely separate from her, and seems to enjoy this different being that shares space with her.

Lucy's cat becomes, then, something that can connect her with hidden parts of herself, increasing her self-knowledge, while at the same time connecting her with the external world and others. However, her cat was not the only "bridge" Lucy described, and while talking about a good friend of hers, she explained:

*“And I remember him just being really... furious on my behalf... and er... him just being really worried about me... And that was really nice, because they could give me... [takes air, silence, tongue-clicking] the emotions that I couldn't give to myself... [silence]. Yeah, what, that, I'm, that I struggled to give to myself. You know, I can... at a push, but they could give me those kind of feelings that I really needed from an external source” (Lucy, 1631).*

Lucy seems to imply that some emotions cannot be accessed directly. She seems to conceptualise her friend as an extended part of herself, an external one, that when needed, is able to provide these absent feelings. Lucy, however, insists that she can meet her own needs, reaffirming her capacities. In addition, and similarly to her cat, her friend is seen as an external being, a caring and protective one that wants the best for her. Her silences throughout the quote seem to reflect the sadness and struggle she endured, as well as the relief felt when knowing she was supported and not alone.

Seeing oneself reflected in others was an experience also described by other participants:

*“Find a different way [takes air]. Even if it's a peer-to-peer support group because in helping another person, who's gone through similar, you'll actually help yourself. [silence] And I think it's really, really important, to know... that what you feel is not uncommon amongst people that have gone through that process and I think peer-to-peer support, or finding a way that's suitable for you to help somebody else, really helps yourself. It's not completely altruistic. [smiles] It's a win-win situation [laughs]” (Sarah, 4591).*

Sarah also suggests that not only herself, but everyone, is able to see parts of themselves reflected in other people, and thus, further know and understand themselves. Besides, she also implies that emotions and experiences can be normalised, hence allowing her to feel closer and more connected to others. She assumes women are able to generate these reflections in many ways, as one may not be helpful for all, therefore reasserting her advantageous position. In addition, Sarah suggests that the “bridge” does not only facilitate her own process and assist her, but also the party at the other end of it. She states that sharing is not a selfless act but one that benefits both parties, perhaps moving away from the need to be seen as good, as she already feels confident enough. Finally, she creates the impression that the closer the experiences of the two persons at either end of the bridge, the more reflections will be created, and the greater the self-knowledge.

Emily, however, describes a different experience:

*“I've always liked the smell of fresh laundry fresh wash, fresh washing. It reminds me of when my mum, um... used to like, wash my clothes when*

*I was younger. And also when I was doing my undergrad. Like, sometimes go home and take all my washing, and she'd wash it for me and all. And then, I'll take it back to uni. Um [laughs]. So, it reminds me of just like... don't know just made... There's a couple of things, um.. you know just reminds me of having... being sort of supported I guess. Because it reminds me of my mum [smells the washing powder]" (Emily, 632).*

Emily seems to experience the washing powder as the "bridge" that links her to the relationship she has with her mother, and through it, to a part of herself that is captured in a moment of her past, where she felt safe, secure, and could count on someone else. Perhaps, for this reason, she smelled it when talking with me. In addition, the washing powder also becomes the link to her mother, and what she represents for Emily, maybe making her feel more loved and confident.

Other participants described similar experiences with those that are physically distant from them, and are not part of their close circle of relationships:

*"Mmmh... but if I am feeling angry, mmmh about what's happened to me, I will listen to angrier songs on that album, umm... because I suppose in a way it makes you feel vindicated" (Beth, 587).*

Beth seems to know when she may not be able to provide for herself, and is clearly aware of the different ways in which she can build a "bridge" when needed. In this extract, she does it through listening to music, purposely connecting with similar emotions expressed in the songs, and perhaps with the singer, Beyoncé, herself. Beth seems to feel not only validated through the reflection of her own emotions, but also justified and encouraged to express them, almost as if she has been given permission by this third party, something she perhaps does not feel she can do on her own. She further expands on this:

*"But it's kind of... could have feel that represented in a song... Umm... and... yeah, just to feel justified. Because, you know, anger is something we are encouraged to not necessarily feel because it's not, it's not seemly, or it's not... you know... womanly, or whatever. But.. umm... you know, you can't help but, but feel... um.. angry about these things [smiling]" (Beth, 610).*

She describes how, as a woman, she feels she has to comply with tight norms that do not allow her to express, or even experience, some of her emotions. Beth acknowledges the impossibility of hiding or erasing, not only her anger, but any emotion, and seems to suggest that the song not only validates her reasons for being angry, but provides the extra support she feels she needs to express her anger. I

wonder if her smile at the end of the sentence may be a way to mitigate the anger she expresses, almost making her a “proper” woman once again.

Claire expresses how she is not only able to create “bridges” with individuals, but also with collectives:

*“A lot of feminist lit-, when you find some... like... women, specially that you identify with... [laughs] Yeah, um... you just feel like you are less alone, you don't feel like you are as mad. Whereas when I was at uni, and everyone was like: “oh, it's just bad sex”. You feel like you are crazy, and then you lose like, some sort of... grip on reality, which is what I think I did. But when... there's, there's a whole scholar, or like whole school of thought about this [tongue-clicking] then, you just feel less crazy [laughing] um... and more validated” (Claire, 805).*

She portrays the need for an understanding, safe, and validating environment, portraying the difficult experience of being in a surrounding where she did not feel supported or reflected, almost doubting her own self. However, she also describes how she felt less strange and distant, and thus more connected and less alone, when recognising herself in another. Furthermore, and as Claire did, she seems to position theory and those who provide it, in an important position of power, and her repetition of the word “*whole*” seems to suggest that scholars can provide a solid and important argument that is difficult to contest.

Finally, Lucy not only explains how seeing herself reflected in others was helpful to her, but also how sharing time with those who shared the same interests was also important:

*“Talking online to women who... um... I feel who are as passionate as me about social justice issues, has been really nice as well, to be like, you know, you can... Yes, men may be physically stronger than us [takes air] but, that doesn't mean that they can... control our thoughts and our minds, and the way we interact with the world. And it's really, it's really inspirational [takes air] other powerful women out there saying: I, I refuse to be defined, um.. by experiences like this. It's really powerful” (Lucy, 2619).*

Lucy reaffirms her own agency by highlighting how the impression of physical force, and thus control, exercised by men, does not necessarily imply that women lose their power. She also describes how communicating with other women in a supportive environment has strengthened her own sense of self, brought her joy, and thus has stimulated possibilities for the self in the future. Finally, she refers to men as those that want to control her and other women, perhaps reflecting not only the gender of her aggressor, but also the gender of all the aggressors of the women who participated in this project.

As presented in this theme, women empower themselves in various ways. They create a space for the self that is nurturing and safe, and where they can understand their experiences and develop a more secure and cohesive sense of self, widening this space at the same time. They are always their main sources, validating, nurturing, and reasserting themselves, yet they also draw from the parts of the self that are reflected in others, in a way that can vindicate and inspire them.

Within this chapter, I have presented the themes that emerged from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis I undertook on the interviews of six women. The themes have been presented here without references to the wider literature, theories, or clinical practice, to stay close to women's experiences. In the following chapter, I will present the links between these findings and those of other studies.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

This chapter discusses the contributions of the present research to the existing theory and literature, as well as to the practice of counselling psychology. This is followed by the considerations of the strengths and limitations of this study, and recommendations for future research. Finally, a conclusion is presented.

### 4.1. Significant Findings and Contributions

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As previously stated, this research project has explored, through a phenomenological analysis, how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault, and I believe it has provided a valuable contribution and further understanding to an under-researched area in the field of (counselling) psychology.

The analysis of the participants' accounts reveals how inner resources are not fixed, but are flexible and changing, and their development is strongly linked to women's sense of self. After sexual assault and/or rape, women are constantly engaging with their repertoire of inner resources, even if, at times, they are only aware of it in retrospect, supporting Davis' (2002) analysis of inner resources. Women's accounts show how they are active and creative agents who, through their minds, bodies, objects, or significant others, become aware of, create, and strengthen their inner resources. This is a gradual and difficult process that requires women to constantly learn, work hard, and develop as they manage the advantages and drawbacks of their inner resources, and struggle with society's narratives of sexual violence that often clash with their own experiences.

#### 4.1.1. The "Will to Live"

As presented in the Analysis chapter, the "Will to Live" illustrates how women experience part of their inner resources as inherent to themselves, as the drive that resurfaces in times of need when there is nothing else to hold on to, that provides

them with inner-strength through the knowledge of having overcome difficulties in the past, and gives them hope and motivation to continue going by envisioning a better future. At the start of this project, and after the review of the literature and the near non-existent references to women's inner resources within it, the possibility of women not experiencing inner resources after rape and/or sexual assault was considered as a possible outcome for this research, and thus the decision was taken to include the non-experience of inner resources as another experience in the range of possible outcomes. This unexpected theme is an important contribution to the literature, as it clearly challenges the main vision of women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape as passive victims who need external resources to heal. It captures how inner resources are always present and experienced as a core part of women's selves.

Even if the "*Will to Live*" is not present in gendered violence studies, it has recently been correlated negatively with post-traumatic stress (Pangi, 2017). This result could perhaps start to explain how, as women become more aware of their "*Will to Live*" and see themselves as strong, they further develop their inner resources and thus feel more able to manage post-traumatic symptoms.

The "*Will to Live*" has been further explored in the areas of gerontology and terminally ill patients. Carmel (2001) first described the will to live within this area as "the psychological expression of instinct" (p. 949), and suggested it is the expression of the desire and commitment to live. In the context of Western societies, she linked it to the fear of death and physical, social, and psychological wellbeing, and her quantitative analysis suggested that the higher the self-esteem and the higher the fear of death, the stronger the will to live would be, thus linking it to psychosocial and spiritual needs rather than physical needs, bringing it close to the definition of inner resource as stated by Van Dierendonck (2009). Expanding upon this with a grounded theory study on older Israeli adults, Carmel, Granek and Zamir (2016) found that the will to live was strengthened by a sense of revenge at having survived traumatic experiences and going on to thrive in life; the acknowledgement of positive changes when comparing past and present; a sense of belonging; and the hope for a peaceful future. These results almost identically reflect the first overarching theme presented in the Analysis chapter, thus perhaps suggesting that the "*Will to Live*" is experienced and understood in a similar way by diverse populations, and is therefore universal.

The first theme of this first overarching theme, the "*Little Will to Live*", was present in all the participants' accounts, and encompasses an inherent part of the self: the resources that are experienced at the deepest level, those that are always present



and resurface to help women survive during the most difficult times, including immediately after their experiences of rape and/or sexual assault, and that underlies self-care and self-compassion. Women's narratives described qualitative differences in how they experienced the "*Little Will to Live*": as a latent feeling (Beth), a voice (Lucy), confidence in overcoming difficulties (Sarah), or an unbeknownst drive (Claire), but for all of them, it was difficult to acknowledge at first, as it appeared to have no shape or form. Furthermore, and perhaps reflecting what occurs within the literature, the "*Little Will to Live*" seemed to rarely be acknowledged by those present in women's lives – family, friends, or professionals.

The sense of something within that helps women to continue to be alive, can be related to Davis' (2002) phenomenological research, in which women with experiences of intimate partner violence described an "intuition" that informed them of their surroundings, and allowed them to protect themselves physically and emotionally, describing it as self-love, and sometimes as a bodily sensation that was an important part of their journeys of healing. Even if also experiencing a sensation from within, it seemed women were able to quickly "translate" its meaning to a cognitive level, almost transforming this intuition in a tool they used to protect themselves. On the contrary, women who took part in my project described a more intangible and precognitive experience that occurred through an unknown process, even when they were aware of the "*Little Will to Live*" existence and trusted it would help them in times of need. Furthermore, they also described a more energetic and encouraging experience to "keep going", rather than a protective system.

This theme can also be linked to the "animating force" described in Draucker and Stern's (2000) study with women who had experienced sexual violence, as they, too, described how they choose to live and move away from violence and death through reclaiming this force – their spirit – and how with time, and, similar to my participants, this force represented the beginning of a slow process of recovery. However, the authors said that regaining the animating force was experienced as a decision taken at a conscious level and undertaken through everyday acts of rebellion, while the "*Little Will to Live*", as stated, is more of an inherent, unconscious experience, even when it is acknowledged (Sarah).

As reported, there is little in the literature that explores the "*Little Will to Live*"; however, it can be linked to various theories and psychological models. On the one hand, this experience can be linked to the Eros or life instinct (Freud, 1922), the instincts that procure our basic survival, are present from the beginning of a person's

life, are linked to love, and are in opposition to the death instincts. They can be brought from the unconscious to the conscious mind, perhaps following the pattern that participants described: through learning, practising, and developing. Abel-Hirsch (2010) suggests that Freud described the Eros as what holds up the person when they are crumbling, and as a “drive” that will “restore a lost wholeness”. This could reflect participants’ experiences of the *“Little Will to Live”* as what kept them alive after their sexual assault or rape and in different times of struggle and despair, as well as the way in which, in retrospect, it symbolises the “lifeline”, the beginning of their journey of recovery (Claire, Beth) as also described in Draucker and Stern’s (2000) work.

Following on from the idea of drives proposed by Freud (1922), other psychoanalytic authors have also focused on the concept of ego drive or “knowns”, and have linked them to neuroscience through the works of Panksepp at the end of the 1980s. Boeg (2014) for example, suggests that it is through the seeking system – the one that draws from past learning and external stimuli; that brings thirsty animals to water – that the ego drives engage in cognition and behaviour, perhaps describing how participants’ *“Little Will to Live”* may also draw from past experiences and knowledge to keep women alive and lead them towards what they need to continue to live.

Along this line of thought, and rooting his ideas in Husserl (1970) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), Malkemus (2015) suggests a new understanding of instinct that takes into account the lived experience of the being. He suggests that we are a collection of millions of genetically informed cellular systems (evolutionary past) that interacts with the “bodily affective present”, and describes this instinct as “the way in which a distinctly constellated corporeal consciousness engages in meaningful relationships with the world” (p. 21), and thus suggests that human beings will always strive towards improving their lives. Similarly, and rooting their ideas in the humanistic tradition, the organismic valuing process theory – growth through adversity – proposed by Joseph and Linley (2005), suggests “each person possesses the innate tendency to know his or her own best directions in life in his or her pursuit of well-being and fulfilment” (p. 270). Both of these theories could explain how, without being able to describe the *“Little Will to Live”*, or knowing how it operates, women kept living and going, even when parts of themselves did not want to.

The Strong(er) Self describes how women’s acknowledgement of being alive after rape and/or sexual assault becomes an irrefutable proof of their strength,

allowing them to face hardships and struggles with confidence, through providing a vision of the self as a capable being. As Barstow (1992) described it, “their ‘having-been’ helps form their ‘becoming’” (p. 14). This theme was apparent in all participants but Claire. Through our interview, Claire appeared to see herself as strong and capable; however, and perhaps due to reading feminist theory and understanding her experience of sexual assault within this framework relatively soon after it happened, she appeared not to question her strength as much as other participants did. I believe then, that a Strong(er) Self not being part of her account is not due to her not feeling strong, but to her not questioning it as much, or for as long, as other participants did.

As described, the Strong(er) Self can be linked to the sense of revenge at having survived (Carmel et al., 2016). This theme, too, comes from a sense of triumph and satisfaction due to survival. However, this sense of revenge seems to require an external witness. In contrast, the experiences of the Strong(er) Self only need women to be their own witnesses, and thus reflects the vision of a capable woman who does not depend on others to feel strong. Furthermore, this theme is also consistent with women’s narratives in Smith and Kelly’s (2001) study, as they too give value to being alive. In addition, the sense of becoming (aware of) a strong self after difficult or traumatic events is in line with different studies, such as Davis (2002) or Sinopoli (2009), and resemble women’s narratives described in Chaudry’s (2012) phenomenological study of having a greater capacity to confront adversity and cope with challenges in the present, and with the definition of inner strength proposed by Burkhardt (1989, p. 72, in Howden, 1992, p. 10) as “one’s inner resources, awareness, consciousness and sense of sacred source”.

Finally, this theme is also in line with Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger and Long’s (2004) findings, which state that past experiences and the resources acquired from them facilitate the process of change in the present life, and that post-traumatic growth, and therefore inner strength, can be seen from two weeks after the traumatic event. This could explain the surprise that some participants expressed upon their own capacities and strength after a relatively short period after the assault. Furthermore, this increased sense of personal strength is explored in depth within post-traumatic growth research, which is rooted in the post-traumatic growth descriptive model proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), or the organismic valuing process theory, growth through adversity, proposed by Joseph and Linley (2005).

The third sub-theme in the *“Will to Live”*, Looking Towards the Future, captures the women’s curiosity towards a better future, and how the possibility of change and the envisioning of this future motivates them to pursue their wishes and purposes. This theme was present in all participants’ accounts but Lucy’s, perhaps because the time between her sexual assault and our interview was the shortest when compared to the other participants, or perhaps because Lucy, before the assault occurred, knew her life would change considerably in a relatively short period of time, and thus the wish to achieve this wanted change was so strong that the experience of assault did not delay its achievement. The different textures participants described within this theme can be explained through Joseph and Linley’s (2005) or Malkemus’s (2015) ideas, that, as alive beings, we always move towards and know how to improve our lives. Thus, women who described this vision of a better future as being rooted in their previous capacity for change and improvement (Sarah), and those that did not (Emily) would both continue to persist to achieve it.

These findings are concordant with those of Chaudry (2012), in which women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse described experiencing hope and optimism for the future, or a sense of having new choices, as also described in post-traumatic growth models. In addition, these findings can also be linked to those of Smith and Kelly (2001), in which women who had experienced rape also described finding a purpose. However, their participants’ purpose appeared to be described as directly linked to their experiences of rape – the “rape had a purpose”. This was clearly not the experience women described in my study. Participants described hoping one day they could use their experience to help others, transforming something negative into something with a purpose, thus positioning themselves as the active agents that made this transformation possible, rather than considering their experiences as something positive. Women were clear in acknowledging how it was their own actions and ways of managing what had happened to them that led them to finding a purpose in their lives, and not the experience of sexual assault and/or rape itself, thus clarifying Park’s (1999, in Zoellner and Maercker, 2006) ambiguity over the source of the positive outcomes of traumatic growth, not addressed in many referred studies. For example, during Emily’s interview, she could not understand how something positive could be taken away or drawn from an experience of sexual assault (question number six of my interview schedule). After a similar reaction, Kate described how her experiences of sexual assault only made her journey in life harder and longer, and Claire clearly stated how, by referring to the experiences of sexual assault and/or

change as something that allows women to change their lives and draw something positive from it, we give sexual assault and/or rape and the perpetrator(s) a power they do not have, and we continue to perpetuate the image of a passive and incapable woman. In her words:

*“It gives the perpetrators more power by saying oh, I’m stronger for it, like, and... I guess I don’t know what.. I am... in some ways I am, but not because of them” (Claire, 1197).*

#### **4.1.2. The “Warrior”**

The term “warrior” encompasses personal and social qualities that the term “fighter” does not have. As Fader (2016) states, “a warrior is more than a fighter” (p. 1). A warrior avoids conflict when possible but engages in the fight if it is inevitable; a warrior knows that there are many ways to fight, not only physically, as most battles are won without violent action; and a warrior expands her or his training to positively affect life in different ways. This term clearly reflects the experiences that this second overarching theme encompasses; the experiences of women as warriors who fight within themselves and against external opponents, who fight for themselves and for others, and who fight to regain and maintain control over their lives. Women, as warriors, fight to win their battles and have a better life.

The “*Battle*” encapsulates women’s experiences of being held back due to the consequences of someone else’s actions, the struggle in regaining agency over their own lives. This resembles the “fighting spirit” described by Sinopoli (2009), the wish to get back what was taken away after experiences of sexual violence. Interestingly, the battles that women described here were not battles that had taken place at the time of the assault, nor were they against their PTSD symptoms. They were long-term battles against their perpetrators, parts of their own selves, society, and against the impacts that sexual assault and/or rape had on their sense of self.

The internal struggle women describe in this theme – fighting against death thoughts, or not letting the experience “*overtake my life*” (Beth, Claire) – could be linked to the concepts of internal conflict or cognitive dissonance, the mental struggle we experience when opposite thoughts, desires, or feelings are experienced, or when one part of ourselves contradicts another. Draucker et al. (2009) described women’s struggle as they seek and avoid others or their memories at the same time.

Most importantly, women also described a struggle to restore their own humanity. The process of dehumanisation has been described, mainly in the context

of war, as the process in which autonomy and freedom are denied, and the ability to change, central to being human, is denied too (Oelofsen, 2009). The dehumanisation that occurs, not only when rape and/or sexual assault is happening, but that permeates the society we live in in subtle ways, can explain participants' experiences within the battle and the need to redeem themselves – to free the self from bad aspects or spiritual death (Etymology Dictionary, 2018), or rehumanise themselves – the process in which a person recognises her own autonomy, reduces the otherness through finding similarities with others, acknowledges her own emotions, projects, and aspirations, and examines and understands the context she lives in (Oelofsen, 2009). These experiences of rehumanisation and redeeming are consistent with women's experiences in Draucker et al. (2009), in which women, too, described seeking to repair aspects of themselves that they believed had been damaged, attempting to rid themselves of the psychological and physical consequences of the violence.

Finally, dehumanisation could also explain the feelings of otherness and loss experienced by participants and described throughout the analysis, as often those who have suffered violence find it difficult to see themselves as whole (Oelofsen, 2009). These are consistent with women's descriptions in Draucker and Stern (2000), and the experiences of seeing the self as other reinforcing feelings of unworthiness, as described in Janoff-Bulman (1993). Finally, this constantly experienced dehumanisation could also explain why this battle is experienced as a long-term one, as rehumanisation is a process that needs to be constantly fought, not only internally, but externally, as women live in a society that constantly objectifies them. Thus, it will be essential for therapeutic models to address not only women's internal world but also the context in which they live and sexual violence occurs, as the feminist model does (Ullman and Townsend, 2008), to facilitate rehumanisation at both levels.

Regaining Control was a theme present in all participants' accounts, and relates the multiple ways in which women regain and maintain control through the use of music (Beth), the movement of their bodies (Emily or Sarah), focusing their attention on external activities or objects (Beth, Claire, or Lucy), or on those around them (Kate). These findings are consistent with an array of studies, such as Sinopoli (2009) or Chaudry (2012), in which women described wanting and regaining a sense of control during their process of healing, or PhuongThao (2016), where women described constantly resisting and creating opportunities to escape, better managing their suffering and pain.

In addition, and as previously addressed, women also described using sex (Kate) or drugs (Claire) for a period of time, as ways of regaining control over their lives, and especially over their bodies and emotions. It is not uncommon for women to use drugs and maintain high numbers of sexual relationships after experiences of sexual violence. The empowerment model (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1974, 1975) describes how this can be helpful in creating distance from the assault, avoiding difficult feelings, or feeling in control when with a man, and is echoed by other studies in which women with experiences of sexual violence also reported struggling with substance misuse (Kalmakis, 2010). Interestingly, Draucker et al. (2009) described these risky behaviours as part of “restoring a sense of self” (p. 374), as they too countered the sense of victimisation.

The multiple ways in which women regain and maintain control can also be understood as so many acts of resistance. Influenced by existentialist ideas, Goffman (1961) was one of the first authors to describe the different ways in which hospital patients resisted and responded to the asymmetrical relations of power through “small acts”, such as using medical equipment in different ways, being silent, sticking their tongues out, walking slowly, or pretending to be unintelligent. Foucault, in the 1960s, highlighted the importance of the body within resistance, even if he failed to acknowledge that violence, when used to exert power, is never neutral (Branfield, 1997). In the field of violence against women, Kelly (1988) described the acts of resistance women constantly engage with during and in the aftermath of incest, sexual assault and/or rape, and within the whole continuum of sexual violence. Similarly, Barstow (1992) suggested that acts of resistance also occur in a continuum, from the most isolated ones, such as sticking the tongue out, to the collective acts – organised protest such as Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Most recently, women’s extreme drinking or dieting has also been understood as a way in which women challenge and resist gender ideals, social processes, and reconstruct their identity (Day, 2010), and Reynolds (2014) has expanded the definition of resistance by stating that it does not only refer to the responses against abuses of power and oppression, but also to the many ways in which individuals maintain their dignity and try to move towards justice, reflecting some of the experiences women described in this study (Lucy).

Even if the most obvious ways of resistance, with different parts of one’s self or with external others, are those that can be seen – yelling, kicking, or running away, women also use more cognitive ways to resist, such as thinking about alternatives or planning how to continue to be safe, or emotional ones, such as protecting the core

parts of themselves even when submitting to an attack to avoid further injury (Hollander, 2005). Thus, reading a book (Claire), moving their bodies (Emily), changing their posture (Sarah), or playing a specific song (Beth), for example, become acts of resistance against the oppressive internal or external other. As Wade (1997) described it, these acts of resistance women undertake are spontaneous and opportunistic; they are prudent, in the sense that they are subtle and disguised; they show determination, as women are able to start these actions despite experiencing pain and suffering at the time; and they are not always expected to lead automatically to success, but build up slowly as time goes by. This is consistent with my participants' accounts, as they, too, described how it was through time and practice that these responses and inner resources became more and more effective.

Still, as Branfield (1997) points out, acts of resistance can be robbed of their power and become neutralised since "what might be an act of resistance for the performer is not necessarily read as such by the audience" (p. 204). This does not only exemplify how women's acts of resistance and/or inner resources when regaining and maintaining control are rarely acknowledged by those around them, but also, perhaps, how the acts of resistance against different parts of oneself may be harder to identify – by the audience and the women themselves.

Finally, the "*Social Justice Warrior*" describes how women fight, not only for themselves, but for a wider group of women, which in turn continues to motivate them in their fight, and acknowledges the wrongness done to them by placing the responsibility on the offender(s). This theme was apparent in all participants' accounts but Beth's and Emily's, perhaps because the need to have space for themselves to process at the time did not allow them space to look towards the outside. However, the strength and passion with which the other women described, and seemed to deeply connect with this experience, was remarkable.

These findings are congruent with Sinopoli's (2011), in which women not only felt empowered through voicing their experiences in community settings, but started advocacy work on behalf of other women with similar experiences. They, too, are consistent with Chaudry (2012), as women also described developing a feeling of compassion towards others in a global sense, and, as a consequence, increased their interest in social justice and prevention of suffering in their communities. Finally, they are also consistent with Draucker and Stern (2000), who suggested that women's feminism – fighting against stereotypes or acknowledging society's oppression of



women – and thus wanting a better society, helped women reduce shame and guilt, and led them towards wanting to prevent others undergoing the same difficulties.

While providing feedback on the findings of this study, participants linked this theme to the #metoo movement. For some, this movement seemed truly inspirational:

*“I can’t tell you how helpful the #metoo movement has been and continues to be. That there is a social movement out there, which I can get involved in, and get fired up about really helps me move out of self-pity and into productivity” (Lucy).*

For others, the sense of strength reflected in the findings I shared with them was:

*“a much needed narrative after the #metoo, as it seems everyone is focusing on men, and what they do wrong, which is needed. But it is also needed to focus on women and what they are doing right” (Kate).*

The findings of this study thus support the idea that turning towards the community can be conceptualised as an internal resource for women. More research on how women understand and differentiate inner from external resources is certainly needed.

#### **4.1.3. The Growing Self**

The Growing Self encompasses the multiple ways in which women expand their sense of self, sometimes building bridges between the internal and the external. As described in many identity theories (see Breakwell, 1996; or Giddens, 1991), this theme encompasses the hard work and development women undertake to gain meaning and a stable sense of identity after rape and/or sexual assault, perhaps as they become aware of their innate tendency to know their best directions in life for wellbeing and fulfilment, as described by Joseph and Linley (2005).

Janoff-Bulman and Frieze (1983) state that one of the assumptions that is shattered as a result of negative and life-changing traumatic events such as rape, is the vision of the self as positive. Draucker et al. (2009), in their qualitative metasynthesis on the essence of healing from sexual violence, described how various authors referred to the process of acquiring skills in work, educational, or social competences, as renovating the self, reincarnating the buried self, reconstituting a sense of me, transforming the self, or redefining the self, and how they chose to describe this process as “restoration because it implies the preservation of the essence of an entity by repairing damage done by the environment” (p. 13). Finally,

the empowerment model, as Herman (2015) states, has referred to this process as reconnecting with the sense of self, which also includes addressing the “environment”.

Space for the Self refers to the multiple ways in which women created and expanded their mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical safe spaces – spaces where they were able to process their experiences and their emotions, as they were able to connect with themselves. Sometimes due to the lack of these spaces in their lives, and sometimes due to the need to expand them as their sense of self grew, women used meditation (Claire), music, their bodies, travelling (Sarah), their diaries (Kate), their drawings or objects (Emily), to do so. Women’s accounts depicted their creativity, as well as the need for more spaces where women feel safe to process and heal. This theme was present in all the participants’ accounts but Beth’s, who instead brought the idea of a “*bad space*”. With this concept, she referred to the difficulties she was experiencing after her assault, how inhabiting this “*bad space*” made her relationships difficult as she felt it “*pushed others away*” (Beth, 1319), and how she felt vulnerable and afraid of being hurt again.

The concept of a safe and protected space where women can be far from others to process their emotions, transform, and heal, is beautifully portrayed in Smith and Kelly’s (2001) findings, in which women described creating and being in a cocoon at the beginning of their healing journey. Similar to the women in this study, they described how being in this space allowed women to talk about their experiences, whereas outside of it, as described by Kate or Claire, women felt they could not express what was happening to them, and if they did, they were often dismissed and regarded as strange, as their experiences did not fit prevalent myths of rape and sexual assault. This feeling of otherness is also reflected in Chaudry’s (2012) research, in which women, too, described feeling isolated and disconnected from others, as they did not feel understood by them. It was precisely for this reason that Claire started to build her safe space “*in between*” her friends and her parents.

Most participants (all but Lucy) described not talking about their experiences of rape and/or sexual assault with their parents. Bryant-Davis, Cooper, Marks, Smith and Tillman (2011) described the difficulties women experienced talking or even thinking about their wartime sexual assaults, and how they avoided conversations with others as a way to cope. At the same time, they also described how women sought safe spaces where they were able to express their feelings and receive support. However, and perhaps due to sexual violence occurring in a context of war and thus being known to all in the community, or perhaps due to living in a more community-oriented society

rather than an individualistic one, their participants found these spaces in community settings, such as churches, gatherings, or trauma-focused workshops, rather than in “personal cocoons” like my participants. Nonetheless, their study states the need to challenge sexism, the hierarchies of power, and the privileges in society that not only contribute to a conducive context for sexual violence (Kelly, 1988), but lead to women feeling diminished and othered, as their narratives and experiences of sexual assault do not match the myths and expectations of their communities. This, in turn, leads to further silence and isolation (Heath, Lynch, Fritch, McArthur & Smith, 2011), and increases the difficulties women have in labelling their experiences (see also Sinopoli, 2009).

The sub-theme Learning and Developing portrays the ways in which women, as the main active agents in their healing journeys, provide themselves with the nurturance, care, and information they need to heal. Women relearn how to live their lives, and begin a search for knowledge that validates and empowers them. Within this journey, women acknowledge their changing needs, the conquest of their past difficulties and struggles, and sometimes also through spirituality, they connect with themselves at a more profound level, strengthening their sense of self. This powerful theme was present in all the participants’ accounts, and strongly challenges the idea that women do not have inner resources, or are passive and almost invalid beings after rape and/or sexual assault.

These findings are clearly consistent with the women’s narratives described by Smith and Kelly (2002), where women described regaining what was lost, acknowledging personal growth, finding inner peace and understanding, self-love and forgiveness, and feeling able to redefine themselves. They are also consistent with Chaudry (2012), as women described finding contentment, acknowledging how their developing journey and work on self-esteem or confidence would be a long one, and connecting with spirituality, which was also reflected in Draucker and Stern’s (2000) study. Similarly, Kingi and Jordan’s (2000) study reflects how some women also described feeling more aware, stronger, resilient, and having increased their self-knowledge after these experiences, and highlights the difficulty some of the participants expressed in recognising the end of their healing journey or even deciding if there was an end, as they continued to work on managing the long-term difficulties of sexual assault and/or rape, such as flashbacks (Emily). Curiously, only one participant in this study referred to herself as a survivor, and none as a victim. Most

did not refer to an end when exploring their healing journeys, but described some of their long-term difficulties, such as intimacy, and how they were managing them in their day-to-day life (Kate). Most also assumed their journey would never be completed (Kate or Sarah), as with some of the participants in Kingi and Jordan (2000). Finally, my participants also referred to a clear starting point in their journey of recovery (a book for Claire, or attending a concert for Beth). I believe acknowledging their achievements, rather than focusing on what “was missing”, reflected a sense of self that was often missed by others, and thus was helpful in validating and reinforcing the vision of themselves as active and capable agents – for themselves and for those around them that bear witness – perhaps also bringing a more hopeful view of the future. This is also reflected in Janoff-Bulman and Frieze’s (1983, p. 8) study: “Their self-enhancing strategies minimise their self-perceptions as victims”.

All these studies describe the improvements women experienced in their lives; however, none of them seem to reflect the journey women undertake before achieving the latter parts of their healing process – the journey that starts with rehumanisation, and continues with the search for knowledge, the learning and practice that is required to manage the short, mid, and long-term difficulties after sexual assault and/or rape, and the different ways in which women improve the connections with their selves and their inner resources. The concept of empowerment can be linked to women’s described experiences. It is described as the process by which people “gain mastery over their lives” (Rappaport, 1984, p. 3, in Ullman and Townsend, 2009), and occurs at an interpersonal, interactional, and behavioural level through gaining control, access to resources, and acquiring a critical understanding of one’s sociopolitical context (Zimmerman, 1995). It has been linked to an increased sense of control and strength, feeling more independent, aware, and confident, having an increased understanding and capacity to make choices, and gaining more education and training, or better self-care.

These first definitions of empowerment, even if rooted within the social action framework, were criticised for not focusing enough on the context, and thus not addressing how the context can limit individual empowerment (Rigger, 1993, in Ullman and Townsend, 2008). However, as Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) state, these critiques led to an overcorrection of this focus, and it is perhaps for this reason that most recent literature on empowerment and many therapeutic approaches recommended for rape and/or sexual assault focus on how others – professionals or bystanders – can facilitate this process.

Grounding and stabilisation, psychoeducation, or restarting activities women used to enjoy prior to the assault, are mainly described as a consequence of the therapeutic process rather than activities women initiate themselves. Most therapies recommended for rape and sexual assault – trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy, or the empowerment model, for example – describe how it is first necessary to establish a safe space and a good therapeutic relationship, which includes grounding techniques. This will lead to the processing of the trauma, which will include psychoeducation and thus normalisation of women’s experiences, focusing on the impacts on the sense of self. Some will also contextualise the abuse within their close community and within society in general, and finally, they all will solidify this process. However, participants’ accounts show how, outside of therapeutic processes, women are already undergoing a similar process on their own, thus undertaking an internal journey that may be re-walked, perhaps differently, in the therapeutic settings.

More recent authors place the emphasis on the agency individuals have on the process of empowerment, and thus are concordant with the experiences women described in this study. Kasturirangan (2009) describes empowerment as a “conscious raising” that requires “critical awareness”, distributive justice, self-determination, the development of a chosen identity, and the development and accessing of needed resources. Furthermore, the empowerment process model (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) suggests that empowerment occurs as individuals define or redefine meaningful and power-oriented goals and objectives, carry out the necessary actions for their achievement, and observe and reflect on the impact of these actions in relation to their goal, thus requiring self-efficacy, competence, and knowledge.

Finally, “*Bridges*” encompasses the experiences of extending and expanding the self to connect what is internal with what is external, liberating captive parts of the self and uncovering unknown ones through seeing them reflected in others, and thus, for some, feeling less alone and othered. This theme is found in all participants’ accounts but Kate’s, perhaps because, after her first experience of assault, she felt a lack of support and safe spaces where she could bring her experiences, and thus has learned to mainly rely on more internal resources rather than those on the continuum of inner-outer. Even if this theme may apparently outline an external resource, I feel it provides invaluable knowledge in conceptualising inner resources, as it clearly reflects how what is apparently external can be experienced as internal.

These findings can be linked to Smith and Kelly's (2001) and Sinopoli's (2009) studies, as women described the importance of support and acceptance from significant others, feeling vindicated when others expressed their anger with the aggressor, reaching out to others to feel less alone, and seeking to "be and bear witness". They can also be linked to Draucker and Stern (2000), as women also described feeling validated by others when sharing their stories. Interestingly, women in my study did not seem to share their experiences with their communities to feel validated or vindicated, but to feel understood (Kate), or gauge who could be a resource in their life (Lucy). They, instead, described feeling validated and vindicated only by those really close to them – directly (a good friend for Lucy), or through an object (washing powder and her mother for Emily); or those with similar experiences – physically close to them (Sarah), or physically far (Beyoncé through her music for Beth, or Lena Dunham through her book for Claire).

Therefore, the majority of people in women's lives did not help them feel validated and vindicated. As Sinopoli (2009) describes it, vindication cannot occur without blaming and claiming, without a party that listens to and supports women and makes the perpetrator(s) responsible for their actions. All women's accounts, and strongly within Claire's and Kate's, described how they often felt silenced, not understood, and were made to feel mad or othered in this society, by their friends, teachers, or the news, which is similar to what many women who have experienced gendered violence describe. Bridges, then, can also be understood as a resource women use to counteract this lack of support, connecting with those that understand and listen to them feeling validated and vindicated, and thus feeling less alone and isolated in front of the majority.

Finally, none of the above studies reflected how women mainly validate and vindicate themselves through their own internal resources: through acknowledging changes over time and how they have conquered past difficulties and struggles (Beth, Kate, Sarah); through acknowledging how they have survived "*the worst*" (Beth, Kate), or how they are able to block and defeat difficult thoughts (Beth, Emily, Lucy); through acknowledging how they have become stronger even if it may not look like it (Beth, Kate), and how they do so through reading about feminism or talking to other women with similar experiences (Claire, Lucy); or through acknowledging what they have and how they are at the present time (Beth, Emily, Sarah).

#### **4.1.4. Inner resources**

Even though this research has focused on exploring how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape, it has also furthered our understanding of inner resources. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Draucker and Stern (2000), in which women reported how it was through finding their inner resources that they were able to find inner strength, create safer lives, and see themselves as successful, self-sufficient, confident, and competent individuals; and with Davis's study (2002), in which inner resources were defined as something that is used to regain control, emotional, mental, and physical safety, and retain self-identity.

Within this study, inner or internal resources are understood as those resources that come from within, from women themselves. Inner-outer resources, or those within the continuum inner-outer, are those resources that may apparently seem external, but actually are also conceptualised as internal by women (a cat, or a social movement). Finally, outer or external resources are those that are uniquely external to women.

The need for a framework when working with stress and trauma, in which inner resources are defined, was already highlighted by Hobfoll (1989). Unfortunately, even if researchers have been prolific in exploring and understanding the process of recovery after sexual violence, resilience and post-traumatic growth – inner resources being at the core of them as stated in the introduction – this is still a necessity today. Hopefully, this study has taken a step in this direction.

Participants' understanding of inner resources could be described through Hobfoll's (1989) definition: "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (p. 516). However, with this definition, as suggested by his examples of resources – self-esteem, economic status, or employment – he mainly refers to what has been considered in this study as external and perhaps inner-outer resources, rather than internal ones. As a consequence, and adding to his theory of conservation of resources in which, perhaps, external resources are "gained", the findings of this project suggest that most internal resources are already present within women and thus, rather than gained, they are uncovered, they grow, and they develop, paralleling Harvey's (2007) conceptualisation of resilience within the ecological model of trauma.

Keeping in mind that inner resources are at the core of resilience, as stated in the introduction, Harvey (1996, 2007) suggests that individuals who may be seriously impaired in a specific domain of functioning are able to show an incredible strength in another, and they may secure the recovery of an area through accessing the strengths of another, thus reflecting the findings of this study.

As demonstrated through the Analysis and in this chapter, after sexual assault and/or rape, women’s inner resources appear to be experienced as constantly interacting with each other, growing together and supporting one another, and thus, the three overarching themes in this thesis – the different ways in which women experience these inner resources – seem to be constantly connected, reflecting women’s journey of recovery after rape in a way similar to that described by Smith and Kelly (2001), and underlining the strong link between inner resources and the self highlighted in the literature.

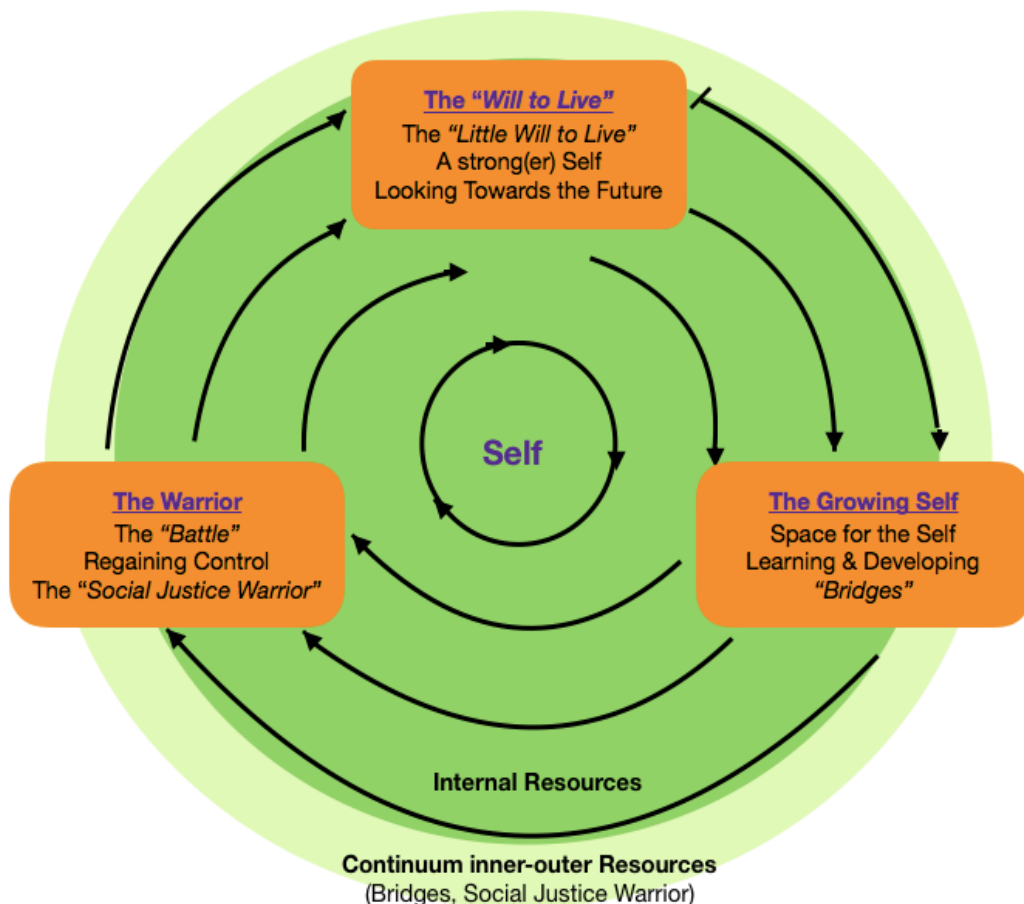


Fig. 4.1. Inner resources tentative model

The *“Little Will to Live”*, an unacknowledged but core part of women’s resources and self, moves women towards life after their experiences of sexual assault and/or



rape, and leads them towards their “*Warrior*”, which battles and regains control in some areas of their life and starts the rehumanisation process. This leads to growth, learning, and the creation of a space that allows the processing of experiences, which in turn, leads to the acknowledgement of the “*Little Will to Live*” in the short and long-term biographical history. This provides a vision of a strong and capable self that starts to (re)envision the possibility of a future. A Will to continue to battle, regain agency, and protect those around women follows, which seems to motivate women to continue to create bigger spaces for themselves where others can be invited, and in turn, further validate them and, at times, experience the rage society does not allow them to express. In turn, this leads to further learning, empowerment, and the acknowledgement that women’s experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, and their experiences during their healing journey are common and experienced by many. Finally, women trust more and more in their capacities and inner resources, view their “*Little Will to Live*” as more tangible and reliable, further fuelling the exploration and consolidation of their inner resources, and further connecting them with their sense of self and their needs.

## **4.2. Relevance to Counselling Psychology Practice**

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First, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty in voicing experiences of rape and/or sexual assault, and thus how women with these experiences may be part of a hidden population (Campbell et al., 2004). As a consequence, counselling psychologists will work with them knowingly and unknowingly. It is for this reason that it is essential for practitioners to offer a space in which clients feel invited and are allowed to talk about their experiences. To do so, in the first session with a client, a practitioner may refer to the way s/he works and the areas of her/his expertise, including sexual violence as another area in her/his repertoire if s/he has it. Equally, at the beginning of a therapeutic process, a clinician may ask clients if they have ever experienced a wide variety of experiences, and include sexual assault or rape within them. At the same time, and as mentioned, it can be extremely difficult for an individual to talk about their experiences of sexual violence or abuse, and thus it is important that practitioners do not pressure clients, and provide a safe and containing space

where it is the client who decides her timings and takes control, as suggested in the empowerment model.

As stated in the introduction, counselling psychology prioritises clients' experiences (Cooper, 2017). During the interviews, participants described some of their inner resources and presented a vision of their self as capable. During their feedback, and similar to women in Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens and Sefl (2010), they reported feeling "*more confident*" (Beth), "*empowered*" (Claire, Kate, Lucy), "*linking things and realising new things about me*" (Kate), "*becoming aware of some barriers*" or "*things I am not communicating*" (Sarah), thus describing it as an insightful, "*helpful*" (Kate) and thought-provoking process that allowed them to "*talk about it in a positive way*" (Claire) in "*a safe space*" (Kate). Thus, exploring their experiences and inner resources in a phenomenological way could be undertaken within the therapeutic setting, as this enhanced women's meaning-making process, and helped them build a more cohesive sense of self.

Likewise, it will be important for women to name their experiences of sexual violence, and for psychologists to refer to women's experiences in the same terms. As described in the introduction, and shown in the sexual assault names table given by participants (Appendix 18), some women may feel that the words "rape" or "sexual assault" (Sarah) identify their experiences; however, others may prefer only parts of these words (Beth, Emily) or completely different words, as these resemble definitions that are far removed from their experiences (Claire), or may trigger flashbacks (Emily). They may feel that these words diminish their experience (Kate) or that they are not being empowered (Lucy). I believe referring to women's experiences in the way they chose throughout the interview allowed them to be more connected to their experiences and thus their sense of self, and I would recommend this in the context of therapeutic practice. In addition, and as reflected throughout this paper, it will be important for practitioners to reflect how the positive changes women experience after rape and/or sexual assault are a direct consequence of their own actions and processes, and not an unintended consequence of the act of violence itself. This would acknowledge women as the active agents they are, and balance the power imbalance they may experience in many social contexts, thus reinforcing their sense of self and empowering them.

In my opinion, psychologists should be cautious in the ways they refer to those with experiences of sexual assault and/or rape. I believe that, through not describing women as victims or survivors during the interview, I was able to reinforce an image

of a woman with a more cohesive sense of self, rather than one with two nearly contradictory identities that need to be merged. In addition, I feel this opened up dialogues on women's difficulties and struggles, encouraging the discussion of experiences without the fear of being conceptualised as passive individuals that "need" or "lack".

Therapies such as trauma-focused CBT or Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) have been recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), as they are highly effective in reducing post-traumatic symptoms (NICE, 2005). Other therapies, such as cognitive processing therapy (CPT) or prolonged exposure (PE) have also been shown to be effective in the treatment of PTSD (Dixon, Ahles & Marques, 2016), as well as techniques such as imagery rescripting (Hagenaars & Arntz, 2012). Even if these therapies also facilitate the development of women's skills, self-esteem, and access to resources, the empowerment or feminist model focuses exclusively on it, empowering women through mirroring and empathy. In addition, this last model also contextualises these experiences and acknowledges the power, social, structural, and situational factors that limit women's empowerment (Ullman & Townsend, 2008), thus also starting to repair some of the "damage done by the environment" (Draucker et al., 2009, p. 13). As counselling psychologists, we focus on facilitating growth and supporting and empowering our clients from a non-hierarchical relationship (Cooper, 2017), and due to the importance and long-term effects of the experience of a "*Battle*" – with internal and external parts of the self – it is important for all therapeutic models to not only address the traumatic experiences and their processing, but also to acknowledge and address the context in which sexual violence occurs.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that it is important for practitioners who work with women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape to include the exploration of women's inner resources within their therapeutic practice, and most importantly, to facilitate their identification and acknowledge their development, as participants' accounts suggest that it may be difficult at times to acknowledge or access them. Women described how the "*Little Will to Live*" was often heard but dismissed, and it seems essential that we pay attention and reflect this powerful resource, encouraging women to listen to and trust it, further connecting with their sense of self. In addition, it seems important to constantly question our understanding of resources, and be aware that those that may seem external at first may actually be a reflection or an expansion of an internal resource. Identifying, validating, and valuing

women's inner and inner-outer resources may help reflect a vision of our clients as active agents of their process, and thus add to their self-esteem and the "restoration" of the self (Draucker et al., 2009), perhaps also reducing risk. Besides, as some women appeared to be surprised at their own strength and capacity to overcome difficulties during the interview process, it will be of value to continually reflect on women's achievements and power.

As stated in the literature, rape and/or sexual assault crosses the boundaries of the body, affecting the most intimate self. In light of the study's findings, it seems essential that therapeutic work pays attention to how inner resources themselves are embodied. The inclusion of objects that women relate to their inner resources, such as music and dance, personal diaries, drawings, stones, or various smells, should also be encouraged, as they may facilitate the expression of women's experiences, and due to encouraging a focus on the present they can too "fulfil a therapeutic function" (Willig, 2016, p. 14). In addition, bringing an object into the therapy room gives clients – as gives participants – an active role that allows them to decide what and how much they share (Willig, 2016), thus balancing the relations of power within the therapy room. These objects can be explored and experienced within the therapy room in the way women might outside of it – holding them, writing on them, dancing them, listening to them. These experiences could then be discussed and also used to inform our therapeutic practice. Furthermore, as occurred in the interview process, these objects may not only help women to further connect with their inner resources when they are in therapy, but they may also start a different "conversation" about them through a language that "does not require translation" (Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009), and that will also inform our knowledge and allow us to further support our clients. In addition, it seems important for practitioners to focus on the body within therapeutic work by, for example, commenting on the client's body posture, repetitive movements, or movement when describing feelings or experiences, and further exploring them as they may lead to uncovering bodily patterns. Practitioners may also create a "body map of emotions", by linking emotions to the different parts of the body where they are experienced, and exploring their textures and colours with the client.

Finally, psychologists should be encouraged to work with, and refer their clients to, other professionals who may provide a focus on body experiences, such as body therapists, Reiki practitioners, or dance therapists, as some of the participants reported finding them helpful. Besides, as some of the women who took part in this project stated, services should not treat experiences of, and the difficulties related to,

sexual violence as separate from other difficulties women experience, as they are often related and should be approached together. In addition, and as counselling psychologists work within teams and community settings, it will be important to collaborate in the expansion of spaces where women are able to talk about their experiences of sexual violence, as suggested by some of the participants, and to share the knowledge we have about inner resources and the ways women experience them after rape and/or sexual assault with other professionals and with the society we live in, as, amongst other things, we would add to the view of women as active and capable agents in their process of healing, and thus contribute to social justice.

### **4.3. Strengths, Limitations**

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#### **4.3.1. Methodological challenges**

This research project attempted to provide a space where the voices of women who are often silenced could be heard. It did so using an IPA methodology, allowing an idiographic approach that privileged the participants' subjective experiences. However, it is important to acknowledge how this is a qualitative study that has explored the experiences of six women and, therefore, even if it deepens our understanding, the findings cannot be generalised, nor can they create a theory applicable to all.

IPA has been criticised at times for becoming a simple sharing of experiences rather than providing further understanding and explanation of the phenomena that it studies (Willig, 2008). Participants' reactions and words during the interview, as well as their feedback on it and on the findings of the study, show how women also gained further understanding and knowledge that transcends the explored experience. As previously stated, the interview process increased the understanding participants had of their inner resources and of their sense of self; it brought to their awareness present struggles, and helped some participants feel empowered and more confident. As suggested by Fisher (2010), and in line with my feminist epistemological position, I applied a feminist framework to the interview that allowed a connection between each one of the participants and myself. In addition, in accordance with my epistemology and methodology, and adding transparency to the study (Yardley, 2000), I asked

participants for their feedback on the study's findings. They stated that this had also facilitated their process of validation through seeing themselves reflected in the findings, and that seeing a common thread with others who had similar experiences brought sadness, but also hope:

*"What I really liked about your findings is that at no point did you portray us as 'victims'. You worked hard to ensure that our stories were of recovery, but also allowed for the reality that we went through traumatic experiences" (Lucy)*

*"It was sad to realise so many people has gone through it" (Sarah)*

*"Nice that respecting all individual narratives you found ways that connected us all, and we all survived, and we all struggled, and we all will continue to survive" (Kate)*

IPA methodology has also been criticised for over-focusing on cognition (Willig, 2001), thus leaving less room for the embodied experience (Willig, 2008). Following Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), and their statement on the need to pay attention to pre-reflective experiences, I paid close attention to participants' body language throughout the interviews, exploring it with them when appropriate, and I paid attention to their feelings and metaphoric expressions, as shown in the transcriptions, thus providing richness to the data. In addition, while planning the interview stage on a phenomenon that clearly affects women's bodies, and, at times, cannot be expressed through words, I wanted to include a "different" way of exploring women's experiences of inner resources: through an object. Interestingly, most of the participants decided what object they would bring to the interview at the time I told them about it over the phone during the screening stage. However, once I asked why they had chosen the object during our interview, most did not know the answer at first, and needed some time to think about it. It was through the interview process that they thought about what the object meant to them and how it linked to their inner resources, allowing me to "witness active meaning-making" (Willig, 2016, p. 11). Thus, I believe that through the use of an object, this research has also paid attention to pre-reflective experiences, which have been extremely helpful in accessing women's experiences, furthering understanding for the researcher and for the women themselves.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge how English was the first language of all the women who took part in this project, and how most of them were educated to university level as inferred through their accounts. As further developed in the next section, I wonder if the same themes would have emerged if participants had been from different backgrounds, and if English had not been their first language.

Moreover, even if IPA is described through clear stages, it has no guidelines on the process of each analysis stage, and thus it is also a creative process. This has allowed me to undertake a “double step” phenomenological analysis that continues to place participants’ accounts at the heart of the study, but also brings doubt, as there were many ways in which this could have been done. Other practitioners would, perhaps, have analysed this data differently, as they would have confronted the difficulty of answering the “how” without knowing the “what” in a different way. As suggested by Yardley (2000), I hope that by providing clear descriptions and examples of these steps in the Methodology chapter, I have provided enough transparency and clarity for the reader to judge the quality of this study.

Finally, unlike many other IPA researchers, I have not provided short case descriptions, to protect the identities of the women who took part in this study. However, I believe I have provided enough context through the use of many rich quotes, not only for the different textures of an experience to be captured, but for the interpretations I have made to be judged in their appropriateness and trustworthiness, and for the reader to consider alternative meanings.

#### **4.3.2. Procedural challenges**

As stated in the Methodology chapter, my recruitment process was a long and arduous one. Campbell et al. (2004) have described how this is a continuous challenge for those that work with women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, as they are considered a hidden population. They highlight how it is already difficult for women to speak with family or friends, and how it is even harder to speak with researchers. They highlight the need for researchers to normalise women’s experiences, respect them – also through vouchers or money in exchange for women’s time – and connect and support women to help them feel less isolated. As previously explained, I initially struggled with the decision to offer my participants a £20 voucher; however, through the reactions of participants at the moment of giving them the voucher – a confident thank you with their words and a strong and grounded body language – I realised that this was a sign of respect. I was not only “taking”, I was also acknowledging and recognising their value and expertise.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject, a rigorous recruitment that carefully considered inclusion and exclusion criteria was done to protect women from potential harm and psychological disturbance. However, it is important to acknowledge here

how these criteria only provided access to women who had already discussed their experiences in therapy, and thus, I wonder if accounts of women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, but have not explored them in a therapeutic space, or have not even discussed their experiences with anyone else, would be different. As a consequence, I also wonder if their inner resources, and thus the results of my analysis, would perhaps also have been different. Does therapy have any effect on women's inner resources and the way in which they experience them and develop them? Are women who feel they have enough inner resources more likely to come forward as research participants? I also wonder if the findings of this study and the inner resources identified through women's accounts would have been different if my advert would have referred to "unwanted sex" rather than "sexual assault", as most women may not identify their experiences of sexual violence with these last words, as stated in the literature and through the participants' accounts.

Furthermore, and following Ullman and Townsend's (2008) example, I am white, in my mid-thirties, have two surnames, and an accent that suggests English is not my mother tongue. Thus, and as my photograph and full name were included in the Facebook page of the study, I wonder if some of these characteristics prevented potential participants from contacting me. Also, I wonder how my accent, my look – often others think I am younger than I am – or my undertaking a doctoral course, made my participants construct an understanding of who I was, and how that perhaps affected what they shared with me during the screening, the interview, and the feedback process.

Finally, I believe it was important to provide participants with the choice of contacting the researcher themselves or being contacted by the researcher in the recruitment process. Some participants seemed to reassert their agency through contacting the researcher and expressing their wish to participate in the project. However, others reported that if they had not been given the option to be contacted, they would never have taken part in this project. They reported feeling that the phone call from the researcher was an invitation and "permission" to talk about a subject that they are often silenced on. Similarly, and related to the interview process, I believe asking participants to decide how much to tell me about their experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, and to name these experiences at the beginning of the interview, and for me to refer to them in their terms throughout, set a frame in which women felt respected rather than imposed upon, and thus allowed me to be invited into women's "Space for the Self". I believe holding the interview in these private and safe spaces



provided the rich accounts that allowed a better understanding of women's experiences.

### **4.3.3. Personal and epistemological challenges. Finding balance**

#### **4.3.3.1. Describing and interpreting**

At the beginning of the analysis, I felt quite unsure about interpretation, and thus focused on describing my participants' experiences. The initial excitement led me to quickly connect participants' words with theory, perhaps moving closer to grounded theory than to IPA. It was only through deepening my understanding on phenomenology and IPA, as suggested by my supervisor, and answering the phenomenological and interpretative questions proposed by Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) that I was able to truly understand this process. I realised then that "doing" IPA was similar to the process I undertook as a practitioner in therapeutic sessions – asking about body language or tears during the interview was similar to what I did in therapy sessions; interpreting my participants' words or body language in the analysis stage was reflecting my insights and interpretations in the therapy room; and asking for my participants' feedback on my findings was similar to double-checking if a formulation made sense to the client when building it together. This insight as a novice IPA researcher made me feel more confident, as the process I was undertaking to interpret could be grounded in the process I had been doing as a practitioner who had worked with women who have experienced sexual violence, and helped me to "trust in the process" during the times that I felt lost, stuck, or overwhelmed by the amount of data I had.

Linked to this double but integrated identity of researcher and practitioner, I also found myself moving from the experiential practitioner to the scientific researcher, engaging in a more creative and flexible process while analysing my data and writing my Analysis chapter, and engaging in a more rational and bounded one when writing the other chapters of this research. Additionally, and while writing my Analysis and Discussion chapters, I often found myself switching between wanting to honour participants' ways of naming their experiences, and wanting to provide continuity and understanding for the reader, and thus using the term sexual assault and/or rape more often than I would have liked.

#### 4.3.3.2. *Phenomenology and feminism*

I have attempted to achieve quality and rigour in this project by clearly stating my epistemological standpoint in the Methodology chapter, and by staying close to the participants' accounts during the Analysis stage. However, as previously stated, I struggled to marry my phenomenological position to my critical feminist one. Feminist research is set and explained aside from the three main paradigms in psychology. Books have separate chapters on feminist research, positioning it as something foreign that does not have a place within the continuum of critical realism, social constructivism, or phenomenology. Even if I believe a separate chapter is important, as feminism needs to be clearly outlined, I also believe it needs to be included and positioned alongside the existent paradigms and methodologies in psychology.

It was, again, through understanding the similarities between my role as a researcher and my role as a practitioner that I could understand that phenomenological and feminist standpoints can, and do, coexist, as in feminist phenomenology. Within this research, as I do in the therapy room, I took at face value my clients'/participants' words, experiences, and feelings, and I did not question where they were coming from. I understood what they were expressing as "their truth". I then attempted to understand as best as possible what we were discussing, analysing it and formulating it/creating a table of themes. This was, then, not only framed and understood within the confines of the self (client/participant), but within the context where this person was and is – a patriarchal society that does not only create a conducive context for sexual violence (Kelly, 1988), but that continues to pathologise women's experiences (Käll & Zeiler, 2014) also within the field of psychology, and silence and hold them down during their healing process. As Tseris (2015) states, "no knowledge is immune from context" (p. 35), and, as with other feminist phenomenologists, I believe that feminism and phenomenology can intersect and become more than the sum of their parts.

#### 4.3.3.3. *Protection and disempowerment*

After the analysis of women's accounts and the discussion of findings within theory and literature, I returned to a question that was raised in the Methodology chapter, and that has been present throughout the writing of this thesis: how much are those that work with women who have experienced sexual violence protecting them from harm and preventing risk, and how much do they continue to reflect and conceptualise women as passive and fragile agents dependent on external

resources? I still do not have an answer to this and I believe it requires a fine balance on a case-by-case basis. However, I think it is an important question for practitioners to keep in mind. I hope this research contributes to the view of women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape as active agents, constantly battling and growing, and permanently engaged with their inner and inner-outer resources even when struggling, and in so doing helps change the context in which this question is raised.

#### **4.3.4. Future research**

Even if throughout this chapter I have suggested possible avenues for further research, in this section I focus on some that are of particular interest to me.

The findings of this study support Van Dierendonck and his colleagues' (2009) conceptualisation of inner resources as universal, but they too suggest that they are different for each individual as they are intimately linked to the sense of self. All my participants were white, and as stated by Bertram and Crowley (2012), race, class, and gender determine the way society views those who have experienced sexual violence and/or rape. Attributions of innocence, and thus less blame, are linked to those who are "sufficiently pale", middle class, and straight (Bertram & Crowley, 2012). Negative social reactions have been linked to an increase in PTSD symptoms (Najdowski & Ullman, 2011) and positive social reactions have been described by women as helpful in their journeys of recovery from sexual assault and/or rape (Kingi & Jordan, 2009). Thus, I believe it would be beneficial to replicate this study with participants from different backgrounds and explore if these social reactions also have an impact on how women experience their inner resources.

In addition, and having included the use of an object to elicit data from my participants, I am curious about the objects women from different backgrounds and cultures would link to, and thus bring, into the interview. Are objects that embody women's inner resources different depending on women's cultural background or are they more universal? Besides, and as some women who have experienced sexual violence prefer to see a therapist who does not match their cultural background – often due to fears of being judged or shamed, it will be interesting to see if the objects that women bring would be different, or would be explored differently, if the researchers they interacted with were from diverse backgrounds.

Further, I am extremely interested in music as an “object”. As stated, music is used in many cultures to connect with and evoke different feelings – is universal – and half of my participants brought a song or an entire album as an object they linked to and used to access their inner resources, in many different ways. Besides, and even if Willig’s (2016) study and mine explored different phenomena, our participants brought music as an object that embodied their experiences. I believe that studies that focus exclusively on the exploration of music as an object to elicit participants experiences are needed, as the findings would not only be helpful to women from diverse cultural backgrounds and to researchers who explore diverse phenomena, but would provide further understanding on how one object can embody an experience in many different ways.

Additionally, and as discussed with one of my participants while providing feedback on the findings of the study, we would be interested in knowing if there are any differences in the experiences of inner resources of women with different ages, particularly those of older women. As described in Willig’s (2016) study, coming to terms with death may change the outlook on the way we live, and thus, Sarah and I wondered if this would have an impact on the way older women experience their inner resources, and in particular their “*Battles*”. In Sarah’s words:

*“Is people in their 50 or 70s struggling with the same devils? Older people have a different perspective. They come to terms with death, for example, do they come to terms with this? If they do, we could know what is helpful and help people get there earlier in their lives”* (Sarah).

Finally, further research that focuses on how apparent external resources are experienced, and are indeed internal resources (the “*Social Justice Warrior*” and “*Bridges*”), is needed. I believe this could provide a better understanding on the active role women take on their journey of healing from sexual assault and/or rape, highlighting it for women themselves and those around them, and perhaps starting to repair some of the “damage done by the environment” (Draucker et al., 2009, p. 13).

#### **4.4. Conclusions**

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The aim of this study was to explore how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape. Through a (feminist) phenomenological

analysis of the rich accounts of six women, this thesis has identified three overarching themes: the “*Will to Live*”, The “*Warrior*”, and The Growing Self. Addressing limitations and suggestions for further research, this study adds to the understanding of inner resources as inherent parts of women’s self, and thus, as constantly interacting and developing. Through providing insight into how women acknowledge, develop, and create their inner resources in their healing journey, this study contributes to the research and practice of counselling psychology, and will hopefully be helpful to those who therapeutically work with women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape.

It is at this point that I realise how much my practice has already changed through the knowledge I have acquired undertaking this study. I am now more hopeful. Women are highly aware of their resources and their processes, and have powerful inner resources that they constantly develop with the utmost creativity.

Finally, the end of this project signifies the end of my training as a counselling psychologist. I believe this thesis has provided me with a more rounded view of the multiple forms in which this profession continues to engage and challenge me, surprise me, and fill me with joy.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1: Online Advert

## Call for participants – women who have experienced sexual assault

Anna Flo Arcas is undertaking a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University. She would like to invite women with experiences of sexual assault and/or rape to help with her research. Here is her recruitment advert:

### Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources

Hello!

My name is Anna Flo Arcas, and I am **looking for participants** to take part in a study exploring women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault.

I am interested in **women's expert, individual, and unique experiences!**

**If...**

- You are a **woman aged 18 years old or older**
- You **have experienced Sexual Assault** \*and **discussed this experience in therapy**
- **And you are currently in therapy ...**

**I would really like to hear from you!**

*\* "Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts or traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (WHO, 2002)*

**You would be asked to:**

- take part in a short telephone interview
- attend a face-to-face interview that will last approximately an hour

**You will be:**

- reimbursed for travel costs to and from the interview
- receive a £20 voucher in appreciation for your time
- able to share your experience with others through the study
- able to participate in the discussion of the results of the study

**\*\*\*\*\*Participation is voluntary and confidential\*\*\*\*\***

This study has been approved by the Health Research Authority IRAS Project ID 212511; and City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

**For more information about this study or to take part, please contact:**


**Anna: T: [REDACTED] or E: [REDACTED]**

Or see Facebook : <https://en-gb.facebook.com/Life-after-sexual-assault-Exploring-womens-experiences-of-inner-resources-1757308507831844/>

Please, share the above with anyone who might be interested. Thank you very much in advance!


Anna

## Appendix 2: Leaflet



CITY UNIVERSITY  
LONDON

IRAS Project - ID: 212511  
Version 1, 24/10.16



Find me on  
Facebook

### Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources

Hello!

My name is Anna Flo Arcas, and I am looking for participants to take part in a study exploring women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault.

I am interested in **women's expert, individual, and unique experiences!**

**If...**

- You are a **woman aged 18 years old or older**
- You **have experienced Sexual Assault \***
- And you **have discussed this experience in therapy...**

**I would really like to hear from you!**

*\* "Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts or traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (WHO, 2002)*

**You would be asked to:**

- take part in a short telephone interview
- attend a face-to-face interview that will last approximately an hour

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- reimbursed for travel costs to and from the interview
- receive a £20 voucher in appreciation for your time
- able to share your experience with others through the study
- able to participate in the discussion of the results of the study

**\*\*\*\*\*Participation is voluntary and confidential\*\*\*\*\***

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee -PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee on [REDACTED] a email: [REDACTED]

**For more information about this study or to take part, please contact:**  
Anna: T: [REDACTED] or E: [REDACTED]

## Appendix 3: Consent to Contact Form



IRAS Project ID: 212511  
Version 1, 24/10/16

### **Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources.**

#### CONSENT TO CONTACT

After receiving a leaflet and discussing this research with my therapist,

I \_\_\_\_\_  
(name and surname)

give consent to the lead researcher -Anna Flo Arcas- to contact me in the near future to invite me to participate in this research study.

Please include your contact information below:

**Telephone:** \_\_\_\_\_

Please, do NOT leave a voicemail

**Email** \_\_\_\_\_

*Every effort will be made to safeguard your contact information. Access to this information will be limited to the lead researcher, and will be stored in a locked cabinet and password protected computer.*

*This consent is effective immediately. Your consent to be contacted can be revoked by you at any time.*

This study has been approved by City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Clinician's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

#### **Further information and contact details**

Anna Flo Arcas  
Doctorate in Counselling Psychology student at City University, London  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 4: Email sent to Organisations**

Dear \_\_\_(organisation)\_\_\_ ,

My name is Anna Flo Arcas and I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student of the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych) at City University London. At present, I am undertaking a **research** project ***“Life after sexual assault: exploring women’s experiences of inner resources. An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach.”***, and I am in the process of **recruiting participants**.

**My intention** with this research is to bring women’s individual and unique experiences to the centre of the focus, instead of relying on legal definitions or medical models that may depict an image of a damaged woman that needs fixing. I am curious to know what is it specifically about women that have experienced sexual assault (including rape) that is helpful on their journey, a side from support offered by others, such as friends or organisations.

I am aware **(organisation)**\_ empowers women that have experienced rape and sexual violence, and that you promote and offer \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ services. **I would be really grateful if you could display my study advert in your premises and/or website, or at your different events, inviting participants to take part in my research.** If you would like to, you could also pass it on to organisations you work with. I have attached my advert to this email, and I could provide you with printed copies if wished.

*This research has been approved by the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, and given the **ethic code PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202.***

Please, do not hesitate to contact me by email or phone if you require further information, or you wish to discuss this proposal further. You can do so in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. I can also come to your organisation to meet face to face if you prefer.

I would really appreciate your collaboration, and I am looking forward to hearing from you!

Kind regards,  
Anna Flo Arcas  
Trainee Counselling Psychologist  
[Email](#) || [Telephone](#)

### **A little bit about myself**

My interest in gendered violence started while studying a degree (BSc) in Psychology between Portugal and Spain, and it expanded when undertaking an MA in Women and Child Abuse at London Metropolitan University, with Professor Liz Kelly and Dr Maddy Coy. As a trainee counselling psychologist I have worked with women that have experienced different types of gendered violence including sexual violence at the Women and Girls Network, Mind, or Centre for Better Health, and at present at the Integrated Psychological Therapy Team at Lewisham Hospital, as part of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

Previous research I have undertaken includes “Exploring the links between migration and trafficking of women in China” (2011), and “Is sex trafficking increasing during large sport events?” (2012) as part of “Stand with survivors of sex trafficking” project aiming to raise awareness of sex trafficking during the London Olympics 1012.

## **Appendix 5: Telephone Screening**

- Presentation of self and study
- Purpose of call
- Questions about the study
- Basic information collection
  - o Age:
  - o Marital status
    - Married, single, divorced...
  - o How do you describe your ethnic or cultural background?
    - Black, white, welsh, ...
  - o As per the leaflet you were given, is it ok for me to assume you have had an experience of sexual assault and or rape?
    - And it occurred while you were an adult?
  - o How long ago did it occur?
  - o Have you discussed this experience in therapy?
    - Current or past one?
  - o Therapist at present:
  - o Are you currently Involved in any court case relating to the assault?
- Day to day questions: (Risk assessment):
  - o How do you sleep?
    - Do you have nightmares?
  - o How are you eating? Is it regularly?
  - o How would you describe your energy levels?
  - o And your mood?
  - o Are you experiencing anxiety and or depression at the present time?
    - If you were experiencing this during our interview, how would I know?
    - What is helpful to you at this time?
  - o Do you self harm at present?
    - If yes, how?
    - And in the past?
  - o Have you thought about taking your life/killing yourself?
    - When was the last time?
    - What stopped you?
- Network
  - o Is there someone close to you with whom you feel you can talk?
  - o Are you in contact with any organisations at present time?
- Do you believe is there any reason for you not to take part in this research study?
- Finally, would you like to give your feedback on the results of this study?
- Study
  - o Do you have any further questions about this study?

- I will send you further information and a consent form which so you can read and discuss with others if you wish. Or contact me to discuss further. We will sign the consent form on the interview date.
  - Shall we then set up a date for the interview?
    - It will be approx. one hour., with brief before and debrief after.
    - If you could not attend or you wish to change the time, please contact me so we can rearrange.
  - On the day of the interview, I would really like for you to bring something that you feel helped you after the assault and you associate to your inner resources: it can be an object, a song, picture, sound, blanket, smell, ..anything you want! The object will be photographed and discussed during our interview.
- Any further questions?
  - Recap:
    - Email with more info and consent form we sign on day of interview
    - Think and bring an object associated to inner resources for interview
    - See each other on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_
  - Thank you very much

### NO PARTICIPATION

High levels of anxiety or low mood, or undergoing a court case at the time of the telephone screening. This will be discussed with them during the telephone screening, and interview stage if necessary, and they will be encouraged to discuss it with their therapists, or GP's.



## **Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet**



IRAS Project ID: 212511  
Version 2, 16/12/16

### **Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources.**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish; and do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to clarify anything, or would like more information. Thank you very much!

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This research is interested in exploring women's experiences of inner resources after sexual assault, and my intention is to focus on women's individual and unique experiences, instead of relying on legal definitions or medical models. Only recently, studies have started to focus on the process of sexual assault recovery or healing and I am interested in discovering what women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape find is helpful on their journey, aside from support offered by others such as friends or organisations.

This study will take place from November 2016 to September 2017, and it is undertaken as part of the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University, London.

#### **Why have I been invited?**

I am looking for eight women, 18 years old or older, from any cultural background, ethnicity, or marital status, who have experienced sexual assault and or rape as adults (18+), and have discussed this experience in therapy.

If you are experiencing high levels of anxiety or low mood, or undergoing a court case at this time, you will not be included in the study to protect you from potential harm and psychological disturbance, as well as to prevent any interference with your legal case.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this research project is voluntary. You can choose to participate in part or in the entire project, as well as choose not to answer a specific question. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **What will happen if I take part?**

- You will receive a phone call of approximately 20 minutes in which some of your personal information will be collected, and your current circumstances discussed to make sure you will not be adversely affected by the interview
- You will receive an email enclosing a consent form that will be signed the day of the interview
- You will be invited to take part on a face to face interview that will last approximately an hour
- The interview will take place in a private space in this service
- You will be invited to provide feedback on the findings of the study. You can do so via email, or phone conversation.
- If you wish, a copy of the completed study will be sent to you
- The research study will run from November 2016 to September 2017
- Data will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), founded by Jonathan Smith in 1997, which is interested in how participants experience an event.

#### **Expenses and Payments**

- You will be reimbursed for travel costs to and from the interview.
- You will receive a £20 voucher in appreciation for your time
  - This voucher could be considered by HMRC as income and so may affect your tax liability

and/or entitlement to any income dependent benefits you receive. No UK income tax, nor National Insurance has been deducted and it is for you to let the appropriate agencies know you have received this payment if this is relevant to you. If you would prefer, it's fine to take part in this study without accepting this voucher.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Exploring an area such as inner resources after sexual assault can be really intimate and personal. Participating in the study may trigger different feelings, thoughts, memories, or bodily sensations in you that may bring you close to the traumatic event, or to its aftermath. It is for these possible reasons that different requirements and strategies have been put in place.

Firstly, the short telephone interview (screening) aims to insure your safety, and to avoid causing you any potential harm and psychological disturbance. Secondly, you are required to have undertaken therapy after your experience of sexual assault and/or rape to avoid disclosing for the first time during this study, and to be undertaking therapy in case new issues arise and you wish to explore them further.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

You will have the opportunity to be heard, and share your experience/es with the researcher. You will also be part of a publicised study, which will be a chance for you to share your experience with other people. Moreover, by participating in this research, you will be able to provide feedback on the results of the study, which will be included in its discussion, and receive a copy of the completed study.

Finally, you will be able to take part in a study that intends to improve mental health and other services by better understanding how to best support individuals that have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, helping them recognise and acknowledge their inner resources and therefore developing effective and tailored mental health interventions and specific therapy methods.

### **What will happen when the research study stops?**

Personal information used along the research, including audio-recordings, will be safely stored at the private network file space at City University (digital server), which is password protected and encrypted, and only accessible by the researcher.

At the end of the research study your contact details will be destroyed, as well as the document that links your name with your pseudonym, fully insuring data is non-person identifiable. Following City University practice and British Psychological Society guidelines all the research original data will be kept for 5 years after the study publication date. Your consent form will be kept within a sealed envelope inside a locked filing cabinet inside the supervisor's office at City University; and all the non-person-identifiable data will be kept electronically in a password protected computer, in password protected and encrypted files. Only the researcher will have access to the data, unless is demanded by the above organisations for monitoring.

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

- No identifiable data will be published. Only the researcher will have access to your identifiable information.
- Confidentiality limits will be explained at the beginning of the interview and maintained at all times. However, if disclosure of information that requires notification or follow up would occur – e.g. risk to self or others- you will be informed, and next steps discussed.
- All documents -besides the consent form- will be managed using a pseudonym given to you.
- Audio recordings, personal information, and data generated by the study will be stored following the Data Protection Act (1998) regulations.
- Data archiving will be done in locked cabinets and encrypted and password protected files in password-protected computers.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

Once the research is completed, it will be available at the Library of City University. Further dissemination will be pursued in different journals and publications, such as the Psychology of Women's section of the British Psychological Society.

### **What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?**

If you would like to withdraw from the study, you are free to do so without an explanation or penalty within a month from the date of the interview. If you wish to request the complete destruction of your data you can also do so within a month from the date of the interview.

If you have provided feedback on the results of the study and you wish to withdraw the data provided and request its complete destruction, you are free to do so without an explanation or penalty within two weeks from the date you provided the feedback.

**What if there is a problem?**

You will be able to contact me Monday to Friday from 9am to 6pm. In the rare case I could not be reached at these times, you can leave a message and I will contact you as soon as possible.

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's inner resources. An Interpretative phenomenological approach.

You could also write to the Secretary at:

[REDACTED]  
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee

[REDACTED]  
City University London  
Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0HB  
Email: [REDACTED]

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been approved by City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Newcastle and North Tyneside 2 HRA research ethics committee, project code IRAS project ID: 212511.

**Further information and contact details**

Anna Flo Arcas  
Doctorate in Counselling Psychology student at City University, London  
Email: [REDACTED]

Dr Daphne Josselin  
Research Supervisor at City University London  
Email: [REDACTED]

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet**

## Appendix 7: Consent Form



IRAS Project ID: 212511  
Version 3, 15/02/17

Title of Study: **Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources. An Interpretative phenomenological approach.**

Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being interviewed by the researcher</li> <li>• allowing the interview to be audiotaped</li> <li>• if wished, providing feedback on the findings of the research before its publication</li> </ul>	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party unless there is risk to myself or others. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.</li> <li>• I understand that data will be stored in locked cabinets and password protected computers, and that a pseudonym will be assigned by the researcher. I understand that these steps will be done to protect my identity from being made public.</li> </ul>	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, that I am free to withdraw without an explanation or penalty and request the complete destruction of my data within a month from the date of the interview, and if applicable, two weeks after providing feedback on the results of the study.	
4.	I agree to Anna Flo Arcas recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purposes of this study, answering the research question: "how do women experience their inner resources after sexual assault?", and my consent is conditional on Anna Flo Arcas complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Note to researcher: to ensure anonymity, consent forms should NOT include participant numbers and should be stored separately from data.

## **Appendix 8: Brief and Revised Face to Face Interview**

### **Brief:**

- Nice meeting you
- Questions regarding participant information sheet
- Risk assessment:
  - Change of circumstances
  - Reasons to not undertake interview
- Sign consent form.

### **Semi Structured Interview:**

#### ***A) Introduction***

- Thank you again for coming today.
  - Confirmation: read PIS, signed CF. Confidentiality.
  - It may be the first time you are asked some of these questions. There is no right or wrong answers, so take as much time as you need to think about them and feel free to tell me if they are not clear.
  - If you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions you can choose not to answer them.
    - And finally remind you that information that could identify you will not be published in my study.
- I am curious to know how you felt about coming today?

#### ***B) Sexual assault experience***

- Really briefly, and sharing only what you feel comfortable with, could you tell me a bit about your sexual assault experience?
- How would you define, or how would you like me to refer to what happen to you during this interview? How would you want me to name it.

#### ***C) Inner resources***

- Object
  - Over the phone I ask you if you could bring something today that you link to your inner resources and that you feel has been helpful in your journey. What have you brought?
  - What made you choose this object?
  - What does it represent?
    - How was/is helpful?
    - When was/is helpful?
- What has kept you going?
  - Is there anything specific about you that helped you carry on?
    - Physically
    - Emotionally

- Mentally
- Spiritually
- Prompt
  - Could you tell me more about this?
  - What does it mean to you?
- What resources do you think/feel you have drawn from this experience? /walk away with/ took away with you
  - Inner resources: “A reservoir from which one can draw in times of need, giving a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day to day living” (Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2009).
  - Prompt
    - Could you say a bit more?
    - What does it mean to you?
- How do you think or believe your experience changed you?
  - Prompt
    - How long ago did this happen?
    - Could you tell me a bit more about it?
    - How would you define this?
- How do they affect your everyday life?
  - Prompts
    - Relationships
    - Work
    - Interests
    - And in comparison to the past?
- How would you define yourself as a person?
  - What would you say are some of the characteristics that define you?
    - Prompts:
      - What would other people say?
      - How would they describe you?
      - Would you agree?

#### **D) Ending, goodbye**

- Is there anything else you would like to add? or share about your experience?
- Thank you

## **Appendix 9: Debrief**



IRAS Project ID: 212511  
Version 1, 24/10/16

### **Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources.**

#### DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study!

You have been invited to this interview to understand and explore your unique experience of inner resources after sexual assault, and your journey of recovery and healing. As previously described, my intention is to focus on women's individual and unique experiences, instead of relying on legal definitions or medical models, and I am interested in knowing what is it specifically about women who have experienced sexual assault that is helpful on their journey, a side from support offered by others, such as friends or organisations.

The information you have provided during this interview will increase the knowledge on sexual assault/rape, and will have an impact not only in the academic arena, but as well in the therapeutic arena. It is intended that the knowledge acquired through this research will provide Counselling Psychologists and other professionals a better understanding of how to best support individuals that have experienced sexual assault or rape and improve mental health and other services; as well as help them recognise and acknowledge inner resources women identify in this research during therapeutic relationships, and therefore create effective and tailored mental health interventions, and develop specific therapy methods.

If you feel you would like to speak to someone regarding any concerns that the interview might have raised, you can contact your therapist \_\_\_\_\_ (name of therapist), or your GP.

Finally, I would like to provide you with the names and services of different organisations in London that provide specific information and specialised services for women who have experienced sexual violence and rape. You will also find specialised organisations for the LGBT community, children, and men, as well as organisations that support other organisations.

I hope you found the study interesting and the information helpful. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact me at the address below.

*Thank you!*  
*Anna*

Anna Flo Arcas Doctorate in Counselling Psychology student at City University, London

Dr Daphne Josselin Research Supervisor at City University London Email:

## Organisations

<b>RAPE CRISIS CENTRES</b>	
<b>East London Rape Crisis Service. NIA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Services for women, children and young people who have experienced male violence</li> <li>- Offers: advocacy, support and counselling after rape and sexual assault, provides refuge and outreach services, also prevention work in schools</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.niaendingviolence.org.uk">http://www.niaendingviolence.org.uk</a> 020 7683 1270</p>
<b>North London Rape Crisis Service. Solace Women's Aid</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Services to women and girls who have experienced sexual and/or domestic violence,</li> <li>- Offers: advice, advocacy, counselling; provides 19 refuges, outreach services and training</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.rapecrisislondon.org">http://www.rapecrisislondon.org</a> 0207 619 1369</p>
<b>South London Rape Crisis Centre Croydon RASASC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supports female survivors of sexual violence</li> <li>- Offers: counselling, advice, and ISVA services; provides training, and research</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.rasasc.org.uk">http://www.rasasc.org.uk</a> 0208 683 3311</p>
<b>West London Rape Crisis Women and Girls Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supports women and girls who have experienced gendered violence, including sexual and domestic violence</li> <li>- Offers: counselling, advocacy and advice</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.wgn.org.uk">http://www.wgn.org.uk</a> 020 8567 7347</p>

<b>WOMEN</b>	
<b>Advance:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domestic Violence, 15+ years old</li> <li>- Offers: advocacy, support, advice, help in court, crisis intervention</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://advancecharity.org.uk/">http://advancecharity.org.uk/</a> T: 020 8741 7008</p>
<b>Ashiana:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sexual and Domestic Violence (including harmful practices)</li> <li>- Refuge to BAMER community (20 beds),</li> <li>- Offers: advice and counselling</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://ashiana.org.uk">http://ashiana.org.uk</a> T: 0208 539 0427 (9.30-12h &amp; 1-5pm)</p>
<b>EACH</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Asian community: DV, drug or alcohol abuse.</li> <li>- Offer: one to one counselling, family therapy and support, open groups</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.eachcounselling.org.uk">http://www.eachcounselling.org.uk</a> 020 8577 6059</p>
<b>Forward</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Violence against women</li> <li>- Offers: emotional support, informal meet-ups, information, health advocates, provision of training and research.</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://forwarduk.org.uk">http://forwarduk.org.uk</a></p>
<b>Hestia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domestic abuse, human trafficking. Adults and children in crisis</li> <li>- Offers: emotional and practical support, advocacy services, outreach, mentoring programs</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.hestia.org/contact/">http://www.hestia.org/contact/</a> (0)20 7378 3100</p>



<b>Imece Women's Centre</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women survivors of violence against women and girls, BAMER</li> <li>- Offers: advice and advocacy, counselling, health support, intervention and resettlement support, promotes research and awareness</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.imece.org.uk">www.imece.org.uk</a>
<b>Jewish women's Aid</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Culturally specific service for Jewish women affected by domestic violence</li> <li>- Offers: counselling and confidence-bulging groups, provides training and different community projects</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.jwa.org.uk">www.jwa.org.uk</a>
<b>Latin American Women Rights services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Culturally specific service for Latin American women and girls who are experiencing or have experienced any form of violence</li> <li>- Offers: advice, advocacy and practical support</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.lawrs.org.uk/en/womengirls/">http://www.lawrs.org.uk/en/womengirls/</a> 020 7336 0888 or 084 4264 068
<b>My body back project</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supports women who have experienced rape or sexual assault to love and care for their bodies again</li> <li>- Runs Cafe V, a safe space for women who have experienced sexual violence to learn about sexual pleasure and reclaiming their body after assault.</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.mybodybackproject.com">http://www.mybodybackproject.com</a>
<b>Refuge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specialist domestic violence services to women and children</li> <li>- Offers: accommodation in different refuges, IDVA services, counselling, provides outreach services, awareness projects</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.refuge.org.uk">http://www.refuge.org.uk</a> 020 7395 770
<b>Respond</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domestic violence for Learning Disabilities</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.respond.org.uk/">http://www.respond.org.uk/</a>
<b>Rights of women</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support to women that have experienced gendered based violence, including domestic and sexual violence</li> <li>- Offers: diverse legal advice, provides training, and campaigns to improve women's legal rights and their access to justice</li> </ul> <a href="http://rightsofwomen.org.uk">http://rightsofwomen.org.uk</a>
<b>Shepherds Bush Housing Group: Impact project</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women over 16 years old that have suffered domestic abuse</li> <li>- Offers: practical and emotional support, court support, housing options, access to training and education</li> </ul> <a href="https://www.sbhg.co.uk/impact-project">https://www.sbhg.co.uk/impact-project</a> 07826 894906
<b>Women's Aid</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support to women and children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse</li> <li>- Offers: counselling, helpline, advice and support services, provides research and training, different community projects</li> </ul> <a href="https://www.womensaid.org.uk">https://www.womensaid.org.uk</a>
<b>Woman's trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women in London affected by domestic violence and abuse</li> <li>- Offers: person centred counselling, support groups, and workshops, in a woman only environment</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.womanstrust.org.uk/">http://www.womanstrust.org.uk/</a> 020 7034 0303/0304

<b><u>EVENTS</u></b>	
<b>Cafe V</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safe space for women who have experienced sexual violence to learn about sexual pleasure and reclaiming their body after assault.</li> <li>- See website for next events (running all year)</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.mybodybackproject.com">http://www.mybodybackproject.com</a>
<b>Trust women Conference 30 Nov - 1 Dec</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agenda 2016: focusing on Modern slavery and Human trafficking - including stories of survival- as well as Women entrepreneurs - including women driving change and breaking the taboos.</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.trustwomenconf.com">http://www.trustwomenconf.com</a>

<b><u>LGBT</u></b>	
<b>Rainbow Hamlets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- LGBT+, hate crime, domestic abuse and family abuse,</li> <li>- Offers: counselling, IDVA services, research or community events</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.rainbowhamlets.org">http://www.rainbowhamlets.org</a>
<b>Stonewall housing ROAR project</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specialised LGBT domestic abuse</li> <li>- Offers: advocacy service, emotional support, legal and safety advice, advocacy or sign-posting</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.stonewallhousing.org">http://www.stonewallhousing.org</a>

<b><u>CHILDREN</u></b>	
<b>One in four</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Child sexual abuse</li> </ul> <a href="http://oneinfour.org.uk">http://oneinfour.org.uk</a>
<b>Tender</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Young people</li> </ul> <a href="http://tender.org.uk">http://tender.org.uk</a>

<b><u>MEN</u></b>	
<b>Respect</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Works with domestic violence perpetrators, male victims and young people</li> </ul> <a href="http://respect.uk.net">http://respect.uk.net</a>

<b><u>FOR ORGANISATIONS</u></b>	
<b>AVA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Help other organisations that work directly with victims/perpetrators of gendered violence.</li> </ul> <a href="http://www.avaproject.org.uk/">http://www.avaproject.org.uk/</a>
<b>The survivors trust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Umbrella agency for specialist organisations that provide services to women and men that have experienced rape, sexual violence, and childhood sexual abuse. Promotes effective responses to survivors and raises awareness.</li> </ul> <a href="http://thesurvivorstrust.org">http://thesurvivorstrust.org</a>

## **Appendix 10: Ethic Approval City University**



Psychology Research Ethics Committee  
School of Social Sciences  
City University London  
London EC1R 0JD

1<sup>st</sup> July 2015

Dear Anna Flo Arcas

**Reference:** PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202

**Project title:** Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's inner resources. An interpretative phenomenological approach

I am writing to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted approval by the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee

### Period of approval

Approval is valid for a period of three years from the date of this letter. If data collection runs beyond this period you will need to apply for an extension using the Amendments Form.

### Project amendments

You will also need to submit an Amendments Form if you want to make any of the following changes to your research:

- (a) Recruit a new category of participants
- (b) Change, or add to, the research method employed
- (c) Collect additional types of data
- (d) Change the researchers involved in the project

### Adverse events

You will need to submit an Adverse Events Form, copied to the Secretary of the Senate Research Ethics Committee ([anna.ramberg.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:anna.ramberg.1@city.ac.uk)), in the event of any of the following:

- (a) Adverse events
- (b) Breaches of confidentiality
- (c) Safeguarding issues relating to children and vulnerable adults
- (d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues (a) and (b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than 5 days after the event. Issues (c) and (d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries then please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards

Karen Hunt  
Departmental Administrator

Katy Tapper  
Chair

## Appendix 11: Ethic Approval NHS Health Research Authority

Appendix 11: Ethic Approval NHS Health Research Authority



**Health Research Authority**

Ms Anna Flo Arcas

Email: [hra.approval@nhs.net](mailto:hra.approval@nhs.net)

21 February 2017

Dear Ms Flo Arcas

### **Letter of HRA Approval**

**Study title:** Life after sexual assault: Exploring women's experiences of inner resources. An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach.  
**IRAS project ID:** 212511  
**REC reference:** 16/NE/0385  
**Sponsor** City University London

I am pleased to confirm that **HRA Approval** has been given for the above referenced study, on the basis described in the application form, protocol, supporting documentation and any clarifications noted in this letter.

#### **Participation of NHS Organisations in England**

The sponsor should now provide a copy of this letter to all participating NHS organisations in England.

*Appendix B* provides important information for sponsors and participating NHS organisations in England for arranging and confirming capacity and capability. **Please read *Appendix B* carefully**, in particular the following sections:

- *Participating NHS organisations in England* – this clarifies the types of participating organisations in the study and whether or not all organisations will be undertaking the same activities
- *Confirmation of capacity and capability* - this confirms whether or not each type of participating NHS organisation in England is expected to give formal confirmation of capacity and capability. Where formal confirmation is not expected, the section also provides details on the time limit given to participating organisations to opt out of the study, or request additional time, before their participation is assumed.
- *Allocation of responsibilities and rights are agreed and documented (4.1 of HRA assessment criteria)* - this provides detail on the form of agreement to be used in the study to confirm capacity and capability, where applicable.

Further information on funding, HR processes, and compliance with HRA criteria and standards is also provided.

It is critical that you involve both the research management function (e.g. R&D office) supporting each organisation and the local research team (where there is one) in setting up your study. Contact details

and further information about working with the research management function for each organisation can be accessed from [www.hra.nhs.uk/hra-approval](http://www.hra.nhs.uk/hra-approval).

### Appendices

The HRA Approval letter contains the following appendices:

- A – List of documents reviewed during HRA assessment
- B – Summary of HRA assessment

### After HRA Approval

The document "*After Ethical Review – guidance for sponsors and investigators*", issued with your REC favourable opinion, gives detailed guidance on reporting expectations for studies, including:

- Registration of research
- Notifying amendments
- Notifying the end of the study

The HRA website also provides guidance on these topics, and is updated in the light of changes in reporting expectations or procedures.

In addition to the guidance in the above, please note the following:

- HRA Approval applies for the duration of your REC favourable opinion, unless otherwise notified in writing by the HRA.
- Substantial amendments should be submitted directly to the Research Ethics Committee, as detailed in the *After Ethical Review* document. Non-substantial amendments should be submitted for review by the HRA using the form provided on the [HRA website](#), and emailed to [hra.amendments@nhs.net](mailto:hra.amendments@nhs.net).
- The HRA will categorise amendments (substantial and non-substantial) and issue confirmation of continued HRA Approval. Further details can be found on the [HRA website](#).

### Scope

HRA Approval provides an approval for research involving patients or staff in NHS organisations in England.

If your study involves NHS organisations in other countries in the UK, please contact the relevant national coordinating functions for support and advice. Further information can be found at <http://www.hra.nhs.uk/resources/applying-for-reviews/nhs-hsc-rd-review/>.

If there are participating non-NHS organisations, local agreement should be obtained in accordance with the procedures of the local participating non-NHS organisation.

### User Feedback

The Health Research Authority is continually striving to provide a high quality service to all applicants and sponsors. You are invited to give your view of the service you have received and the application procedure. If you wish to make your views known please email the HRA at [hra.approval@nhs.net](mailto:hra.approval@nhs.net). Additionally, one of our staff would be happy to call and discuss your experience of HRA Approval.

IRAS project ID	212511
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**HRA Training**

We are pleased to welcome researchers and research management staff at our training days – see details at <http://www.hra.nhs.uk/hra-training/>

Your IRAS project ID is **212511**. Please quote this on all correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Miss Helen Penistone  
Assessor

Email: [REDACTED]

Copy to: *Professor Emmanuel Pothos* [REDACTED]  
*Jennifer Liebscher, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust,*  
[REDACTED]

## Appendix A - List of Documents

The final document set assessed and approved by HRA Approval is listed below.

Document	Version	Date
PMIC CAG Approval		
Contract/Study Agreement [Student Status]		06 October 2016
Copies of advertisement materials for research participants [Research Advert]	Version 2	04 December 2016
Covering letter on headed paper [Cover Letter]	v1	25 October 2016
Evidence of Sponsor insurance or indemnity (non NHS Sponsors only) [Indemnity Letter]		15 August 2016
Interview schedules or topic guides for participants [Topic guide client contact]	Version 1	28 October 2016
IRAS Application Form [IRAS_Form_30012017]		30 January 2017
IRAS Application Form XML file [IRAS_Form_07112016]		07 November 2016
IRAS Checklist XML [Checklist_30012017]		30 January 2017
Letter from sponsor [Sponsor Letter]		07 November 2016
Letters of invitation to participant [Leaflets]	Version 1	24 October 2016
Other [IPTT Lewisham approval]		25 October 2016
Other [IPTT Southwark approval]		20 October 2016
Other [Consent to contact form]	Version 1	24 October 2016
Other [Debrief]	Version 1	24 October 2016
Other [Confirmation from R & D - no SoE or SoA required]		19 January 2017
Other [Debrief v2]	Version 2	04 December 2016
Participant consent form	3	15 February 2017
Participant information sheet (PIS) [Participant Information Sheet v2]	Version 2	16 December 2016
Research protocol or project proposal	2	15 February 2017
Summary CV for Chief Investigator (CI) [CV Chief Investigator]		27 October 2016
Summary CV for student [CV Anna Flo Arcas]		24 October 2016
Summary CV for supervisor (student research) [CV Dr Daphne Josselin]		26 August 2016
Summary, synopsis or diagram (flowchart) of protocol in non technical language [Procedures flowchart]	Version 1	24 October 2016

## Appendix B - Summary of HRA Assessment

This appendix provides assurance to you, the sponsor and the NHS in England that the study, as reviewed for HRA Approval, is compliant with relevant standards. It also provides information and clarification, where appropriate, to participating NHS organisations in England to assist in assessing and arranging capacity and capability.

**For information on how the sponsor should be working with participating NHS organisations in England, please refer to the, *participating NHS organisations, capacity and capability and Allocation of responsibilities and rights are agreed and documented (4.1 of HRA assessment criteria) sections in this appendix.***

The following person is the sponsor contact for the purpose of addressing participating organisation questions relating to the study:

Name: Ms Anna Flo Arcas

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

### HRA assessment criteria

Section	HRA Assessment Criteria	Compliant with Standards	Comments
1.1	IRAS application completed correctly	Yes	Question 5 on the IRAS project filter page was answered incorrectly. There will be NHS research sites.
2.1	Participant information/consent documents and consent process	Yes	The Consent Form was updated following REC favourable opinion; mention of videotaping was deleted.
3.1	Protocol assessment	Yes	The protocol was amended following REC favourable opinion to clarify the secure storage of consent forms.
4.1	Allocation of responsibilities and rights are agreed and documented	Yes	The study sponsor has not requested completion of the Statement of Activities or Schedule of Events for this study.  The single NHS organisation has advised that they will confirm their readiness to participate by email to the



Section	HRA Assessment Criteria	Compliant with Standards	Comments
			sponsor.
4.2	Insurance/indemnity arrangements assessed	Yes	Where applicable, independent contractors (e.g. General Practitioners) should ensure that the professional indemnity provided by their medical defence organisation covers the activities expected of them for this research study
4.3	Financial arrangements assessed	Yes	No external funding will be available to support this study.
5.1	Compliance with the Data Protection Act and data security issues assessed	Yes	No comments
5.2	CTIMPS – Arrangements for compliance with the Clinical Trials Regulations assessed	Not Applicable	No comments
5.3	Compliance with any applicable laws or regulations	Yes	No comments
6.1	NHS Research Ethics Committee favourable opinion received for applicable studies	Yes	No comments
6.2	CTIMPS – Clinical Trials Authorisation (CTA) letter received	Not Applicable	No comments
6.3	Devices – MHRA notice of no objection received	Not Applicable	No comments
6.4	Other regulatory approvals and authorisations received	Not Applicable	No comments

## Participating NHS Organisations in England

*This provides detail on the types of participating NHS organisations in the study and a statement as to whether the activities at all organisations are the same or different.*

This is a single site study. The site will be a full research site.

If this study is subsequently extended to other NHS organisation(s) in England, an amendment should be submitted to the HRA, with a Statement of Activities and Schedule of Events for the newly participating NHS organisation(s) in England.

The Chief Investigator or sponsor should share relevant study documents with participating NHS organisations in England in order to put arrangements in place to deliver the study. The documents should be sent to both the local study team, where applicable, and the office providing the research management function at the participating organisation. For NIHR CRN Portfolio studies, the Local LCRN contact should also be copied into this correspondence. For further guidance on working with participating NHS organisations please see the HRA website.

If chief investigators, sponsors or principal investigators are asked to complete site level forms for participating NHS organisations in England which are not provided in IRAS or on the HRA website, the chief investigator, sponsor or principal investigator should notify the HRA immediately at [hra.approval@nhs.net](mailto:hra.approval@nhs.net). The HRA will work with these organisations to achieve a consistent approach to information provision.

## Confirmation of Capacity and Capability

*This describes whether formal confirmation of capacity and capability is expected from participating NHS organisations in England.*

Participating NHS organisations in England **will be expected to formally confirm their capacity and capability to host this research.**

- Following issue of this letter, participating NHS organisations in England may now confirm to the sponsor their capacity and capability to host this research, when ready to do so. How capacity and capability will be confirmed is detailed in the *Allocation of responsibilities and rights are agreed and documented (4.1 of HRA assessment criteria)* section of this appendix.
- The [Assessing, Arranging, and Confirming](#) document on the HRA website provides further information for the sponsor and NHS organisations on assessing, arranging and confirming capacity and capability.

The single NHS organisation has advised that they will confirm their capacity and capability to host the study by email to the sponsor and Chief Investigator.

## Principal Investigator Suitability

*This confirms whether the sponsor position on whether a PI, LC or neither should be in place is correct for each type of participating NHS organisation in England and the minimum expectations for education, training and experience that PIs should meet (where applicable).*

The Chief Investigator will act as Principal Investigator at site.

GCP training is not a generic training expectation, in line with the [HRA statement on training expectations](#).

### HR Good Practice Resource Pack Expectations

*This confirms the HR Good Practice Resource Pack expectations for the study and the pre-engagement checks that should and should not be undertaken*

Any activities expected to be undertaken prior to consent by local staff at participating NHS organisations in England for this study will involve accessing identifiable patient data without consent. This should be done only by staff who have legitimate access to that data as part of their normal responsibilities at the participating NHS organisation (e.g. a member of the direct care team for the target patient group). Therefore it will not normally be acceptable for external staff who are not employed by the participating NHS organisation to be granted access to the participating NHS organisation to undertake the activities on behalf of the NHS for this study.

A18 indicates that all research activities post consent will be undertaken by the Chief Investigator who holds an honorary contract with the single NHS organisation. Therefore, there are no additional HR expectations.

### Other Information to Aid Study Set-up

*This details any other information that may be helpful to sponsors and participating NHS organisations in England to aid study set-up.*

The applicant has indicated that they do not intend to apply for inclusion on the NIHR CRN Portfolio.

## Appendix 12: Objects Brought by Participants

<p><b><u>Beth</u></b></p>	<p><b>Album “Lemonade” by Beyoncé</b></p> <p>Beth referred to the album as a whole, and to specific songs and videoclips, such as “Forward” which helps her connect with “moving forward”; or the song “All night” and its videoclip, which reminds her to ‘keep going’ and of her ‘inner-strength’.</p> <p>She told me how music aided her in managing her mood, as well as feeling validated and vindicated.</p>
<p><b><u>Claire</u></b></p>	<p><b>Book “Not that Kind of girl” by Lenna Dunham</b></p> <p>Claire’s book remained on top of the small table next to her during our interview. She referred to it several times, holding it and looking for specific pages at times, as well as passing it on to me for me to look at it while discussing it.</p>
<p><b><u>Emily</u></b></p>	<p><b>Drawing of her “safe space”</b></p> <p>Emily brought a colourful drawing of her safe space: a tree house. She looked at and held it during our interview, while describing it in detail and telling me how she feels within it. She also looked at it at the end of some sentences, as if this was helpful in grounding her and helping her feel contained and safe.</p> <p><b>Washing powder</b></p> <p>Emily brought the washing powder in a small clear plastic container with a blue lid. She held it on her hand, and smelled it several times while exploring it and answering my questions. She smelled it one last time before moving on to her next object, as if wanting to stay in the memory she described one last time.</p> <p><b>Rock/Stone</b></p> <p>Emily brought a round and dark volcanic stone that could fit on the palm of her hand. She held it and moved it from one hand to another while further exploring this object together, she demonstrated how she would lob it if needed, and how she is able to reach it while walking as she always carries it in her bag.</p> <p><b>Song “Ain’t got no (I got life)” by Nina Simone</b></p> <p>Emily brought the lyrics of the song printed on a A4 paper. She referred and pointed to different parts of the song while talking about it, and at times, repeated without reading its exact words.</p>
<p><b><u>Kate</u></b></p>	<p><b>A Personal Diary</b></p> <p>Kate brought an A5 size diary with free standing papers. She told me was one of many she has since she was a teenager, and explained where she bought it and why she chose it.</p> <p>She held it during the interview, opening it and showing me its pages, filled with poetry, writing, and drawings. At times she read fragments out loud.</p>

<b><u>Lucy</u></b>	<p><b>A picture of her Cat</b></p> <p>Lucy showed me the picture she has as a screen saver on her phone. A picture of her cat, in her house, looking at her while sitting on a table. She looked at it during the interview while further exploring it, and often smiled.</p>
<b><u>Sarah</u></b>	<p><b>Song “Something inside so strong” by Labi Siffre</b></p> <p>Sarah brought the lyrics of the song printed on a A4 paper, with parts of the song highlighted in pink and others in yellow. She referred to and pointed at different parts of the song while talking about it, told me about the first time she heard it, and at times recited its same words without reading them.</p> <p><b>Reiki</b></p> <p>Following on from the interview, Sarah and I exchanged different Reiki symbols over email to agree on the one she wanted me to include as her ‘object’.</p> <p>During the interview, she told me about how she became a Reiki practitioner, and the different experiences that she -and others- had of her Reiki practice. She told me how through Reiki she found new ways of taking care of herself - including emotionally and spirituality-, how she felt able to connect and heal the past, and how she felt more connected to others and thus less alone.</p>

**Note:** Pictures of these objects were brought to the Viva examination for the examiners to see. As stated within the thesis, and as the objects were personal and unique, they have not been included in the published thesis to maintain the anonymity of the women that participated in this research project.

**Appendix 13: Transcript Extract**

much harder to  
answer about self

hope + determination

strong enough

stop = die

Keep going against my will  
↳ a part of herself that

keeps her alive

in a bottle

or strength

Death as a theme

even despite myself I kept  
going

"hidden part of self that  
keeps on going"

701 P- ammm #00:05:46-4#  
702  
703  
704 P- I don't k.... know but I guess... (silence) I guess... I'm just (smiles) determined to... like...  
705 do something, or make something, of myself, and.. that you know, I'm, I'm, I'm gonna keep  
706 going, despite how these things... have made me feel, because you know that's.. that's just..  
707 who I am. Like, you know, like... comes through... like... aaa... that... like... the lat., the, no..  
708 no the latter. The former part of my life #00:06:30-3#  
709  
710 R- mhjh #00:06:30-9#  
711  
712 P- and that wasn't necessarily easy either. amm.. So, like.. you know I was strong enough  
713 to do that. So.. and.. I must be strong enough to.. keep going. I #00:06:43-0#  
714  
715 R- mhjh #00:06:43-6#  
716  
717 P- guess. (silence) #00:06:47-1#  
718  
719 R- You are talking about ... being strong #00:06:48-5#  
720  
721 P- yea.... I guess.. just like... #00:06:51-0#  
722  
723 R- tell me a bit more about this... #00:06:53-9#  
724  
725 P- I guess.. just like.... (silence) there's been plenty of things where I've just been like.. like  
726 wanting.. wanting to stop. Wanting ... to die, wanting... it just to come to an end. But you  
727 know I keep going.. and keep going.. and keep going... and... (silence) Even again, you  
728 know, against my will, I keep going. So.. it's just sort of like.. that in itself... is a strength  
729 that I don't know where it comes from, I don't know #00:07:25-8#  
730  
731 R- mmm mmm #00:07:27-1#  
732  
733 P- amm... where it is. But its there. like.. Even in the last few days, like.. with this meds  
734 change, its just.. constantly just wanted to die.. just.. (takes air) it wasn't even like "I wish I  
735 was dead". It was just every fibre of my being, was like.. just.. just die. #00:07:40-5#  
736  
737 R- mmm #00:07:41-4#  
738  
739 P- ammm... What a like.. it's just to hard. I can do this, just die. But you know.. I kept  
740 myself going through that.. amm... #00:07:48-7#  
741  
742 R- how did you do that? #00:07:50-4#  
743  
744 P- I don't know. That's the thing. Even, even despite myself. Even despite thinking, you  
745 know, I may as well, I may as well be dead. Amm.. which I thought so many times.. over  
746 various sexual assault, various... #00:08:03  
747  
748 R- mmm mhjh #00:08:04-7#  
749  
750 P- abuses. Amm.. like.. still.. I'm.. just.. keep going. And.. I can only... You know, I can only

think I really took a  
step back here a little  
- I think I did not  
of the box not for not  
- give it time?

Death / just die

Keep going  
Death (or barely)

This little will believe  
↓  
epitaph

acknowledge of doing  
↓  
Actively trying  
if making voices → bed

not a part, but the whole  
of ME  
just me → diminishing self.  
or acknowledging no others?  
something there that keeps me going  
grateful → associated to self.  
does not see in her self

smoking here  
is not conscious  
not a thought

Little Will  
+ love

voices [ bed voices  
my little voice  
voices of reason

751 assume that there's... you know... that I have this, like... somewhere in me there is this like,  
752 this will, this little will to live. Amm... and... it must be strong. because when every other part  
753 of you is like, "Why aren't you dead" (with a deeper voice) ammm... and you keep going, you  
754 don't... you don't listen to those thoughts... #00:00:30-8#  
755  
756  
757 P- like that, that is strength... that, that is to me... that is... the epitome of... inner  
758 strength. Ammm... So (laughing) I think that I must #00:00:13-3#  
759  
760 R- mmm #00:00:14-0#  
761  
762 P- I may have a lot of it because... #00:00:14-9#  
763  
764 R- (laughs) #00:00:16-8#  
765  
766 P- you know I have to deal with those, those thoughts, you know, deal with those thoughts  
767 a lot. Amm... (takes air) but I'm still here, and I still I'm trying... I'm trying to be here that's  
768 the thing that's crucial to me is that I am actively trying because I am actively ignoring  
769 those voices and... Whatever else #00:00:32-3# ...  
770  
771 R- mmm #00:00:32-7#  
772  
773 P- ammm... #00:00:33-9#  
774  
775 R- mmm #00:00:35-0#  
776  
777 P- So... it's... it's there I think it is just me I wouldn't identify any... kind of part of my  
778 personality that is... is that... that is strong. It's just like... #00:00:50-5#  
779  
780 R- mmm #00:00:50-9# #00:00:50-5#  
781  
782 P- It's just something... something is there that... is keeping me going. And I (smiling) am  
783 very grateful (laughing) for it #00:00:56-5#  
784  
785 R- ok. ye... and I am thinking... could you tell me a bit more about this something?  
786 #00:01:01-3#  
787  
788 P- I jut... #00:01:02-3# #00:01:01-5#  
789  
790 R- You, you said this, this part of me this something that's somewhere, that when all these  
791 other things are going on is there (whispering) #00:01:10-5#  
792  
793 P- is there #00:01:11-3# #00:01:09-5#  
794  
795 R- is still there, and you are telling me I assume is the strong because... it took me through  
796 so many things #00:01:15-9#  
797  
798 P- mmm... it's just... is sort of like, is not like I've, I am thinking like I wanna keep going, I  
799 wanna keep going, I wanna keep going. #00:01:24-8#  
800

o That opposition to everything that says you should stop eating, etc. is a very like

opposition to death  
 unknown of how to do it  
 as she does it  
 action verb  
 prove for post o hold on  
 previous experience helps  
 2 parts of self i love  
 i  
 not trusting self?  
 even when it wasn't you  
 have strength to live?  
 following steps:  
 1. want to keep going  
 2. ask help  
 3. distract self  
 spoke as keener behavior  
 distraction as a keener  
 - the least evil of evils

801  
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R- mmmm #00:01:25-7#  
 P- don't get me sort of this, is not necessarily that. I am thinking that, it's just, (silence) what I'm doing by I guess just by existing, just by existing, it is that.. kind of like like.. its just, its just there... it's kind of like... just... powering me through all these things. And I think about all the things that I have come through and then its just sort of like.. wooo I'm gonna keep, keep going ammm.., and I don't know how I got through those things (takes air) but, ammm... i did. #00:02:11-4#  
 R- mm #00:02:11-8#  
 P- and I ...that's something I would hold on to, and will, probably always hold on to is the fact, you know, I did, you know, came through x, y, z #00:02:23-7#  
 R- mmm mm #00:02:25-5#  
 P- so, even when it feels like you won't, even when it feels like you are gonna die, and you gonna definitely gonna give into those feelings, and you gonna kill yourself. This sort of like.. i've come through so many times when I also thought this, and I didn't. Amm.. (silence) and that alone. I think is a reason to keep going, because is sort of like even when you don't realise it, even when you thought you were at your weakest, you... you came through it. So even when you thought you were #00:02:49-8#  
 R- mm #00:02:43-8#  
 P- at your weakest #00:02:51-4# on his research? My participant are "young enough" to take part in a good enough piece - used is helpful piece? how they killed themselves? have they hope too?  
 R- mmm #00:02:50-4#  
 P- you weren't? #00:02:51-2# → how can this healthy enough population affect my research results???  
 R- How does that happen? From going.. from going you are saying the moment you feel you are the weakest, and then... something #00:02:59-5#  
 P- L.. is... it's just.. it must be just this determina.. is determination again Determination to not... not stop there, ammm is... whether is reaching out for help, at that moment or.. whether its doing something, just something, doing something to distract yourself. Like, at the moment, I've been like, I've been like, I've been like, I've been like, I know is bad for me, but like.. keeps my fingers busy, keeps my mind occupied #00:03:22-3#  
 R- mmm mmm #00:03:23-2#  
 P- that's what got me through the last couple of days, was just.. #00:03:25-8#  
 R- mm #00:03:25-0#  
 P- the.. ability to take myself, sit down, and just being with myself.. and just.. you know, distract myself.. cigarette, whatever, ammm.. used to be solitaire that I would do (laughs) and I just stopped playing solitaire, and.. #00:03:39-9#

Distraction as keener  
 ↳ positive (solitaire)  
 ↳ bad (smoky)  
 - the better of the 2 was a opta



urge to die - wanting to feel up (best) to disappear  
 been get through it - past experience

having control over living  
 others  
 • not that you can do about  
 (best) feelings - they come +  
 go  
 go alone  
 impurities

you say -> she decides  
 why just sigh  
 is easy, dividing self?  
 not recognizing myself  
 effort?  
 the voice is not mine, as mine  
 is busy voice or feeling?

Knowing even when you don't know  
 for me or others  
 non-negotiable

choosing to live - ask help  
 a small part of you  
 becomes self

851 R- mmm #00:03:38-8#  
 852 P- I get this urge to kill myself, and just play software until I got through it. And it's sort of  
 853 like, in itself that's... that's not a big deal, but the fact that you decide you take that active  
 854 decision to do something that would distract yourself. Until those feelings... are gone... Like  
 855 you have to be strong to do that, you have to be determined to carry on, to do that Am...  
 856 #00:04:02-8#  
 857 R- how does that happen? #00:04:05-3#  
 858 P- It, I don't know, (laughs) its just... sort of... there. (silence) Like... its just like a later, I  
 859 guess (silence) like you think that ohh you, you think your whole mind is like  
 860 devoted to this like you need to die, you need to hide yourself... but then... ammm... you just  
 861 (silence, secs)... you just say no, no I'm gonna do, I'm gonna do this, I'm not gonna do it.  
 862 #00:04:32-2#  
 863 R- so a part that's like... no no #00:04:34-3#  
 864 P- yea... its... another, like... just like the voice of reason I guess #00:04:39-8#  
 865 R- mmm #00:04:38-7#  
 866 P- and even if its like the quietest voice #00:04:41-5#  
 867 R- mmm #00:04:42-0#  
 868 P- ammm... that's what I hold on to. Because I know, even when I don't know, when I think  
 869 completely differently, I know that... I need to keep going, even if I don't want to, is still  
 870 this kind of knowing that I need to... and even... whether that's for me, or whether that's  
 871 because I know oh my parents would be devastated, or... you know... ammm my fat, my  
 872 flimflames don't wanna find me dead (smiling), ammm... or... #00:05:10-2#  
 873 R- mmm  
 874 P- or anything like that #00:05:09-5#  
 875 R- mm #00:05:10-1#  
 876 P- e... even if its just the slightest reason... there's always something that  
 877 would give you the reason... and then you could carry on (silence) ammm... like, even when  
 878 was trying to kill myself, like, it was the fact that my friends were saying no, no, no.  
 879 Please, please call 111, or whatever #00:05:23-2#  
 880 R- mmm #00:05:29-7#  
 881 P- Please go to hospital, and then I went to the hospital, and... you know... and the  
 882 reason, you know, I did. I could've made the choice to not call anyone, but I... did. I made  
 883 the choice to call someone... ammm... is sort of like even when... even when you think... it, it  
 884 needs to be all over... is sort of like... there's still a part of you, no matter how small...  
 885 #00:05:58-8#  
 886 900

Am I biased (and really) about her not recognizing her effort  
 L.T. recognition efforts from others?

distraction + def  
 as resources  
 fueled by straight  
 + determined

Keep going for self order  
 any slightest reason  
 building up on small things = big

voice

## Appendix 14: Extract of Step 1 of Analysis: Lucy's Resources

### Lucy's Resources

Inner resource: "A reservoir from which one can draw in times of need, giving a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day to day living" (Van Dierendonck et al., 2009).				
Inner resources	Transcript notes	Quotes	Location	How is the resource experienced?
<b>INNER RESOURCES</b>	<b>Knowing</b>	that I have control and power over my life		
		being empowered now to balance the feelings of past powerlessness		empowering, reassuring of what is mine. As a fight to keep control?
<b>Acknowledging own capacity and strength</b>		capacity to overcome difficult experiences // recognising own thought, process and challenging negative thoughts		
		to increase self value when evaluating own actions // acknowledging		as a surprise, not expected by myself, unknown of me, unimaginable
<b>Space for the Self</b>		empowerment definition: needed to re-humanise myself, I'm worthwhile // reminding my rightful space and voice in the world		as something to be proud of, and achievement, hero
		regaining power by deliberately not being ashamed and talking about it		as something only I can do // as something that needs to be reclaimed (others have taken and need to give me back)
<b>Regain power</b>		feeling powerless is as traumatising as what happened		as actions that empower me // a decision I am aware of that requires fitting with myself
		powerlessness and loneliness		
<b>Regain Control</b>		controlling my body		
		having a choice and deciding what I want		
<b>Taking Decisions / Active Choice</b>		it's not gonna ruin my life (active action on what happens after) // invisible power fight		as a choice, a decision



## Appendix 15: Extract of Step 2 of Analysis: How Lucy Experiences her Inner Resources

### How does Lucy experience her Inner Resources?

Themes		How are IR experienced?		Quotes and line		Notes from transcripts and table of Resources (Step 1)		
Core Self	Innate part of me (not aware of?)	the HAM, inside of me	permanent idea	and the angel are the, are the, the... the strong thoughts, the... the self love thoughts (takes air) am... the self compassion	2087	the angel	Parts of the self	the part of me that pushed through/ the angel
	Fight / Struggle	hidden, invisible, unheard, inside of me	comes out at specific moments but is always there	It was there... and it definitely, in, it definitely came out when I needed it am... (silence) and... I think, you know, it's all, it's always these parts in someone, but it's just that sometimes I, I, I wasn't listening, or I couldn't hear the voice.	2135	the unheard voice within me	Parts of the self	the part of me that pushed through/ the angel
Fighting back	action, choice decision (I do from within)	as something only I can do/ as something that needs to be reclaimed (others have taken and need to give me back)		I really needed to spat re-humanising myself in that sense, that... it, it, its, its... am... (silence) no I won't let this happen, I won't let people get away with this, I, I'm worthwhile. Am... (silence) and that's, that's what is about, is about getting myself back of really, a, a voice, and and demanding the space for myself in this world.	973	empowerment definition: needed to re-humanise myself, I'm worthwhile // reminding my rightful space and voice in the world	I am worthwhile, re-humanising self by demanding the space for myself in this world	Space for the Self
		as a choice, a decision		it's not like... (silence) this big... thing that's gonna ruin my life. I don't want it to be a big thing that's ruined my life, it was something that happened which was significant but it wasn't the most significant thing that's happened to me	1661	it's not gonna ruin my life (active actor on what happens after) // invisible power fight	deciding, active choice // aware of my wants	having a choice and deciding what I want
	against parts of myself	become more compassionate with myself		I do struggle to give myself the empathy and the compassion that if someone else... external had come to me and said the story, I would be very sure in my feelings around this situation, but because it happened to me, am... I struggled to give myself that same compassion... am... (takes air) and... (silence) am... I, I have been able to... but that's only because I've done loads and loads of therapeutic work around that...	870	to be able to give self-compassion and empathy to self	therapy	
	loneliness	being accompanied, supported, less alone, on my side		(crying) I think the worse part of it was not being believed, and the fact that all these people, that didn't even know me, had stuck up for my honour, and for... for me... had been really special to me, (silence, tut) am... because I felt so alone... with the whole thing.	1346	being believed means not being alone	feeling believed	
	balancing	balancing, finding my limits		And I remember putting up a review... of the I'm was like... would have been accepted by then... and I put it up, and I... just had this real sense of fear (takes air) and I... thought... I think I, o, although this whole writing review is supposed to be me having a chance to say it, to just say what I'm ready to say, I think I may have over exposed myself in this review (takes air) .. think I may have written too much detail for that random strangers I've never met before could read.	2266	empowering and disempowering	identifying as a victim of SA	
	Regaining control	stop negative self talk / something to focus on (outside of myself) / purpose	focus/distraction	Am... and so, my thesis is really helped me, to... (silence) again... stop that distract myself... give me something to focus on is given me something that I really felt, has given me a sense of purpose.	1296	distraction, a sense of purpose (positive distraction)	thesis	
		through my body	on my body	(tuts) right now. And... (silence) I've try, I've been trying to not have my period as well, because I don't wanna have to like... put a tampon up there or anything like that, so... it, it does... very much feel... (silence) I don't wanna use the word dead, but it feels dead (pretending to cry) (laughs) have it (silence, takes air) yea... it does... this part it feels dead I think... (silence)	2420	vagina: a dead part of me	controlling my body	



## Appendix 16: Example of Overarching Theme

### Overarching Theme 1: The "Little Will to Live"

Overarching Theme 1: The "Little Will to Live"		Overarching Theme 1: The "Little Will to Live"		
<b>Theme 1: The "Little Will to Live"</b>	<b>Claire</b> within me or energy source? unbeknownst drive= invisible, only aware of it through deduction, as I am alive, I may be strong	I know that needs to come from me.. to feel that I am strong. Am... (silence) (tuts) I don't know, I guess.. there is something.. there's a drop on, like.. there's a drive unbeknownst to me really. Because I don't know.. here I am... yea	832 840 future wishes	
	<b>Beth</b> something that is within me that keeps me going	I don't know. That's the thing. Even, even despite myself. Even despite thinking, you know, I may as well, I may as well be dead. Amm.. (... like.. still.. I'm.. just.. keep going. And.. I can only... You know, I can only assume that there's.. you know.. that I have this, like.. somewhere in me there is this like, this will, this little will to live. Amm	744 the little will to live	parts of self
	<b>Beth</b> something is there,	yea.. even if I don't, even if I'm not, I'm not actually like, actively engaging with it, even if I'm not having this like conversation with myself, like ok you gonna do this, you gonna do this, don't do this, don't do that.	932 voice of reason	parts of self
	<b>Beth</b> something is there,	(silence) there's been plenty of times where I've just been like.. like wanting.. wanting to stop. Wanting ... to die, wanting... it just to come to an end. But you know I keep going.. and keep going, and keep going... and... (silence) Even again, you know, against my will, I keep going. So.. it's just sort of like.. that in itself... is a strength that I don't know where it comes from, I don't know amm...where it is. But its there.	725 keep going / the little will to live	parts of self
	<b>Beth</b> a part of me	even when you think.. it, it needs to be all over... is sort of like.. there's still a part of you, no matter how small... that's like Carry on, and I guess that, that part of me is slowing(?) (illegible) ..is always there - is.. is that is, its the reason I guess that I am still here	898 carry on, keep going	movement
	<b>Beth</b> something is there,	So.. it's.. it's there I think it is just.. me. I wouldn't identify any... Kind of part of my personality that is.. is that.. that is strong, it's just like... it's just something.. something is there that.. is keeping me going. And I (smiling) am very grateful (laughing) for it	777 the little will to live	parts of self
	<b>Lucy</b> the part of me that takes care of me inside of me (permanent)	its almost like having a..... a.... an angel and the devil on your shoulder and... to have, you know the imagery of them whispering into your head (smiles)... and.. am... it, its like having... the.... aa... you know the devil is the nasty thoughts, and the angel are the, are the, the.. the strong thoughts the... the self love thoughts (takes a/r) am... the self compassion,	2078 the angel	Parts of the self/ the part of me that pushed through/ the angel
	<b>Emily</b> somewhere in me, but i do not use	I've always had sort of consistent feedback about having a warm, empathic and compassionate sort of stance of working with clients am.. but I would like to be able to use that towards me. That's there somewhere (smiles) somewhere inside me. Am... I'm not very good at accessing it for me. Can give it all out to everyone else. Am.. I guess that's not really the question... I guess that's something I do know I have.. but I don't use regularly.	1698 accessing the warm empathic and compassionate me	accessing the warm empathic and compassionate me



**Overarching Theme 1: The “Little Will to Live”**

Theme 1: The “Little Will to Live”	A latent feeling	Beth	didn't listen to my instinct	as a latent feeling	(silence) Like... it's just like a latent, I guess a latent feeling.	861	voice of reason	parts of self
		Lucy	didn't listen to my instinct	hidden, invisible, unheard, inside of me (comes out at specific moments but is always there)	It was there... and it definitely, in, it definitely came out when I needed it am... (silence) and... I think, you know, it's a, it's always these parts in someone, but it's just that sometimes I, I, I wasn't listening, or I couldn't hear the voice.	2135	the unheard part of self	Parts of the self / the part of me that pushed through/ the angel
	I know, I will	Sarah	within me / related to the self	as something strong within me that is not doubted/ internal validation of my capacity and strength (—> I know (statement) confidence, trust in capacity, believe is self. Don't doubt that)	Um... but ultimately, no matter what happens, I know somehow I'll find a way of surviving (silence). I'd like to do more than just survive, but I know that I will always survive. And I don't, I don't doubt that. So, is given me an internal strength to know that, no matter how bad it is, I can overcome it, I've been through worse..	907	knowledge (plus tool to increase strength)	knowledge: (I know I can, I know I will)
		Sarah		as a voice within me	In front of bad things I think: I will	925	thinking	knowledge: (I know I can, I know I will)
Theme 2: A Strong(er) Self		Kate		B wheeler	"P-... (silence) yea, I think that is me. I think psychology is... (silence, tuts) the study of humans who ve...you know... been hit by trucks and A- mh mh P- and just... walked away. You know... maybe had a crawl or two in between but... kept walking. A- is that how you feel? P- yea (smiles, laughs) A- (laughs) P- yea (smiling) it's just like they hit you with an 8-wheeler, and then I was like.. ok.. I may as well get up and... keep walking A- mh mh P- am... so yea... A- mh P- yea... (smiles) A- (smiles, silence)"	3323		
	the worst has happened and I've come out the other side (past experiences)	Kate		as validation, confirmation of my strength and capability	I guess I see myself... (silence) as somebody who's been through a lot but come out the other side. Am... (silence) and... I think... (lets air out) I see myself as stronger than a lot of people. Am... but having suffered more. So sometimes it doesn't look like I'm... quite strong. (silence)	3286	vision of self as someone capable	getting through past experiences
		Kate		validation of my strength	"(silence) it's still... it's like... it's a fucking walk in the park (smiling) . Compared to things that have happened to me in my life. And so... when you have someone question that... (laughing/smiling ironically) it's just like.. (silence) what... I'm sorry... but unless you survived... ten years of suicidal thoughts... piss off (laughs)" Kate 2722	2722		
		Beth			I'm much more like.. you know, well the worst has already happened to me, so, like, you know, I'm gonna.. I'm gonna keep going, because, I'm still here, so.. you know.. I've I'm obviously strong enough to come back from that..	1152	getting through difficult past experiences	getting through past experiences

### Overarching Theme 1: The "Little Will to Live"

Theme 2: A Strong(er) Self		Sarah		acknowledging strength / tool to validate acknowledge strength	but actually I am (strong), because all that happened to me and I am not a wreck!	1447	past experiences	past experiences
	Lucy			acknowledgement of own strength and valuing self	(takes air) A... I realise I'm an incredibly strong person. It, it takes, it takes... when I tell people that... how.. (takes air) I was ridiculously scared, and yet I still had the strength within me to go to the police, on my own, in the middle, in .. in the capital (takes air) am... and that I had the conviction to do that, and I got through this experience, am... I think fucking hell!!! that was... what I did was incredible!	1995	increasing self value when evaluating own actions // acknowledging	realising I'm incredibly strong
Acknowledging change/ Changes throughout time	Beth	a more time, more validation		validation of my strength	Umm... and every year that passes from every one of them, and I'm still here, and probably doing better than I was, sort of.. like, well, then I've, I've got the strength to continue, have the strength to continue, and I am still going (higher pitch).	1155	acknowledging change	acknowledgement
From Present	Kate	here or 3.2?		a validation confirmation that change is possible	And... I think, I'm in such a different place now, than I was. (silence) am... (sighs) you know even two years ago now, before I started the course..	1607	acknowledging change	
	Emily	I've got: validation through the present		validating myself and what I have	sort of questioning what have I got? and then, going into actually talking, well actually, I'm still alive, I'm a human being. I've got my hair, I've got my feet, I've got my eyes am... I've got my heart (laughs) am... I've got my freedom probably is the biggest thing...	1047	song/music	
Energy motor/ more rel to future	Beth	potential for more keeps me going		a motor that keeps me going // encourages me to heal	I guess just the, the potential to build more, and the potential to do things, you know. You , you can't do things if you are dead. So... (takes air) it's just sort of like, I feel like life has so much... potential, and so many good things and, I've got those good things in the relationships around me, but you know, it's so much potential for more, am... you know.. I in, in the future.. That am.. Yeah, that's what keeps me going. Encourages me to.. like heal..	675	the future potentials of life	future plans/ potentials
Hope	Emily	present is good, therefore future will be better		hope of freedom from SA	Um... (silence) and like I said like, to get to a point where I think that I do have freedom but that was kind of taken away from me... and then... reinforced or a spat on (laughs) back then. Am.. I think it helps me hang on to the bit that I think will maybe, th, that I can find some sort of freedom from this. Because I do have a life, I do have a home, I do have.. like I can support myself I do have family, I do have friends, I'm not... what she is talking about there..	1250 1256	song/music	
hope	Sarah	Hope		short version	they (my brothers) do give me hope that... there are decent men out there. That want to have a, a supportive partnership relationship, yes, and that, they are not all evil, out to get women (laughs) yes	2269	2269	res of brothers with their wives /other people, including family



### Overarching Theme 1: The "Little Will to Live"

<b>Theme 3: Looking Towards the Future</b>		<b>Energy motor/ more rel to future purpose</b>	<b>Emily</b>	<b>not giving up</b>	<b>a motor that keeps me going,, holding on to hope</b>	<b>1786</b>	<b>stubbornness (B)</b>
		<b>purpose</b>	<b>Kate</b>		<b>as a motor to keep going</b>	<b>1852</b>	<b>keep going + making different in other's lives = purpose- not wanting to loose purpose</b>
		<b>purpose</b>	<b>Kate</b>		<b>as something to look forward to, find purpose</b>	<b>2256</b>	<b>having future plans, goals, ambitions,* travelling</b>
		<b>purpose</b>	<b>Claire</b>		<b>as the only thing I can do</b>	<b>796</b>	<b>future wishes</b>
		<b>purpose</b>	<b>Emily</b>		<b>as motivation, source of energy, hope</b>	<b>1365</b>	<b>the job I do</b>

# Appendix 17: Table of Themes and Quotes

**Table of themes & quotes of the study as a whole**

<p><b>1: The “Will to Live”</b></p>	<p><b>1.1.- “The Little Will to Live”</b></p>	<p>“I know that needs to come from me.. to feel that I am strong. Um... [silence] [tuts] I don't know, I guess.. there is something.. there's a drop on, like.. there's a drive unbeknownst to me really, because I don't know.. here I am... yeah” (Clare, 840).</p> <p>“I don't know. That's the thing. Even, even despite myself. Even despite thinking, you know, I may as well, I may as well be dead. Umm... like.. still.. I'm.. just.. keep going. And.. I can only... You know, I can only assume that there's.. you know.. that I have this, like.. somewhere in me there is this like, this will, this little will to live. Umm” (Beth, 744).</p> <p>“Yeah.. even if I don't, even if I'm not, I'm not actually like, actively engaging with it, even if I'm not having this like conversation with myself, like: ok you gonna do this, you gonna do this, don't do this, don't do that” (Beth, 932).</p> <p>“There's been plenty of times where I've just been like.. like wanting... wanting to stop. Wanting ...to die, wanting... it just to come to an end. But you know I keep going.. and keep going, and keep going... and... [silence] Even again, you know, against my will, I keep going. So. it's just sort of like.. that in itself... is a strength that I don't know where it comes from, I don't know...where it is. But its there.” (Beth, 725).</p> <p>“Even when you think.. it, it needs to be all over... is sort of like.. there's still a part of you, no matter how small... that's like “carry on”, and I guess that, that part of me is always... is always there. Is.. is that is, it's the reason I guess that I am still here” (Beth, 898).</p> <p>“So.. it's.. it's there I think it is just.. me. I wouldn't identify any... kind of part of my personality that is.. is that.. that is strong. It's just like... It's just something.. something is there that.. is keeping me going. And I [smiling] am very grateful [laughing] for it ” (Beth, 777).</p> <p>“It's almost like having a.... a... an angel and the devil on your shoulder and... to have, you know, the imagery of them whispering into your head [smiles]... and.. um... it, it's like having.. the... a... You know, the devil is the nasty thoughts, and the angel are the, are the, the.. the strong thoughts the... the self-love thoughts [takes air] um... the self-compassion” (Lucy, 2078).</p> <p>“I've always had sort of consistent feedback about having a <u>warm, empathic</u> and compassionate sort of stance of working with clients um... but I would like to be able to use <u>that</u> towards <u>me</u>. That's <u>there somewhere</u> [smiles] somewhere inside me. Um... I'm not very good at <u>accessing</u> it for <u>me</u>. Can give it all out to everyone else. Am.. I guess that's not really the question... I guess that's something I do know I have.. but I don't <u>use</u> regularly.” (Emily, 1698).</p> <p>“Like.. its just like a latent, I guess a latent feeling.” (Beth, 861).</p> <p>“It was there.. and it definitely, in, it definitely came out when I needed it um... [silence] and... I think, you know, it's al-, it's always these parts in someone, but it's just that sometimes I, I, I wasn't listening, or I couldn't hear the voice” (Lucy, 2135).</p> <p>“Um... but ultimately, no matter what happens, I know someday I'll find a way of surviving [silence]. I'd like to do more than just survive, but I know that I will always survive. And I don't, I don't doubt that. So, it's given me an internal strength to know that, no matter how bad it is, I can overcome it, I've been through worse.. ” (Sarah, 907).</p> <p>“In front of bad things I think: I will” (Sarah, 925).</p>
	<p><b>1.2.- A Strong(er) Self</b></p>	<p>“Kate.- [silence] Yeah, I think that is me. I think psychology is... [silence, tuts] the study of humans who've...you know.. been hit by trucks and... Anna- mh mh K- and just.. walked away. You know.. maybe had a crawl or two in between but... kept walking A- Is that how you feel? K- Yeah [smiles, laughs] A- [laughs] K- Yeah [smiling] it's just like they hit you with an 8-wheeler, and then I was like.. ok.. I may as well get up and... keep walking A- mh mh K- Um... so yeah... A- mh K- yeah.. [smiles] A- [smiles, silence]” (Kate, 3323).</p> <p>“I guess I see myself... [silence] as somebody who's been through a lot but come out the other side. Um... [silence] and... I think... [sighs] I see myself as stronger than a lot of people. Um... but having suffered more. So sometimes it doesn't look like I'm... quite strong [silence]” (Kate, 3286).</p> <p>“It's still.. it's like... it's a fucking walk in the park [smiling]. Compared to things that have happened to me in my life. And so... when you have someone question that.. [laughing and smiling ironically] it's just like.. [silence] What?... I'm sorry?... But unless you survived...ten years of suicidal thoughts... piss off! [laughs]” (Kate 2722).</p> <p>“I'm much more like.. you know, well the worst has already happened to me, so, like, you know, I'm gonna.. I'm gonna keep going, because, I'm still here, so.. you know.. I've, I'm obviously strong enough to come back from that...” (Beth, 1152).</p> <p>“But actually I am [strong], because all that happened to me and I am not a wreck!” (Sarah, 1447).</p> <p>“I realise I'm an incredibly strong person. It, it takes, it takes... when I tell people that.. how... [takes air] I was <u>ridiculously</u> scared, and yet I <u>still</u> had the strength within me to go to the police, on my own, in the middle, in .. in the capital [takes air] Um... and that I had the conviction to do that, and I got through this experience, um... I think fucking hell!! That was... what I did was incredible! [opening her eyes widely]” (Lucy, 1995).</p> <p>“And every year that passes from every one of them, and I'm still here, and probably doing better than I was, sort of.. like, well, then I've, I've got the strength to continue, have the strength to continue, and I am still going [with a higher pitch tone, smiles and swings her folded right arm towards the front of her body]” (Beth, 1155).</p> <p>“I think, I'm in such a different place now, than I was. [silence] Um... [sighs] you know even two years ago now, before I started the course.. ” (Kate, 1607)</p> <p>“Sort of questioning what have I got? And then, going into actually talking: well actually, I'm still alive, I'm a human being, I've got my hair, I've got my feet, I've got my eyes, um... I've got my heart [laughs] Um...I've got my freedom provably is the biggest thing...” (Emily, 1047).</p>

<p><b>1: The "Will to Live"</b></p>	<p><b>1.3.- Looking Towards the Future</b></p>	<p>"I guess just the, the potential to build more, and the potential to do things, you know. You, you can't, you can't do things if you are dead. So... [takes air] it's just sort of like, I feel like life has so much.. potential, and so many good things and, I've got those good things in the relationships around me, but you know, it's so much potential for more, umm... you know.. I, in, in the future... That umm... Yeah, that's what keeps me going. Encourages me to... like heal, from those, th... things that've happened" (Beth, 675).</p> <p>"Um... I think it helps me hang on to the bit that I think will maybe, th, that I can find some sort of freedom from this [her past experiences of sexual violence]. Because I do have a life, I do have a home, I do have... like I can support myself I do have family, I do have friends" (Emily, 1256).</p> <p>"They [my brothers] do give me hope that... there are decent men out there. That want to have a, a supportive partnership relationship, yeah, and that, they are not all evil, out to get women [laughs] Yeah" (Sarah, 2269).</p> <p>"I've not given up on therapy, just not having... [] had a lot of therapy... lot of different ones that haven't worked, I haven't sort of given up and thought... clear I'm a lost cause. I think maybe, something will work." (Emily, 1786).</p> <p>"I guess is the idea that, if I.. if I stopped... getting on with it, [silence] you know... w... my purpose is lost. My purpose to... help, children and.. and... and... get to where I want to" Kate, 1852</p> <p>"So it just changed everything. I had a reason, I had something... to look forward to. I had something on the horizon that I could get to..." (Kate, 2256).</p> <p>"For me the only thing I can do is carry on... Kind of believing in what, what I believe in like, maybe working in.. for a women's charity or setting one up eventually which I really... would like to do..." (Claire, 796).</p> <p>"Um... I think provably, um... [silence] How much I love doing the work that I do. Um... and wanting to continue doing that, I guess" (Emily, 1365).</p>
<p><b>2: The Warrior</b></p>	<p><b>2.1.- The "Battle"</b></p>	<p>"Don't want those things [experiences of sexual assault] to be the thing that stops me from... [takes air] like.. achieving my potential, or whatever, umm... Because isn't isn't, is not fair. Like those are things done to me, and.. against my will, and... and... [silence] Yeah, I, I, I, I want to be, I want to .. like... win, in that... in that battle right. 'cause if I don't, if I don't keep going then... They win, and I don't want that" (Beth, 689).</p> <p>"[I am] Having this like conversation with myself, like, ok, you gonna do this, you gonna do this, don't do this, don't do that. Sometimes I do that, sometimes I have the [inaudible: power?] to fight it with myself, about whether I s-, do.. something bad or not, and.. umm... (Beth 933).</p> <p>"I'm not gonna let this [sexual assault] ruin, this one and only opportunity that I've got to go traveling around [omitted]. He is not gonna take that from me, and I carried on. (Sarah, 1745).</p> <p>"I think that I should always be.. both events... I need to kind of undo the wrongness that was sort.. put into me. Um... and the only way that I can do that is by... just doing stuff all the time" (Emily, 1372).</p> <p>"It just... makes me feel that anything I do, um... [silence] is never going... is like I said before, I have, I feel I have to be doing something to redeem myself to prove that I'm not that person that deserves to be spat on. Not that person... I feel quite angry right now... [tenses body] Um... I'm not that person. And I am not a person who... deserves that, or deserved that. Um... so therefore, I need to redeem myself by proving that I am not that person" (Emily, 2133).</p> <p>"I really needed to [inaudible: start?] re-humanising myself in that sense, that.. it, it it's, it's... Um... [silence] no I won't let this happen. I won't let people get away with this. I, I'm worthwhile. Um... [silence] and that's, that's what it's about. Is about getting myself back of really, a, a voice, and, and demanding the space for myself in this world" (Lucy, 2651).</p> <p>"I think... my... struggle with intimacy will be... life long. I don't.. foresee it ever being... perfect. Um... so I struggle... day to day to be.. softer. And kinder. And... not as... [silence] controlling, and... trying to move away from intimacy. It is... not something daily; but something that happens quite often. Um... [silence] and it... in the line of work we are in... when people talk about their own experiences it always comes up [silence] so it's always there... And whether or not it... affects me deeply... or... improves my understanding, and... you know, affects because of the posi-, positively, it always affects me... in some way. And it's always gonna be there. Um... I think... [silence] is not that I've accepted... that the events in my life... with that in particular, will always affect me. I've not... accepted it [silence] but I know... that it will" (Kate, 3053).</p>
	<p><b>2.2.- Regaining Control</b></p>	<p>"I was crying almost every day, am... I couldn't go to my course, like... I, I couldn't concentrate on anything um... And so... it is kind of.. was bizarre that I could sit down and read a book, because I couldn't do that with any other book [laughing] Um... [tuts] and then just seemed to... And it was, it felt quite soothing. Mmh..." (Claire, 553).</p> <p>"I think I feel quite a lot of my memories from... what happened... are experienced to hit like in my body here [pointing towards her legs with her fingers] Um... And I just hate feeling relaxed. I hate feeling that sort of just... um... that describe it, it's like... everything that, say meditation or mindfulness ... or whatever encourages... like soothing yourself, I guess the soothing affiliation system, really. I... I can't access, because it just reminds me of that. Because I didn't have control then. I stayed still, I didn't move. And when I start to talk about it sometimes I feel as if my legs are going again. So, I have to sort of like move [starts moving her legs side to side while sitting on the chair] to make sure I can actually stand up" (Emily 302).</p> <p>"Sometimes when I'm with my current boyfriend, I start to think it's... my ex, I get this weird feeling, and I can't get it out of my head and I need to focus on him, and how he feels, and how he smells, and what he looks like" (Kate, 2409).</p> <p>"So if I'm at that point where I think that I could tip over into... [silence] I don't know, ruminating or... getting stuck in just... don't know... being anxious, I don't know how to explain it, is almost like... [silence] I guess going back to sorts of trauma symptoms and getting... triggered more easily, I do, I don't know how to explain it. Is like a sea.. is like a seesaw... sort of like that, Um and.. If I feel that I'm heading towards having a bad day, or a bad week" (Emily, 1112).</p> <p>"So I will always, I'm looking for kind of happy... or positive... songs... Ummm. when I'm down to bring me up, I guess" (Beth, 582).</p> <p>"Cause that's me putting, 'cos when, when you feel down and depressed, you can kind of end up sinking down and [sinks upper body down], you get neck ache, 'cos you are looking down too much, and your shoulders are hunched. And then I hear that, and you just reminds you... do you know what? you may not see it, but there is something really strong in there. And suddenly the shoulders come back, and the head tips up, and you look around and just changing your posture, actually makes you feel better. [Takes air] Um... Is probably a mindfulness technique somewhere [smiling] but um... it does make you feel better, and you don't generally do it. But that song makes me stand up like a daffodil, all over again and just remind yourself... [silence] that is in there" (Sarah, 1141)</p> <p>"Is.. whether is reaching out for help, at that moment or.. whether its doing someth-, just something, doing something to distract yourself, I've just been chain smoking, which I know is bad for me, but like.. keeps my fingers busy, keeps my mind occupied that's what got me through the last couple of days, was just.. the.. ability to take myself, sit down, and just being with myself.. and just.. you know, distract myself.. cigarette, whatever. Umm.. used to be solitaire that I would do [laughs] and I just stopped playing solitaire, and I get these urges to kill myself, and just play solitaire until I got through it" (Beth, 836).</p>

<b>2: The Warrior</b>	<b>2.2.- Regaining Control</b>	<p>"It's just something that's, um... external.... [silence, takes air] yeah... it can take me out of... out of the... introspection negative introspection and the negative thinking. [takes air] Um... because, you know when I'm sat there feeling shit... I could really ruminate. And go around, and round, and round, and round, and... you know, it's part of mindfulness, I try and catch my thoughts now, when I'm having that, and... I try and distract them. And so he is... so, when I'm feeling oh shit! And I think: well I know what I can do that will make me feel better, I just go and.. stroke [cat's name]" (Lucy, 1167).</p> <p>"When I'm feeling so... shit, and thinking... about all the things, the stuff that has happened and.. you know how it was my fault, or yeah the voice in me saying to myself that it was your fault and I can kind of go there and.. I don't know, be a bit nicer to myself [smiles]" (Emily, 480).</p>
	<b>2.3.- The "Social Justice Warrior"</b>	<p>"It was also this... you know, just social justice warrior um... in me, which is like [changes to a lower tone of voice] it's not just for you, but for all the women in the future you need to do this. [changes voice back] Um... and... [changes to a lower tone of voice] this is wrong. [changes voice back] So... Um... [silence] the... yeah... That's really, helps me get through um... I think when I... [takes air, silence, tuts] focus on s-, on social justice issues has just got stronger after this experience. My feminism is, just got stronger, um... yeah, from this experience for sure" (Lucy, 2105).</p> <p>"I can now... have a deeper level of... of emotional awareness around this. And I... I just hope that one day I'll be able to help, use that, to help other people... In that way, I would have sort of changed what's this really negative experience, into something which has a purpose and a meaning yeah, I think that's, that is really important for me [laughs]" (Lucy, 2034).</p> <p>"As hard as it is to b-... to be so aware of like... [takes air] gender issues, like I'm a massive feminist, and that really has... I mean, is depressing 'cause you think... you look at the kind of... um... how often this happens and occurs, and how nothing happens, or t-, there's no consequences to it for the perpetrators. But for me, the only thing I can do, is carry on... Kind of believing in what, what I believe in, like, maybe working in... for a woman's charity or setting one up, which I really... would like to do" (Claire, 785).</p> <p>"And the type of social responsibility, we think we have, you know... to get out there, and help other people. And I guess... [silence] that's always been part of it. To get out there and help other people" (Kate, 1872).</p> <p>"And is not my job to protect everyone. However, as a woman, as a survivor it, I'd like to be able to help other women that [have] been through the same thing. So, this, it, it... gives me an opportunity to do that, so for that, I feel a bit of like... well done Sarah you've given back a little bit." Sarah, 189</p>
<b>3: The Growing Self</b>	<b>3.1.- Space for the self</b>	<p>"Inside the tree house is almost like I can be me.. and I can... um... [silence]. I don't know I've got things I really just.. like. Um... I don't worry about anything when I'm in there, I can just be.. separate from all of the crap going on outside" (Emily, 460).</p> <p>"When I started meditating more, the thing is... the emotions that I suppressed from the first assault, and definitely the second to some extent, kind of... alarmingly came to the surface, but I knew I had to deal with them. I was like, I cannot deal with them. And I have dealt with them, and I am still dealing with them, but meditation helps at, because it means... you are aware of.. you don't suppress anything and I think that's a lot more healthy to do things that way and to deal with them. And you can deal with them while on your own. In a space of meditation and reflections, which means you don't need other people's advice or opinions... I guess, yeah..." (Claire, 1369).</p> <p>"But for me I need to be able to talk about it... and... I don't know... Because it is part of who I am I guess, as much as you don't like that it is, but it is. Um... [clears throat] I need that open space and that like... nurturing space to talk about it" (Claire, 1565).</p> <p>"And I remember putting up a review... of the, I'm, was like... would have been accepted by then... and I put it up, and I... just had this real sense of fear [takes air] and I... thought, I think I, o-, although this whole writing review is supposed to be me having a chance to say it, to just say what I'm ready to say, I think I may have over exposed myself in this review [takes air]. [I] think I may have written too much detail for, that random strangers I've never met before could read." (Lucy, 1346).</p> <p>"It's like you... you shed a skin, is like a... like a... well, how I see it, like a snake or reptile, you shed the skin... and you go on, and you move on. So... [silence] I guess what... kind of parallels that... and my journal entries is... is, you are putting a part of yourself in here... and then, you move forward... And you, and you... [silence] and you can be... a version, a newer version of yourself" (Kate, 1326).</p> <p>"Put the song on, put it out loud, have a good sing along, um.. 'cause having a really loud sing is almost as cathartic as having a good cry [silence]. 'cause it, it releases some emotions, so I'll probably play it two or three times back to back, quite possibly go back to it over the next few days or weeks and, and play it a bit" (Sarah, 1084).</p> <p>"So, it was the best thing to do [travel], and it got down the last of the barriers and it enabled me to go and be me. I'm not, nobody knew my story, nobody, at all, um... and it was nice, I just felt I had a blanc [inaudible: packed?] canvass. And I could just be me, whatever me was. And it was lovely, and that was the real breakthrough to getting those barriers down that had remained for years" (Sarah, 2941).</p> <p>"If you feel bad in your body, where, where do you feel it? Come away, think about it was I feeling anxious? Or.. was I... feeling uncomfortable because of a person? Um.. and just... to be a bit more aware and just take my time, rather than just saying I've got so many feelings, they're overwhelming me, I don't like them, I'm gonna ignore them" (Sarah, 3151).</p>
	<b>3.2.- Developing &amp; Learning</b>	<p>"I think it represents growth... for me. [silence] Yeah, um... [silence] It was felt like a bit of a lifeline at the time. Um... [tongue-clicking] Um... [silence] Yeah, I mean... I, maybe I didn't realise at the time, that I didn't learn the lessons that she was talking of, but like... it definitely... [silence] On reflection, yes.. it helped.. I don't know if mature is the right word but... yeah, it just definitely represents growth from this place... that didn't want to be in. Um... [silence] and positive change maybe? I'm not sure, mmh..." (Claire, 491).</p> <p>"It feels like everyday that you're learning because you don't know what's the right or wrong thing to do afterwards. Um... it feels like you are kind of writing a book about how to live your life, like, there's no leaflet. I mean, I'm sure there are leaflets on sexual assault [laughing] but there's no leaflet on how to live your life after this [laughing]" (Claire, 936).</p> <p>"Psychologists... [smiles] is about learning to understand... the thought patterns, and the emotional rollercoasters that people go on. And when someone can draw it out and say: this is the... the patterns that people do. You start realising your own patters, and that actually you're normal. You follow the patterns of human beings, because you are one" (Sarah, 3871)</p> <p>"I'm reading, um... Deborah Lee, Compassion Focused Trauma Therapy, or therapy of trauma at the moment, as part of my therapy. But also, cos I had the book anyway. Um... and yeah, I can read it, is almost like reading it with two heads. I can read it in relations to my clients, um... but don't work with clients who've had... sexual trauma... I said it's easier to say, 'cause I'm not talking it about it to me. Um... be easier that would just be... I can't. Um... but in relations to, you know, other things. Um... [silence] yeah I can connect with it, from a... work capacity [laughs], but can't connect very well emotionally. And I guess again, that's probably what we're working on in therapy [smiles]" (Emily, 1727).</p> <p>"Is that, just doing things that have, doing this interview, um... you know, talking about it, not... deliberately not being ashamed of what's happened. [takes air, tongue-clicking] Um... these have all been really empowering steps which have really helped me" (Lucy, 2180).</p>



<b>3: The Growing Self</b>	<b>3.2.- Developing &amp; Learning</b>	<p>"I remember eventually, realising that I didn't had anyone touch me for like well over a year. Not even let my mum hug me [takes air] Um... and I went for a massage with a therapist, um... that uh... worked with people that don't want to be touched, so, um... I sobbed. It was horrible. But it was lovely at the same time. You need it" (Sarah, 3220).</p> <p>"I just feel like I'm not accepted in a lot of... [tongue-clicking] I don't accept a lot of... pop culture and I don't er... I don't feel very accepted... in big friendship groups. And I think that's probably... partly because I just see something that so many other people don't see, or are just ignoring, or blind to... And so that does affect your interests and relationships, um... [silence, tongue-clicking] Yeah, and it's painful to occupy that space, but also I think is kind of enlightening [laughs]" (Claire, 1881).</p> <p>"You know, but it... it's funny because I can wait to tell my story now... to people. I'm not sure I have much of a story anymore... I think... [silence] Before, my story was based on a life of abuse [tongue-clicking] and I would gain these relationships with people and friendships with people, and I would... have this... overwhelming need to tell them everything, you know, 'cause I just wanted... somebody to understand me, and get me, and get on my neurosis [smiling] and all of that, and... [silence] I don't have a need to do that anymore. You know, my boyfriend knows about everything that happened, but I don't really... have this... need to... justify who I am, 'cause it's... uh... [silence] I'm not... that girl anymore. [silence] But it will still never go away... yeah, if that makes sense... is really difficult to... say, yeah..." (Kate, 2477).</p> <p>"To be... [takes air] having panic attacks on the train [takes air] to being able to let a stra-, a stranger put his head on my shoulder, and think [smiling]: this is amusing! I know [smiling] why he is doing this, he doesn't! [laughs] and not be freaked out by it. It's.... er, it's a contrast I didn't think would ever come [silence]" (Sarah, 4391).</p>
	<b>3.3.- "Bridges"</b>	<p>"He's very much... everything I project onto him. [He] is a projection. [takes air] You know, all the feelings and all of that. I'm like: Oh! Look at him! He's feeling this way. And I'm like... is he really feeling that way? Or is it just me... that wants him to feel that way? [takes air] But... [silence, tongue-clicking] he also is... something external from me, you know. He has his... he definitely has his own mind, then he has his own will, and his own way, and... um... [takes air] yeah... so... yeah... It is definitely that bridge between the two..." (Lucy, 1263).</p> <p>"And I remember him just being really... furious on my behalf... and er... him just being really worried about me... And that was really nice, because they could give me... [takes air, silence, tongue-clicking] the emotions that I couldn't give to myself... [silence]. Yeah, what, that, I'm, that I struggled to give to myself. You know, I can... at a push, but they could give me those kind of feelings that I really needed from an external source" (Lucy, 1631).</p> <p>"Find a different way [takes air]. Even if it's a peer to peer support group because in helping another person, who's gone through similar, you'll actually help yourself [silence] And I think it's really, really important, to know... that what you feel is not uncommon amongst people that have gone through that process and I think peer to peer support, or finding a way that's suitable for you to help somebody else, really helps yourself. It's not completely altruistic [smiles] It's a win-win situation [laughs]" (Sarah, 4591)</p> <p>"I've always liked the smell of fresh laundry fresh wash, fresh washing. It reminds me of when my mum, um... used to like, wash my clothes when I was younger. And also when I was doing my undergrad. Like, sometimes go home and take all my washing, and she'd wash it for me and all. And then, I'll take it back to uni. Um [laughs]. So, it reminds me of just like... don't know just made... There's a couple of things, um.. you know just reminds me of having... being sort of supported I guess. Because it reminds me of my mum" (Emily, 632).</p> <p>"Mmmh... but if I am feeling angry, mmmh about what's happened to me, I will listen to angrier songs on that album, umm... because I suppose in a way it makes you feel vindicated" (Beth, 587).</p> <p>"But it's kind of... could have feel that represented in a song... Umm... and... yeah, just to feel justified. Because, you know, anger is something we are encouraged to not necessarily feel because it's not, it's not seemly, or it's not... you know... womanly, or whatever. But... umm... you know, you can't help but, but feel... um.. angry about these things [smiling]" (Beth, 610).</p> <p>"A lot of feminist lit-, when you find some... like... women, specially that you identify with... [laughs] Yeah, um... you just feel like you are less alone, you don't feel like you are as mad. Whereas when I was at uni, and everyone was like: "oh, it's just bad sex". You feel like you are crazy, and then you lose like, some sort of... grip on reality, which is what I think I did. But when... there's, there's a whole scholar, or like whole school of thought about this [tongue-clicking] then, you just feel less crazy [laughing] um... and more validated" (Claire, 805).</p> <p>"Talking online to women who... um... I feel who are as passionate as me about social justice issues, has been really nice as well, to be like, you know, you can... Yes, men may be physically stronger than us [takes air] but, that doesn't mean that they can... control our thoughts and our minds, and the way we interact with the world. And it's really, it's really inspirational [takes air] other powerful women out there saying: I, I refuse to be defined, um... by experiences like this. It's really powerful" (Lucy, 2619).</p>

## Appendix 18: Table of Themes and Participants

**Table of Themes and Participants**

		Beth	Claire	Emily	Kate	Lucy	Sarah
<b>The "Will to Live"</b>	The " <i>Little Will to Live</i> "	X	X	X	X	X	X
	A Strong(er) Self	X		X	X	X	X
	Looking Towards the Future	X	X	X	X		X
<b>The Warrior</b>	The " <i>Battle</i> "	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Regaining Control	X	X	X	X	X	X
	The " <i>Social Justice Warrior</i> "		X		X	X	X
<b>The Growing Self</b>	Creating Space for the Self		X	X	X	X	X
	Learning & Developing	X	X	X	X	X	X
	" <i>Bridges</i> "	X	X	X		X	X

## Appendix 19: How Women Named their Experiences of Sexual Assault and/or Rape

Answers to question: How would you like me to name it?

How would you like me to name it?		
<b>Beth</b>	Assault	<i>Ummm... assault..is fine by me yea (211)</i>
<b>Claire</b>	A and B	<i>Um... I don't; know. I've just gone, I just normally do A and B (laughing). And.. I don't really like.. I mean. I guess I have no issues using their names, but then also I don't ...like naming, I feel like it makes them... (tuts) more of a (illegible: perth?), like more... (takes air) it makes it.. them more like... I don't know how to explain it (airy voice, as struggling), it makes me f.. when I name them, and put the name to it, then I.. it just sounds like I'm talking about someone I know, it (illegible: makes it) sound like I'm talking about someone that's done something really bad, if that makes sense. Am.. my.. past coun, yea, my past counsellor just used to refer to A and B, I guess. am.. (360)</i>
<b>Emily</b>	Assault (no rape, no sexual)	<i>I don't know cos I always avoid using the term or saying the R word But I don't like that to, just makes me think, think about it... and... (silence) I don't know how open are people in talking about that? (...) (sights) we can just say assaulted, or just won't put the S (thing) in front of it. so that's that (sights) (I ask about clenching body) So I think (breathes out, silence) cos I know it's stupid. Am... but... I know at that talking about this sort of stuff <u>does</u> bring, bring on memories. I know sort of how it works. Am... but I just don't... I don't want.. (sights) I don't know, is always like if I talk about it it's gonna happen again. Am.. Which I know that talking about is like can't make it happen and, you know I've, I said I'm gonna win the lottery and it wouldn't happen. am...(silence) but I think I just get scared of my threat system going up I think. (250)</i>
<b>kate</b>	What happened to me	<i>am... Oh, I don't know, I don't, don't ... I don't have a specific...(silence) way that I, I'm fine with.. whatever you say.. yea.. provably am.. specific way.. that.. yea.. I want it to referred to.. yea (prompt) (silence) just anything you say I'm sure is fine. Yea, cos I can't really, can't really think of a.. way I wanted to be.. raised, so.. I'm sure whatever you say will be ok, yea (prompt)(clears throat) gosh! you know what I don't know... I... (silence) I don't think I particularly like the word assault am... (silence 6s, tuts) I think, cos I think I usually .. just say stuff like what happened to me am... I think... (silence) I think assault for me is a bit.. am...(silence) too strong.. for me. Am.. until... (silence) yea, and I guess that comes from.. like a larger picture diminishing what women go through..., a lot of the time. Am... (silence) and provably... what my friend had said as well, you know.. kind of diminishing it, and making it.. into nothing. it was like, some kind of club we belonged to.. like the sexually <u>harassed</u>, it wasn't ...assaulted or anything like that, yea... So I think I usually just refer to it as like what happened to me, or something like that yea (clears throat) (1067)</i>
<b>Lucy</b>	What happened to me	<i>(takes air) am.. just say like.. what happened to you, yeah I there, I mean.. don't give me too much time to think about that, cos I could go on for ages, (changes her voice towards a higher pitch) o maybe say this, or maybe, maybe you need to be more empowering and say this (changes voice back), no, just said what happened to me. Yeah, that's the first thing I felt comfortable in. I, I actually wonder why that is actually... because it is something that very much happened to me.. but.. (silence, tuts) am.. but it also kind of.. doesn't... it's not like... (silence) this big... thing that's gonna ruin my life. i don't want it to be a big thing that's ruined my life. it was something that happened which was significant but it wasn't the most significant thing that's happened to me (...) (takes air) yea, and then it gives it balance... yeah (953)</i>
<b>Sarah</b>	Rape	<i>It was rape! yea, it was rape. That wasn't a sexual assault, that was actual rape. (696)</i>

## **Part Two: Publishable Article**

***“Standing up like a daffodil”*: The battles women experience in the journey of healing from sexual assault**



## Prefix

For the purposes of this article, I have focused on the overarching theme The “*Warrior*”, which explores the ways in which women resist the loss of and regain control, and are resilient; and it also brings a new understanding of the battles women are constantly fighting with themselves and with external forces, including the wider society. I decided to write this article for *Feminism & Psychology*, as it is placed at the interface of feminism and psychology, and fosters the development of a feminist psychology through articles that integrate research and practice, and that provide insights into gendered realities.

The following article is presented in the format required for submission to the journal *Feminism & Psychology*.

**Title: “*Standing up like a daffodil*”. The battles women experience in their journey of healing from sexual assault**

**Abstract**

Inner resources are at the core of concepts such as recovery, resilience, post-traumatic growth, or the healing journey from sexual violence; however, they are an under-researched phenomenon. Using object elicitation and the phenomenological analysis of six interviews, this article explores how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape, focusing on the battles they wage within this process: how they rehumanise themselves, regain and maintain their sense of agency through their bodies or the use of external objects such as music, and how they seek to improve their lives and their communities. The findings of this study may contribute to the vision of women as active agents in their journey of healing, and provide new insights into how therapeutic practice can aid women during this journey.

**Keywords:** sexual assault, rape, feminist, phenomenological analysis, object elicitation, therapeutic practice

**Introduction**

Sexual violence has vast consequences and affects all areas of an individual's life, from the relationships maintained with significant others and with the world, to the most intimate part of the self, as it crosses the boundaries of the body. Research has shown that it is highly prevalent amongst women and girls, and in the United Kingdom, one in five women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16 (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

There are several definitions of sexual assault and/or rape, mainly depending on the context (i.e. law, social, or the country from where it originates), and issues have been raised around their lack of clarity when describing consent and coercion. This paper will be guided by the World Health Organisation's definition of assault: “Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts or traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by

any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (World Health Organisation, 2002).

This definition has the capacity to encompass the variety of experiences women describe, as it is one of the widest available. However, and as the word rape carries more power due to often being placed at the most violent end of the sexual assault spectrum, both words will be used throughout this paper to reflect how women give different names to similar experiences and how most of my participants described more than one experience of sexual violence.

Accordingly, this paper will follow Van Dierendonck’s work, and thus understand inner resources as those that come from within, as “a reservoir from which one can draw in times of need, giving a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day-to-day living” (Van Dierendonck, Rodriguez-Carvajal, Moreno-Jimenez & Dijkstra, 2009, p. 750).

Quantitative studies have produced vast knowledge on the area of sexual violence, rape and sexual assault in particular. Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders and Best (1993) suggested that sustaining injury or threat to life increased the likelihood of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and Foa and Rothbaum (1998, in Campbell & Wasco, 2005) stated that rape survivors are the largest group of persons with PTSD. Traumatic memories, such as those experienced after sexual assault, are located in the emotion centres of the brain – hypothalamus and amygdala – rather than the cortex, and thus are not associated with a specific time and location, and are harder to express in words, as they take the form of images, smells, or bodily sensations (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Experiences of rape and/or sexual assault have also been linked to an increase in self-harm and suicide attempts (Creighton & Jones, 2012), and more acute and chronic physical health problems (Golding, 1994, 1999; Goodman, Koss & Russo, 1993), as well as alcohol abuse and drug abuse (Zinzow et al., 2012). However, it is important to note that Ullman (2016) suggests that it is not the experience of PTSD that leads to alcohol abuse, but the experience of re-victimisation: “any sexual abuse or assault subsequent to a first abuse or assault that is perpetrated by a different offender to the initial victimisation” (Stathopoulos, 2014). Women who have experienced sexual assault also experience flashbacks, sleep disturbances, and withdrawal (see Smith & Kelly, 2001), higher levels of fear and anxiety, long-term sexual problems, and lower self-esteem, affecting their physical and social self, and

their identity, in the short and the long term (Resnick, Calhoun, Atkeson & Ellis, 1981; Resnick et al., 1993).

However, most of the quantitative studies in this area are based on medical models, and follow legal definitions that tend to be far from women's words. These studies can depict an image of a damaged woman who needs fixing, and some label women's experiences as out of the ordinary, even if data attests that they are really common. As a response to this, feminist theorists and researchers argue that women's reactions to rape do not indicate pathology, but are normal reactions to traumatic and difficult experiences that invade and violate the self, and they have proposed various alternative explanations to these reactions (Burgess, 1983), such as the Rape Trauma Syndrome (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1974). These authors suggested that women first undergo an acute or disruptive phase in which they experience chaotic thoughts, followed by a phase of reconstitution, in which they disregard anything related to the rape. Finally, they reach an integration stage, in which women start the long-term healing process by incorporating the rape or sexual assault into their life story.

Furthermore, quantitative methodologies are not fully able to capture the nature of sexual assault and/or rape (Wasco, 2003), nor the dynamic and complex processes through which adults heal from it (Draucker et al., 2009; Sinopoli 2009), and therefore, qualitative methodologies are essential to answer process questions that can capture these complexities (Campbell & Wasco, 2005). Draucker and Stern (2000) described women's difficulties in overcoming shame and guilt, how they reduced self-blame by identifying gender role stereotypes, gained wisdom through connecting with their spirits, and how, by finding their inner resources, they discovered their inner-strength, created safer lives, and saw themselves as self-sufficient and competent individuals. Similarly, Kalmakis (2010) described how women managed their fears, and struggled with substance misuse and their sense of self or relationships, and Heath, Lynch, Fritch, McArthur and Smith (2011) suggested that rape myths fuel self-blame, make women question whether the event is really a rape, and thus silence women.

Sexual assault affects a woman's whole self, and even if several studies describe this impact, only some have exclusively focused on it. In her study with women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, Chaudry (2012) describes women's experiences of fragmented identity, changes in their body image, feelings of disconnectedness, a feeling of compassion towards others, and having a greater capacity to confront challenges. PhuongThao (2016) explored women's experiences of sex trafficking in Vietnam, and described how women inhibited their emotional

expressions, blocked their thoughts and memories to avoid emotional struggles, resisted in multiple ways, and were impacted by culture and spirituality.

After showing an interest in the prevalence and impact of sexual violence in the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s the literature turned its focus to the journey of recovery or healing from sexual assault and/or rape, and positive outcomes and concepts such as resilience or post-traumatic growth started to be discussed. The concept of recovery has changed over the years to address the physical impact of trauma (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1974) as well as the difficulties with relationships, feelings of shame, self-blame, or self-esteem (Harvey, 1996). Resilience was understood as the capacity to mobilise internal resources that existed before the traumatic experience, and positive or adversarial growth was described as the result of having overcome the trauma (Harvey, 2007).

Smith and Kelly (2001) explored what women who had experienced sexual violence understood as recovery. They described a cyclical and progressive process that constantly revisited feelings of fear and anger, and described how women created safe spaces, regained control, found inner peace, and redefined themselves. The empowerment or feminist model (Ullman & Townsend, 2008) was framed along these lines, as its emphasis is on the individuality of the healing process, allowing survivors to take control over their body, their choices, and their own recovery process.

Later, Draucker et al. (2009) suggested that women used active and avoidant-oriented approaches in their recovery; they avoided memories but sought them at the same time to fill the gaps and understand what had happened to them. Kingi and Jordan (2009) described how women found it difficult to assess to what extent their recovery process was complete, as they continued to experience flashbacks or work on aspects of their self-esteem. In addition, Bryant-Davis, Cooper, Marks, Smith and Tillman (2011) explored women's healing journeys after war-rape in Liberia, and described how they sought safe community spaces – church gatherings or workshops – where they could express their feelings and receive support. Finally, Sinopoli (2009) focused exclusively on better understanding women's first sexual experiences after rape or sexual assault, in which women described their difficulties in labelling their experiences, and regaining a sense of control and feeling empowered through voicing their experiences in community settings, learning about feminism, and starting advocacy work on behalf of other women with similar experiences.

To recover and heal from sexual assault or rape, Giddens (1991) suggests individuals are required to reflect, work, and revise their personal biography to finally

gain meaning, acceptance, and a stable sense of identity. However, to do so, Conboy (1997) suggests that a focus on embodiment is essential, as this is the point where the personal and the social converge. The importance of focusing on the body when working with those who have endured traumatic experiences is clear within sensorimotor psychotherapy (Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006), an integrative mind-body approach that focuses on the embodied experiences and uses body-oriented interventions, or in somatic experiencing (Levine, 2010) that proposes that, as trauma memories are not yet processed in the mind, they need to be treated in the same way they are experienced, at the body level.

Finally, creative art therapies have appeared in recent decades to help individuals communicate at a non-verbal and/or pre-verbal level using drawing, sculpting, music, movement, or dance, as these forms of communication can be experienced as less threatening when expressing difficult experiences (Koop, 2002, in Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009).

As previously stated, inner resources are understood as resources coming from within the person, from inside rather than outside, and their origins are strongly rooted in spirituality. Howden (1992) defined inner resources as the process of striving for wholeness, discovering identity, and a sense of empowerment, which manifests through “feelings of strength in times of crisis, calmness or serenity in dealing with uncertainty in life, guidance in living, feelings of ability, and being at peace with oneself and the world” (p. 15).

In her work with women who had experienced domestic violence, Davis (2002) conceptualised inner resources as a part of women’s coping strategies, as adaptive responses to stressful life events that women used to regain control, emotional, mental and physical safety, and to retain their self-identity. She suggested women are constantly engaged with their inner resources, even if this is not apparent to those who surround them. More recently, Walter and Hobfoll (2009) focused on the resources that women with experiences of sexual violence utilised; however, they mainly conceptualised these as being external to them (e.g. money). It is from the existing literature that we know that women with similar external resources have different experiences of the aftermath of these events and their recovery, and thus it is important for studies to distinguish inner resources from external ones.

Even if literature on inner resources is scarce, recent studies have furthered Davis’ (2002) understanding of inner resources, and thus, as previously described,

this work is guided by the definition of inner resources of Van Dierendonck, Rodriguez-Carvajal, Moreno-Jimenez and Dijkstra (2009, p. 750) as “a reservoir from which one can draw in times of need, giving a feeling of strength when facing the challenges of day-to-day living”. These authors suggest that people with inner resources are better able to manage life difficulties and challenges, and they understand inner resources as a “universal capacity” (p. 750), inherent to every human being and recognisable across different cultures.

As stated, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the factors that influence the process of recovery or healing from sexual violence. Within this literature, several studies refer to the personal factors or inner resources that women display, gain, or draw from in their recovery from sexual assault and/or rape; others describe how it is the mobilisation of inner resources that allows their growth. However, none of these studies focuses exclusively on these inner resources and how they are experienced by women in their journey of healing after sexual assault and/or rape. This study aims, then, to shed light upon this under-researched area by answering the question: How do women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape?

## **Method**

Taking into account the phenomenon studied in this project, it was important to select a method that fostered a sense of respect between the researcher and the participants. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2004) was used, as its aim is to explore the participants’ unique, individual, and different lived experiences (Willig, 2013) and the ways in which they made sense of them, while also being sensitive to the intersection of the personal and the social (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). IPA also allows a bottom-up approach (Willig, 2012), giving a forefront space to participants’ perspectives and understanding, as well as challenging existing psychological theories and traditional research in light of their accounts (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Within IPA, the data is always “mediated” by the researcher (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008), and thus my identity and feminist phenomenological standpoint have inevitably impacted on the way I have represented and made sense of participants’ material.

After ethical approval had been granted<sup>6</sup>, participants were recruited from a secondary NHS service through fliers provided by clinicians, and from a professional's blog through an online advert. A short telephone screening was carried out by the author to assess risk (protecting participants from potential harm or psychological distress), discuss the project and potential participants' needs during the interview, and collect basic information. A face-to-face interview was then arranged at university and NHS premises, and participants were asked to bring an object they linked to their inner resources (e.g. a smell, a song, a piece of clothing). Object elicitation facilitates the communication of participants' experiences through an object, allowing women to take an active role as they decide what and how much of their experiences they share (Willig, 2016). As a consequence, we were able to maintain a "different" conversation.

Six women<sup>7</sup>, each with at least one experience of rape and/or sexual assault as an adult, were recruited. English was their first language, and their ages ranged from early twenties to late forties. Written consent forms were signed before undertaking the semi-structured interviews in private and neutral rooms at the hospital and university, and women were reminded they could refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time without being penalised. The interview guide contained eleven questions and prompts based on existing literature, concerning their experiences of sexual assault and/or rape and of their inner resources. It also included asking women to name their experiences. I believe this allowed them to be more connected to their experiences and sense of self, providing richer quotes.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim – including silences, body language, emphasis on specific words, and changes in tone of voice. They were then analysed by the author using IPA. The transcripts were read numerous times, and various themes started to emerge as the parts were interpreted in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the parts. Emergent themes were connected and related, and were clustered creating superordinate themes. These themes spoke to the participants' understanding of what their inner resources were and how they were experienced. This process was repeated for each transcript, and a table of themes created for each of the participants. Finally, attention was paid to theme similarities and uniqueness amongst the different

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<sup>6</sup> Ethical approval was received from the Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee at City, University of London (PSYCH (P/F) 14/15 202), and through the Health Research Authority from the National Health Service (ID: 212511).

<sup>7</sup> All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.



participants' tables and transcripts (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012), and three overarching themes were identified.

## Findings

Through the phenomenological analysis of the six interviews, three overarching themes were identified: "*The Will to Live*"<sup>8</sup>, the drive that keeps women alive and moving forward, and is experienced as inherent to themselves even if it is not always acknowledged or seen; "*The Warrior*", which describes the ongoing battles women fight with themselves and against external opponents to maintain and regain control over their lives, and also to improve the lives of other women; and "The Growing Self", which portrays the ways in which women create nurturing and safe spaces in which to process and transform, search for knowledge, validate and vindicate themselves, and thus achieve a more secure and cohesive sense of self.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the overarching theme of The "*Warrior*", which encapsulates three themes: the "*Battle*", "Regaining Control", and the "*Social Justice Warrior*". This theme explores the ways in which women resist and are resilient, and it also brings a new understanding to the battles women are constantly fighting with themselves and with external forces, including the wider society.

**The "*Battle*":** Throughout all interviews, women described experiencing a continuous battle that extended long after their experiences of rape and/or sexual assault. This battle was mainly implicit in women's accounts, and rarely described in detail, making it invisible at first. Women described fighting to maintain control over their lives, and felt they were the only ones responsible for managing the consequences of events they did not have any control over. In this battle, continuing with daily activities or goals signified a win, while stopping or dying, a defeat. As Beth depicted it:

*"Don't want those things [experiences of sexual assault] to be the thing that stops me from... [takes air] like.. achieving my potential, or whatever, umm... Because isn't isn't, is not fair. Like those are things done to me, and.. against my will, and... and... [silence] Yeah, I, I, I, I want to be, I want to .. like... win, in that... in that battle right. 'cause if I don't, if I don't keep going then... They win, and I don't want that"* (Beth, 689).

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<sup>8</sup> Italic font style indicates participant's words.

Beth's lack of control and power at the time of the assault is clearly expressed here, and is in contrast with her sense of being the one who has to deal with the consequences of it. This imbalance is qualified as unjust by her, almost cruel. The pause in her explanation seems to allow her to shift her focus from the past and what happened to her – the things that she cannot change – to the future and her goals. Being sexually assaulted is experienced by Beth as something that slows and holds her down, taking away her agency, and not allowing her to develop her abilities or accomplish her goals. Thus, she experiences her present as being a “battle”, a difficult and lengthy struggle in which she is required to be resilient, and where her lack of movement is understood as a defeat. It is through the strength of her voice that Beth seems to tell me she does not want her enemy to win; however, it is not clear who this enemy is: an abstract one, her experiences, the perpetrator, her thoughts, something else, or all at the same time.

Throughout the interviews, participants provided clear examples of this everyday battle. It could be framed as a battle between two different parts of the self: the part that wants to live and the thoughts that suggest dying would be better (Beth). Or the battle could be fought against external aggressors: the experience of rape itself, or the perpetrator (Sarah). For other participants, this battle was about freeing themselves from what had happened, and fighting to restore what had been taken. A battle, in a wider sense:

*“I really needed to [inaudible: start?] re-humanising myself in that sense, that.. it, it it's, it's... Um... [silence] no I won't let this happen. I won't let people get away with this. I, I'm worthwhile. Um... [silence] and that's, that's what it's about. It's about getting myself back of really, a, a voice, and, and demanding the space for myself in this world” (Lucy, 2651).*

Lucy felt less human after what happened to her; however, similarly to Beth, who or what is responsible for this is not clear. It is also unclear what she refers to when stating that she has to regain her humanity: if she is referring here to her condition as a human being, her essence as a person – her self – or if she is referring to her goodness or kindness, qualities that are often brought forward when valuing women within the society she lives in. Either way, however, she seems to feel her value has been unjustly diminished, as has her right to be, something she must restore by punishing this abstract other, reasserting herself by setting clear limits, and cohering her sense of self. In addition, and as with many women who have experienced sexual assault and/or rape, it seems difficult for Lucy to stay with painful past feelings that may be linked to moments where she felt powerless and worthless.

It seems she uses the silences in this fragment to redirect her focus and her speech towards the actions she is able to take.

The sense of something being lost or stolen, or the possibility of it, was experienced by all women, as well as the sense of this battle being an ongoing one that extends beyond their experiences of sexual assault:

*"I think... my... struggle with intimacy will be... life long. I don't.. foresee it ever being... perfect. Um... so I struggle... day to day to be.. softer. And kinder. And... not as... [silence] controlling, and... trying to move away from intimacy. It is... not something daily, but something that happens quite often. Um.. [silence] and it... in the line of work we are in... when people talk about their own experiences it always comes up [silence] so it's always there... And whether or not it... affects me deeply... or... improves my understanding, and... you know, affects because of the posi-, positively, it always affects me... in some way. And it's always gonna be there. Um... I think... [silence] it's not that I've accepted... that the events in my life... with that in particular, will always affect me. I've not... accepted it [silence] but I know... that it will"* (Kate, 3053).

Kate seems to assume there is a unique and ideal way to be close to others, and even if she seems to imply she will never achieve it, she continues to attempt to connect with parts of herself that can bring her nearer to it, portraying herself as a resilient person. She suggests that these parts are in opposition to more rigid and protective parts of herself, thus they are, maybe, more vulnerable, and consequently require her to be courageous and brave to connect with them. Kate also describes feeling that these experiences will affect her life permanently, making this battle a long-term one. Finally, she makes an important distinction between accepting and knowing. By *"not accepting"*, she gives the idea she is resisting, as accepting here seems to imply not fighting, and losing the battle. However, by *"knowing"*, she seems to be acknowledging and validating the efforts she makes to minimise the impact these experiences have on her everyday life, including her work.

**Regaining Control:** This theme portrays the diverse ways women found to regain and maintain control over their lives, their bodies, and/or their minds. At times, to regain this control, they counteracted with direct action; however, at others, they focused on maintaining the control they had by actively resisting its loss.

As many women who relive experiences of sexual assault and/or rape, participants described using their sense of smell and touch to ground themselves and be in the present (Kate), or reading a book to focus and quieten their minds (Claire).

However, for some participants, soothing was not something that helped them feel in control:

*“I think I feel quite a lot of my memories from... what happened... are experienced to hit like in my body here [pointing towards her legs with her fingers]. Um... And I just hate feeling relaxed. I hate feeling that sort of just... um... that describe it, it's like... everything that, say meditation or mindfulness ... or whatever encourages... like soothing yourself, I guess the soothing affiliation system, really. I... I can't access, because it just reminds me of that. Because I didn't have control then. I stayed still, I didn't move. And when I start to talk about it sometimes I feel as if my legs are going again. So, I have to sort of like move [starts moving her legs side to side while sitting on the chair] to make sure I can actually stand up” (Emily, 302).*

Emily clearly expresses her loathing for calmness by repeating the word “hate” and highlighting it with her voice. She seems to be aware of the reasons behind this feeling, and distances herself from it through utilising jargon, as if adopting her mental health professional role. Sadness also seems to emanate from the quote, perhaps related to not being able to experience the stillness as soothing, and to the difficulties she experiences when attempting to. She appears to move away from this sadness, and thus the stillness, by taking action. It seems Emily feels in control through checking that her body still responds to her, and that she can escape any possible threat if she needs to.

Several participants described experiencing the loss of control as a gradual process that started as something small and weak and developed into something big and powerful, making it harder for them to stop it as it progressed. Participants seemed to sense the advancement of this process through feeling they could not move forward smoothly, noticing changes in their mood. This knowledge allowed them to regain control at the beginning and in the middle of this process.

Songs, and music in general, are potent instruments that are used in many cultures to connect with, and evoke, different feelings. Sarah described using “*Something Inside So Strong*” by Labi Siffre and changing her body posture to change her mood and stop this process:

*“Cos when, when you feel down and depressed, you can kind of end up sinking down and [sinks upper body down], you get neck ache, 'cause you are looking down too much, and your shoulders are hunched. And then I hear that, and you, just reminds you... do you know what? You may not see it, but there is something really strong in there. And suddenly the shoulders come back, and the head tips up, and you look around and just changing your posture, actually makes you feel better. [Takes air] Um.. Is probably a mindfulness technique somewhere [smiling] but um... it does make you feel better, and you don't generally do it. But that song*

*makes me stand up like a daffodil, all over again and just remind yourself... [silence] that is in there” (Sarah, 1141).*

She clearly describes what occurs in her body when difficult feelings are present, and what occurs when she regains the control of her emotions, as if her body could select her emotions. Her body and the music seem to be working together to help her. The music seems to activate a part of herself that reminds her of her strength, which in turn generates a response in her body. She seems to increase her sense of power and control by changing her posture, like a flower looking for the warmth of the sun, opening it up and taking more physical space, and observing her surroundings, possibly feeling more present and connected. She also describes moving her head upwards, maybe to facilitate her gazing, but also maybe implying she is not afraid of looking around, nor ashamed of who she is. In addition, the song Sarah refers to is an anti-apartheid anthem that also reflects the difficulties of being a black gay man in British society in the 1980s, possibly reflecting her feelings of oppression and wish to win an unjust battle.

As expressed, women also described maintaining their control by actively resisting its loss. After detailing intrusive and bullying thoughts, Beth describes:

*“Ummm is.. whether it’s reaching out for help, at that moment or.. whether it’s doing someth-, just something, doing something to distract yourself, I’ve just been chain smoking, which I know is bad for me, but like.. keeps my fingers busy, keeps my mind occupied that’s what got me through the last couple of days, was just.. the.. ability to take myself, sit down, and just being with myself.. and just.. you know, distract myself.. cigarette, whatever. Umm.. used to be Solitaire that I would do [laughs] and I just stopped playing Solitaire, and I’d get these urges to kill myself, and just play Solitaire until I got through it” (Beth, 836).*

She describes needing to divert her attention to something external to be able to stop these pervasive and intruding thoughts taking her control away. It is almost as if she has to relocate herself outside of herself, in the activity she is doing, and thus disappear from the battle that is occurring in her body and mind; that way she will not lose the control she has, and give in to her impulses. Beth is able to do divert her attention from the invasive thoughts on her own, and by actively asking for other people’s support by, for example, going to A&E or speaking with friends, as she told me during the interview. Her laugh seems to symbolise the amusement and celebration she experiences when describing how the simplest distraction – playing a game – can have a great effect: saving her life. Likewise, even if she continuously

acknowledges that smoking is not good for her health, she suggests that this is better than dying.

**The “Social Justice Warrior”:** Participants’ accounts not only portrayed women as warriors who fight for themselves to regain and maintain control and agency, but also as warriors who feel they have a social responsibility and who fight to improve the lives of other women, transform their experiences, and build a better society.

*“It was also this... you know, just social justice warrior um... in me, which is like [changes to a lower tone of voice] it’s not just for you, but for all the women in the future you need to do this. [changes voice back] Um... and... [changes to a lower tone of voice] this is wrong. [changes voice back] So... Um.... [silence] the... yeah... That’s really, helps me get through um... I think when I... [takes air, silence, tuts] focus on s-, on social justice issues has just got stronger after this experience. My feminism is, just got stronger, um... yeah, from this experience for sure” (Lucy, 2105).*

Lucy experiences the “Social Justice Warrior” as a part within herself, a part that acknowledges the wrongness that has been done to her and the imbalances and inequalities in society, and that fights for a wider group of women rather than just herself. This part also seems to encourage her and amplify her strength during difficult times, as if all the women she fights for were somehow also supporting her. This may be reflected in the lower tone of voice she adopts when personifying this warrior, as if this warrior is someone bigger than her and comprises the voices of all the women she represents. At the same time, she seems to be in a symbiotic relationship with this part, as the more inequalities she is aware of, the stronger this part becomes, and as a consequence, so does she.

Participants, as active agents on their journey of healing, described wanting to transform their experiences of sexual assault and use their knowledge to help others. At the same time, they acknowledged they were not there yet, and had a challenging journey ahead. Claire further explained these challenges:

*“As hard as it is to b-... to be so aware of like... [takes air] gender issues, like I’m a massive feminist, and that really has... I mean, it’s depressing ’cause you think... you look at the kind of... um... how often this happens and occurs, and how nothing happens, or t-, there’s no consequences to it for the perpetrators. But for me, the only thing I can do, is carry on... Kind of believing in what, what I believe in, like, maybe working in... for a woman’s charity or setting one up, which I really... would like to do” (Claire, 785).*

Similarly to Lucy, Claire's emphasis on social justice is intimately linked with her feminist ideas. The sense of injustice she feels is wide, and not only relates to her sexual assault experience, but also to the imbalances between women and men in the society she lives in, and especially to the lack of punishment for the perpetrator(s), which is strongly stressed by her voice, as if emphasising their full responsibility. At the same time, the quote exudes a sense of sadness and surrendering to this injustice, which seems to be in contrast with the motivation Claire feels when focusing on her wish to work with and for other women.

## **Discussion**

The term "warrior" encompasses personal and social qualities that the term "fighter" does not have. As Fader (2016) states, "a warrior is more than a fighter" (p. 1). A warrior avoids conflict when possible, but engages in the fight if it is inevitable; a warrior knows that there are many ways to fight, not only physically, as most battles are won without violent action, and a warrior expands her or his training to positively affect life in different ways. This term clearly reflects the experiences that this overarching theme encompasses: the experiences of women as warriors who fight within themselves and against external opponents, who fight for themselves and for others, and who fight to regain and maintain control over their lives. Women, as warriors, fight to win their battles and have a better life.

The "*Battle*" encapsulates women's experiences of being held back due to the consequences of someone else's actions, the struggle in regaining agency over their own lives. This resembles the "fighting spirit" described by Sinopoli (2009), the wish to get back what was taken away after experiences of sexual violence. Interestingly, the battles that women described here were not battles that had taken place at the time of the assault, nor were they against their PTSD symptoms. They were long-term battles against their perpetrators, parts of their own selves, society, and against the impacts that sexual assault and/or rape had on their sense of self.

Most importantly, women described a struggle to restore their own humanity. Dehumanisation does not only occur when rape and/or sexual assault is happening; it also permeates the society we live in in subtle ways, and as such can explain participants' experiences within the battle and their felt need to rehumanise themselves. Through this process, they could recognise their own autonomy, reduce

their otherness through finding similarities with others, acknowledge their own emotions, projects, and aspirations, and examine and understand the context they live in (Oelofsen, 2009). These experiences of rehumanisation and redeeming are consistent with women's experiences in Draucker et al. (2009), in which women, too, described seeking to repair aspects of themselves that they believed had been damaged, attempting to rid themselves of the psychological and physical consequences of the violence.

Finally, dehumanisation could also explain the feelings of otherness and loss experienced by participants. These are consistent with women's descriptions in Draucker and Stern (2000), and with the experiences of seeing the self as other – reinforcing feelings of unworthiness, as described in Janoff-Bulman (1993). Finally, this constantly experienced dehumanisation could also explain why this battle is experienced as a long-term one, as rehumanisation is a process that needs to be constantly fought, not only internally, but externally, as women live in a society that constantly objectifies them. Thus, it will be essential for therapeutic models to address not only women's internal world, but also the context in which they live and sexual violence occurs, as the feminist model does (Ullman and Townsend, 2008), to facilitate rehumanisation at both levels.

Regaining Control was a theme present in all participants' accounts, and relates the multiple ways in which women regain and maintain control in this battle through the use of music, the movement of their bodies, and focusing their attention on external activities or objects, or on those around them. These findings are consistent with an array of studies, such as Sinopoli (2009) or Chaudry (2012), in which women described wanting and regaining a sense of control during their process of healing, or Phuong Tao (2016), where women described constantly resisting and creating opportunities to escape, better managing their suffering and pain.

The multiple ways in which women regain and maintain control can also be understood as so many acts of resistance. Goffman (1961) described how hospital patients resisted and responded to asymmetrical relations of power through “small acts”, such as walking slowly, or pretending to be unintelligent. Kelly (1988) described the acts of resistance women constantly engage with during, and in the aftermath of, sexual violence, and Burstow (1992) suggested that acts of resistance also occur in a continuum, from the most isolated ones: sticking the tongue out, to the collective acts: organised protests. Most recently, women's extreme drinking or dieting has also been understood as a way in which women challenge and resist gender ideals and



reconstruct their identity (Day, 2010), and Reynolds (2014) has expanded the definition of resistance by stating that it also refers to the many ways in which individuals maintain their dignity and try to move towards justice, reflecting some of the experiences women described in this study.

Even if the most obvious ways of resistance are those that can be seen – yelling or running away – women also use more cognitive or emotional ways to resist: planning how to continue to be safe, or protecting the core parts of themselves when submitting to an attack, avoiding further injury (Hollander, 2005). Thus, reading a book, moving their bodies, changing their posture, or playing a specific song as women described, become acts of resistance against the oppressive internal or external other. As Wade (1997) described, these acts of resistance are spontaneous, subtle, and disguised. They show determination, as women start these actions despite experiencing pain and suffering at the time, and as these acts are not always expected to lead automatically to success, but build up slowly as time goes by. This is consistent with my participants' accounts, as they, too, described how it was through time and practice that these responses and inner resources became more and more effective.

Still, as Branfield (1997) points out, acts of resistance can be robbed of their power and become neutralised since “what might be an act of resistance for the performer is not necessarily read as such by the audience” (p. 204). This does not only exemplify how women's acts of resistance are rarely acknowledged by those around them, but also perhaps, how acts of resistance against different parts of oneself may be harder to identify by the spectators and by the women themselves.

Finally, the “*Social Justice Warrior*” describes how women fight, not only for themselves but for a wider group of women, which in turn continues to motivate them in their fight, and how they acknowledge the wrongness done to them by placing the responsibility on the perpetrator(s). The strength and passion with which women described, and seemed to deeply connect with this experience was remarkable.

These findings are congruent with Sinopoli's (2011) work, in which women felt empowered through voicing their experiences in community settings, and started advocacy work on behalf of other women, and with Chaudry's (2012) work, as women also described developing a feeling of compassion towards others in a global sense, and increased their interest in social justice. Finally, they are also consistent with Draucker and Stern (2000), who suggested that women's feminism – fighting against stereotypes or acknowledging society's oppression of women – helped women reduce

shame and guilt, and led them towards wanting to prevent others undergoing the same difficulties.

While providing feedback on the findings of this study, participants linked this theme to the #metoo movement – a hashtag virally spread since October 2017 – in which women described their experiences of sexual violence. For some, this movement seemed truly inspirational: *“I can’t tell you how helpful the #metoo movement has been and continues to be. That there is a social movement out there, which I can get involved in, and get fired up about really helps me move out of self-pity and into productivity”* (Lucy). For others, the sense of strength reflected in the findings I shared with them was a *“much needed narrative after the #metoo, as it seems everyone is focusing on men, and what they do wrong, which is needed. But it is also needed to focus on women and what they are doing right”* (Kate).

The findings of this study support the idea that turning towards the community – an apparently external resource – can be conceptualised as an internal resource for women. This contributes to the view of women as active agents in their journey of healing, and presents new avenues for further research.

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory study attempted to provide further understanding of how women experience their inner resources after sexual assault and/or rape. Through phenomenologically analysing the rich accounts of six women, it identified three overarching themes. Within this article, I have addressed the battle that women continue to fight long after their experiences of sexual violence, the multiple ways in which they regain and maintain control using their bodies, music, or other objects, and how, through helping a wider community of women, they also encourage and energise themselves in this long-term battle.

It is important to acknowledge at this point how this is a qualitative idiographic study and thus its findings cannot be generalised. However, they provide further understanding and show how the battles women wage in their journeys of healing after sexual assault and/or rape, and the ways they regain and maintain control, can often be invisible to others and even to the women themselves. In light of this, identifying and validating women’s inner resources within psychotherapeutic practice may help reflect a vision of our clients as active agents, and add to their often damaged self-

esteem. Besides, as some women appeared to be surprised at their own strength and capacity to overcome difficulties, it will be of value to continually reflect on women's achievements and power, as this, too, would contribute to the "restoration" of the self (Draucker et al., 2009).

In addition, and due to the importance and long-term effects of the experience of a "Battle", therapeutic models would benefit from not only addressing the traumatic experiences and their processing, but also from focusing on the context in which sexual violence occurs, starting to repair some of the "damage done by the environment" (Draucker et al., 2009, p. 13). Finally, therapeutic models would benefit from further working with the body, as this is a resource women are already using, and from bringing external objects into the therapy room that women link to their inner resources, as they, too, embody women's experiences, and thus can be an aid when exploring and identifying them.

Race, class, and gender determine the way society views those who have experienced sexual violence and/or rape, as attributions of innocence, and thus less blame, are linked to those who are "sufficiently pale", middle class, and straight (Bertram & Crowley, 2012). As all of my participants described themselves as white, I believe it would be beneficial to replicate this study with participants from different backgrounds and explore if social reactions that we know are linked to PTSD symptoms (Najdowski & Ullman, 2011) and can be helpful to women in their healing journey (Kingi and Jordan, 2009), also have an impact on how women experience their inner resources. In addition, and having included the use of an object to elicit data from my participants, I am curious in the objects women from different backgrounds and cultures would link to, and thus bring, into the interview.

Further, I am extremely interested in music as an "object". As stated, music is used in many cultures to connect with and evoke different feelings – is universal – and half of my participants brought a song or an entire album as an object they linked to and used to access their inner resources, in many different ways. Besides, and even if Willig's (2016) study and mine explored different phenomena, our participants brought music as an object that embodied their experiences. I believe that studies that focus exclusively on the exploration of music as an object to elicit participants' experiences are needed, as the findings would not only be helpful to women from diverse cultural backgrounds and to researchers who explore diverse phenomena, but would provide further understanding on how one object can embody an experience in many different ways.

As suggested by Yardley (2000), I have grounded my work in related theory and research; aimed to be coherent with my aim, philosophical perspective, method and analysis; and sought validation through incorporating participants' feedback. Through rooting my descriptions and interpretations in participants' rich quotes, providing enough context for the different textures of an experience to be captured, and addressing my reflexivity, I have tried to be transparent enough for the reader to judge the appropriateness, trustworthiness, and quality of this work.

### **Acknowledgements**

The most heartfelt thanks to the six women who shared part of their stories with me, and to all of those who made this project a reality.

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## **Part Three: Clinical Case Study**

### **Limiting a highly punitive parent mode**

**The Professional Practice Component of this thesis has been  
removed for confidentiality purposes.**

**It can be consulted by Psychology researchers on application at  
the Library of City, University of London.**









































































