Rape experiences and the limits of women’s agency in contemporary post-reform Vietnam
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CHAPTER 4

The Inner Citadel: Telling Rape Stories

*Số ngôi đa, chết mang theo*  
[Vn.: The secret that will be carried to the grave]  
A Vietnamese saying

Introduction

In a slow, rather monotonous voice, Nguyệt, a thirty-six year old female civil servant, married with two children, recounted to me her sexual experience with her husband. This occurred during our third meeting, in an air-conditioned café in the western part of Hanoi. Outside the noon sun was blazing hot. It was high summer.

“It lasted some 3 to 5 years after my marriage. I had to suffer it all by myself, I used to cry alone, sometimes I just couldn’t help it and sob when there was no one around. All those suppressed feelings. A marriage like this was just like hell. When he came home after a drinking bout with his friends he became violent, just went straight at me. Most times I was already asleep and I didn’t care about having sex. He just pinned me down violently. This is not my husband, this is a monster, I told myself. I felt like being raped, being forced to have sex. At the place where I worked I tried to share my experience with colleagues, but I could not tell the whole story, for fear it might bring my family in disrepute. I never thought of going to a help center or such a place to bare my soul, even if I thought it might do me some good. You know over here (in Vietnam) things are not like in the West where going to such places is just like going to see the doctor. For example if I tell it to you, you may tell another person who happens to work at the same place as I do. That would be disaster. Even if I decide to go to such a place I have to prepare beforehand what to tell and what not. There are things I cannot tell anyone. It’s like carrying a secret to the grave. In order to bring it out, it will take time, very slowly.”

(HN-PI20071)

Not only Nguyệt once thought that she would keep her marital rape experience a secret and carry it to the grave, the majority of the women and girls taking part in this study, those who have been raped or sexually abused regardless of their relationship with their
assailants, were likely to follow the same path. Why? Because, to speak of being raped or sexually abused is to invite dramatic stigmas and social exclusion, for reasons to be explored later, not only to the rapee herself but to her extended family as well. These stories are pushed back into a hidden world of suffering, something akin to self-willed amnesia. Then what makes these female participants decide to break the silence and reveal their hidden secrets to another - a friend, a member of the family, then to the researcher, and for some of them it is a first time disclosure?

The complexity of telling personal experience of rape and sexual abuse will be explored more fully in subsequent chapters. In this chapter I bring out first-person narratives of those women who have “survived” physically and emotionally in the aftermath of rape. The chapter focuses on the women’s accounts of rape experiences, along with their impact on their personal lives. In this respect I try to present an analysis of the women’s self-definition and their own, highly personal interpretations of the event that guide them in dealing with the traumatic incident. Of particular relevance to the discussion are the various coping strategies employed by rapees in the aftermath of the incident. But before describing the use of psychological mechanisms as part of the coping process found among women interviewed in this research, I explore what is meant by “coping” in this context.

As Eldon Tunks and Anthony Bellissimo (1988) point out, coping is as much a colloquial term as a scientific one, being used interchangeably in common parlance and in psychological literature (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). At the heart of this is the assumption that people do make necessary efforts to manage stressful demands, regardless of how well or badly they work (Larazus and Folkman, 1984). These efforts include denial and even avoidance as a strategy of coping with stressful incidents, although they might have to pay for their costs by a continued vulnerability on subsequent occasions. However in order to understand coping and its effectiveness, it is necessary to examine coping as an entire process. According to Richard Larazus and Susan Folkman (1984), a process approach might be applied to all stressful encounters,

33 The field of psychology has framed stress as a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being. For a critical deconstructive approach to stress, see Krohne 2002. Available online at: Stress and Coping Theories: [http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~schuez/folien/Krohne_Stress.pdf](http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~schuez/folien/Krohne_Stress.pdf). Accessed on October 5, 2010. 54
considering the long duration of grief and the changes that take place over time. As a consequence, it is necessary to recognize that there are multiple coping functions. Conceptually, a coping function refers to the purpose the strategy serves. Put simply, the properties of a strategy include the elements of planning (Breznitz, 1986), and this planning involves thinking about how to handle the problem (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989). In the context of rape, many authors refer to Ann Burgess and Lynda Holmstrom’s analysis of the coping process that sets forth three distinct phases: the threat of attack, the attack itself, and the period immediately thereafter (1976). My research however deals with the multiple ways of coping that female rapees usually take up over time, rather than just the period immediately after the event. Normally it takes considerable time for the women to sort out what has happened to them and assess its significance. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze how victimization and survivorship are reflectively understood in the context of cultural narratives concerning women, sexual violence, trauma, and gender identity. In what follows, I shall present: (1) observations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse symptoms among some of these women; (2) individual women’s understandings of the experience of rape incident; and 3) the ways in which these women may adopt particular coping strategies as well as make their decision regarding whether or not to disclose the assault for seeking support.

1. Effects of sexual trauma: psychological and physiological aspects

Before proceeding further, I should like to mention that my “pseudo-scientific” analysis of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) below was based on my consultations with several internationally qualified psychologists in Hanoi during the conduct of this research in 2007.

Effects of sexual trauma have been salient in the psychological literature as a type of experiencing that can be part of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD generally denotes a wide variety of human reactions to “unusual experiences” (Larrabee 1995) of exceptional severity (Isaac et al. 2006) such as combat, disaster, concentration camp, or prison detention and rape (Herman, 1992). According to Robert Lifton, “the

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34 For a historical aspect of the definition of posttraumatic stress disorder, see Gersons and Carlier (1992).
post-traumatic stress disorder is a normal adaptive process of reaction to an abnormal situation reaction to an extreme stress” (1988:9).

In the context of sex-related violence, numerous clinical epidemiological studies have found that a history of sexual victimization makes an individual more vulnerable to a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural symptoms (Kimerling and Calhoun, 1994; Epstein et al. 1997; Donat and Bondurant, 2003). There is considerable evidence to suggest that the severe disturbances observed in sexually victimized women also frequently qualify for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (see reviews by Bolstad and Zinbarg, 1997; Arata, 2000; Ullman and Filipas, 2001) including the emotional chaos and physical injuries from the rape attack that keep resurfacing in the rapee in the aftermath of the incident (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974). Libby Ruch and colleagues (1980, 1983) go further to define the concept of sexual assault trauma, including both the acute, or rather immediate reaction to the assault, and the long-range effects of the assault on the rapee. Accordingly, there are two theoretically distinct dimensions of sexual trauma. First, the type of sexual assault trauma refers to the particular emotional concern or problem the rapee is experiencing. For instance, one rapee may react by expressing strong anger, while another may show signs of depression and withdrawal. Second, the level of sexual assault trauma is defined as the degree to which the rapee is affected by the violation of physical integrity.

At this stage, I should add that it is not my intention to dwell too often on the dark side of victimization. One should bear in mind that despite their suffering, rapees are often able to exercise their agency to challenge the status quo of situational power relations in the aftermath of the incident. Chapters 5 and 6 will deal with how they together with their families develop strategies to remove the social stigmas associated with their rape experiences and to cope with the complexities of the judicial process. As Martha Mahoney (1994) aptly puts it, agency and victimization are understood in relation to each other, a topic that I have discussed in Chapter 2.

1.1. Observations of PTSD symptom

From my interviews and close observations in the present study there were signs of post trauma syndrome among recent rapees, especially during the acute phase that lasted
from several hours to several weeks since the rape event. Similar to the psychological literature on rape, my findings indicate that the symptoms ranged from sleep disturbances, nightmares, appetite changes, work-related difficulties to severe depression, flashbacks, and moodiness, etc. (see Tables 3 and 4). Some, who had suffered the incident much earlier on, experienced a changed perception of the world, exhibited phobic behaviours and admitted having sexual problems. Moreover, it has been shown that even if the situations of the rape are similar, people as individuals respond differently to the incident in terms of long-term effects. This supports the argument that the personally intrusive nature of rape is what makes it uniquely traumatic (Ullman and Fillipas, 2001).

Table 3: Percentage of women reporting PTSD symptoms by rape history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PTSD symptoms</th>
<th>Age at the time of the rape</th>
<th>Relationship to the offender (s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before age 16 (childhood rape) N = 10</td>
<td>At age 16 or older (adult rape) N = 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic symptoms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension &amp; headaches</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomachache or nausea</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back pain</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allergies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight changes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migraine headaches</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insomnia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genital burning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defloration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape - related pregnancy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS transmission</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other illnesses</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Σ</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological symptoms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sexual pleasure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phobia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-destructive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightmare</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted suicide</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Σ</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Predictors of PTSD symptom severity from social reactions to (reported) rapees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social reactions</th>
<th>Age at the time of the rape</th>
<th>Relationship to Offender (s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before age 16 (childhood rape)</td>
<td>N = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reactions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief (re. 1st disclosure)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reactions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbelief</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat differently</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following excerpts are illustrative of the severity and frequency of both somatic and emotional symptoms reported by my research participants. For example, in the case of Nguyệt, being regularly assaulted by her spouse, she reported physical symptoms that are seen as both somatic and psycho-physiological reactions to severe stress.

“To tell the truth, the things that you do not want but still have to bear are very painful. It’s pure torture. I was battered physically, sore all over. Each time it was physically exhausting. I had to wash myself, it took 3 to 4 hours before I could catch some sleep. In the morning when I went to the office, I felt very low emotionally. It was hard to concentrate on my work. An overwhelming feeling of being suppressed took over. It made me even angrier because I could not share it with anyone.” (HN-PI20072)

Nguyệt’s distress was exacerbated by her incapacity to make any sense of her painful experience; she was at a loss to turn it into an intelligible, coherent story. Above all, she could not communicate to her husband because as she put it, “my generation is different from what goes on today, there were things you could not discuss, like that thing (meaning sex-related issues), even between husband and wife.” And since these were matters related to the domestic sphere, they should not and could not be disclosed,
therefore Nguyệt had no one to turn to. That is where she got stuck. Nguyệt’s life story exemplifies not only the type of traumatic stress commonly seen in clinical settings, but also reflects findings from researches on wife abuse, the main form of domestic violence in Vietnam. In a patriarchal society females are supposed to endure suffering or sacrifice their own safety and health for the sake of their family and children (see Rydström, 2003b for a vivid discussion of the theme; for related research with similar conclusions, see Kwiatkowski, 2008), so when it comes to abusive situations, they are expected to stay calm by holding themselves back. By virtue of this pressure on keeping household harmony, as Helle Rydström (2003b) points out, ideas of males’ patrilineal-defined superiority over females are often used as excuses for not intervening in violent conflicts within a household.

An interesting finding of this study is the influence of various characteristics of sexual victimization on PTSD symptom severity during the acute phase immediately after the attack. From the limited number of cases taken up, this study shows that there was a correlation between the severity and type of sexual assault and the degree of psychophysiological disorders. For example, twenty-four year old Mỹ who was robbed and gang-raped by nine teenagers on the country road, suffered more somatic manifestations of stress, as compared to Nguyệt, a victim of wife rape. As Mỹ recalled:

“They took us straight to the hospital because of our injuries caused by the beating. Look at my hand (she showed me her bruised right hand) it was still swollen a few days before. My eyes were also swollen. They kept striking at my eyes, my head. You don’t see from the outside but my head hurts like hell. My body kept shaking. And sleeplessness. I had to take sedatives. One or two pills of ‘seduxen’ helped me sleep for a few hours. I woke up at 2 in the morning. Taking these pills caused eczema, just look at my face. I never had it before. I lost all appetite. Some days I skipped breakfast and lunch altogether. The

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35 Even if the battered woman wants to file for divorce, there is usually a mandated quá trình hòa giải [Vn.: reconciliation process] involving a variety of state agencies and mass organizations, such as the judicial system, the Women’s Union, the representative of the cơ quan [Vn.: work unit], or the local community leaders who are not generally trained as professional counsellors. The practice of the reconciliation group aims to restore family stability, harmony and order, and to ensure the stability and strength of the society (Kwiatkowski, 2008). In recent years, for a number of reasons more women have been acquiring divorces in Vietnam as compared to previous decades, particularly in urban areas (Nguyễn Thanh Tâm, 2002; Kwiatkowski, 2008).
worst thing was the horrible nightmares. About that scene. I shouted in my sleep. Saw the faces of those scums.” (HT-PI20073)

It seems that Mỳ’s experience bears a resemblance to the symptoms of PTSD as widely reported in the psychology literature on rape. Among the physical symptoms she experienced, several might also be somatic consequences of depression and anxiety such as headache, back pain, sleep and eating disorders. Theoretically, extreme psychological and physical stress could bring about a number of physical symptoms and poorer physical health (Kimerling and Calhoun, 1994). In this case, Mỳ interpreted her psychological distress as of a somatic nature, and seeing other common bodily sensations as symptomatic of disease. Furthermore, judging from these narratives one can infer that nightmares, and specifically the frequency of nightmares, are likely to have an impact on other aspects of the post-traumatic stress process. As Barry Krakow et al. (2002) point out, nightmare frequency and intensity are integral components of the psychophysiological process embedded within the hyper-arousal insomnia observed in sexual assault survivors. Specifically, increased nightmare frequency may be associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression and PTSD. This was echoed by Ái, an eighteen year-old victim of another gang rape incident while being intoxicated. Her mother recalled:

“At night she screamed intermittently, then she held me against her, sobbing uncontrollably. When she woke up she huddled in a corner of the bed, covered herself with a blanket, saying unintelligible things. It lasted almost two months.” (LC-PI20074)

Ái’s experience shows correlations between PTSD symptoms and anxiety dreams interrupted by awakenings (read: nightmares). Considering the number of assailants involved in this gang-rape incident with all its savagery, it is not surprising that the rapees showed high levels of psychological distress and somatic symptoms.

1.2. Self blame and guilt feelings

There is evidence indicating that incidence of depression correlates with the degree of deleterious impact, such as disposition of the rapee to blame herself for the attack and the physical severity of the assault. As revealed in the narratives of Mỳ (coming back from a party late at night) and Ái (being intoxicated in the company of strangers), both tended to
blame themselves even though they did nothing to bring the misfortune on themselves. Mĩ recalled:

“I think that if didn’t go to the party that night (smiled)... if I volunteered to be on duty... it’s because others put pressure on me to go along.” (HT-PI20075)

And Ái told me:

“I still feel great regret because I trusted them, that’s why it happened.” (LC-PI20076)

Here one may pose the question: how does Ái’s drunkenness fit into her self blame? If public regulatory norms about body and sexuality may serve as a guiding light then in terms of gender construction it is regarded as not “feminine” to drink alcohol because of the “heat” contained in alcoholic drinks (Rydström, 2003b). In this context, female drinking is seen as a transgressive behavior, and therefore should be discouraged because women’s bodies are assumed to be a site of control and containment. One sees parallels between the ways in which bodies and sexualities become regulated and prescribed within the patriarchal structure of different societies like Vietnam, Malaysia (Ong, 1990) and India (Oza, 2001). Thus the two young women expressed behavioral self-blame related to their behavior prior to the rape incident. More precisely, they blamed themselves for “going to the party” (i.e. the case of Mĩ), or “not having known the possibility of being intoxicated” (i.e. the case with Ái) at the time.

It is important to note, however, that specific traumatic characteristics seldom act independently and may be confounded with other variables to result in PTSD (Frazier et al. 1997; cf. Ullman and Filipas, 2001). Especially interesting is the demographic variable. For instance, a depression related to sexual victimization was apparent in the case of Nga, who had been raped at the age of thirteen by an acquaintance. Her mother observed:

36 This argument is only valid in the case of the ‘majority’ Việt/Kinh people. Traditionally among several ethnic minorities groups, women’s drinking and smoking are allowed. However in the past few years the practice of drinking (and to a lesser extent smoking) has been adopted by a number of Kinh female youth as an indication of modern styles of living which are frequently associated with Western influence. For these young women, their motto is sống như Tây [Vn.: live like (the people of) the West] (Nguyễn Bích Thuận and Thomas, 2004).

37 It is linked to local ideas of a cool-hot dichotomy of the human body, which are amplified by a Taoist cosmology in which female bodies are associated with the forces of âm (Yin in Chinese), indicating that a female body basically is thought to be cool, whereas the dominant forces of dương (Yang in Chinese) are located in a male body/ a male basically are perceived to be hot, also alluding to hot temper.
“To tell the truth she seemed like a lost soul, like someone suffering from deep depression. She just sat there, crying all day. She didn’t want to eat, didn’t react when you talked to her. Like a ghost. It lasted two months.” (HN-PI20077)

Nga was likely to suffer rape-induced depression that had an adverse impact on her physical well-being. Similarly, in the case of Linh who was raped at about the same age, there were symptoms of dissociation, numbness, and detachment during the acute phase following the assault. As her grandmother recalled:

“She acted like a zombie for almost a year. She lost all concentration, became absent-minded, kept forgetting things. It affected her schoolwork. Luckily she didn’t have to repeat her class for another year. Even now when she sits next to me if I ask her about something, sometimes she does not answer. Her mind seems to be elsewhere, I have to shake her to bring her back to reality.” (HN-PI20078)

These instances are consistent with other findings that show those who are raped before the age of fifteen are more likely to suffer from some sort of mental disorder (Epstein et al. 1997; Bartoi et al. 2000), in particular during the months immediately after the assault. In addition, factors such as age, relationship with the attacker, and circumstances of the incident may be predictive of the development of PTSD as a psychological disorder. Thus, differences in terms of assault situations, characteristics of perpetrator and rapee are likely to have a bearing on PTSD development.

In some cases, rapees who displayed a greater level of PTSD-related symptoms (e.g., greater depression, low self-esteem) were obsessed with the loss of their virginity, considered as a mark of dishonour in a patriarchal society like Vietnam. This anxiety could be traced in some of the interviews. For twenty-two year old Lành, who was raped by her ex-boyfriend, the loss of her virginity was a paramount concern. She dreaded the thought of how a future husband would respond to the fact that she was no longer virgin.

“I have been mentally tortured by this problem. Basically I still follow the traditional view concerning it (virginity). I want to keep it for my future husband. Anyway he will ask me about it. That’s why I asked you the other day whether he’d find out. I’ve been thinking a lot about it. If I dropped him (the boy friend) I might try to fill the gap by getting involved with other boys. Later on if my future husband asks me how many boyfriends I had, I’ll tell him I had just one. That’s better, I think.” (HN-PI20079)
Having internalized the traditional notions and cultural emphasis placed on virginity, Lành felt extremely ashamed at being sexually assaulted. She talked with visible apprehension about her belief that a woman’s reputation is tied to respect, honor, and ultimately to virginity. In this respect her loss of virginity constitutes a blemish of dishonour, an irreparable damage to her dignity as young woman which in turn would have a negative impact on her marriageability. This is particularly salient in the story of a Dao girl named Phi who was raped at the age of fourteen by a Kinh road builder. Her father commented:

“They say that it (vagina) is now big enough for a buffalo to pass through. This thing (virginity) is considered very important.” (LC-PI200710)

It seems that the loss of good reputation is what matters not only to the woman herself, but also to her whole family and kin network (Nguyễn Phương An, 2005). Not surprisingly, the centrality of family honor has been attributed to reasons for non/delayed disclosure. Some victims may disclose the abuse incident to a family member, for example, but for a variety of reasons the incident may not be formally reported. This point will be expanded further in the following chapter.

Since a rapee is the subject of stigmatization, an overview of the discussions on stigma may be appropriate at this stage.\(^{38}\) Here Erving Goffman’s qualitative analysis of stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ may serve as a starting point” (1963: 3). According to Goffman, stigma refers to a mark or sign of some sort that is seen as disqualifying individuals from the full social acceptance of a society; it also refers to beliefs about individuals with such a mark. Bruce Link and Jo Phelan (2001) suggest that the term can be applied when a combination of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occurs in a power situation. It should be pointed out that the norms of stigma are to be distinguished from the other notion of deviance. While stigma (shame) connotes a form of social unacceptability, indicating some flaws in the bearer’s constitution, deviance (blame) carries with it a charge of moral culpability (Scrambler and Paoli, 2008). In fact, the distinction between stigma and deviance is most often blurred in the case of prostitution, as I shall discuss later in the chapter. In my research on

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\(^{38}\) For a comprehensive review, see Hinshaw and Cicchetti (2000); Link and Phelan (2001).
rape the fear of stigma (shame) is a major factor that inhibits disclosure and/or reporting, especially when the problem of loss of virginity is involved.

It is interesting to note that there was a pervasive concern about the social consequences of losing virginity or chastity among unmarried participants who were virgins prior to being assaulted. Occasionally a few urban women expressed no fear regarding the loss of their virginity after the abuse. Khanh, an eighteen-year old Tày girl, who had been sexually abused by her stepfather, escaped to Hanoi to work as a shop assistant. She looked at the issue matter-of-factly:

“I think if you can keep it (virginity), it’s a good thing. But these days it’s no longer as important as before. The social environment in Hanoi is no longer as strict as in former times.” (HN-PI200711)

Here one can see a self-conscious effort to move away from the moral expectations of ngày xưa [Vn.: former days] regarding female virginity, in particular among urbanites. Further data from my research indicate that many young people nowadays engage in premarital sex. For instance, Hông, an eighteen-year old rapee (incest) told me:

“Nowadays these things are rather normal. They (the girls) have (sexual) relations with their boyfriends quite normally. My classmate Quỳnh has been sleeping with her boyfriend for some time now. She brags about using condoms of different fruit scents (orange, banana, and so forth), changing them from week to week.” (HN-PI200712)

It is not an isolated viewpoint, being shared even by older people. A rapee’s mother commented:

“Generally speaking it’s not that important anymore. Young people nowadays are different from our generation. There are undesirable developments in society, but they follow their way of thinking, we cannot force them to change.” (HN-PI200713)

Implicit in this quotation is that parents are often less able to exert influence on their children, as compared to past situations. Even though the mother may hold the traditional view that the loss of virginity is both shameful and shaming, she accepts a freer trend of urban sexual mores. Given the fact that these women are members of a population group in the city of Hanoi, further comparative research is necessary to understand present-day social attitudes on gender roles and perceptions of female virginity in both rural and urban areas.
1.3. Women’s reproductive and sexual health

This study extends Jacqueline Golding’s (1996) findings that some types of sexual assault are more strongly associated with health problems than others. Rather, most of the interviewed women indicate a high prevalence of reproductive problems including multiple eczema infections, pelvic pain, menstrual irregularity, sexually transmitted diseases, and non-specific gynaecologic problems (cf. Gibson, 2003). An interesting issue for further investigation regarding individual’s definitions of the content of the general reproductive problems is the extent to which the woman understands and recalls a medical explanation of her symptoms. This may reflect various factors such as symptom severity, access to health care, and learned behaviour about what reproductive problems to report to a local physician. It appears that there may be cultural differences in the ascription of meanings to sexual assault in reporting unexplained symptoms to physicians. For example, even though Phi had suffered symptoms of painful menstruation and excessive menstrual bleeding, her mother was reluctant to report these problems to the local physician. Specifically, she expressed a real fear about unwanted pregnancy that might result from the rape of her daughter:

“I was very worried. If there was something unusual, then I would have to take her to the hospital. After the incident, I took her to the hospital on a Sunday, but there was no doctor on duty then. The nurses asked whether she (Phi) had a period. I said she had it twice. They said not to worry. Then we were relieved and went home. If it just happened once, maybe she wouldn’t become pregnant.” (LC-PI200714)

However in this study there are two instances (i.e. Ly and Diệ) in which the rapees experienced rape-related pregnancy. Since twenty-five-year-old Ly was not able to take care of her newborn son, her family decided to give him away for adoption. However in the case of nineteen-year-old Diệ, who was mentally retarded, her father decided to take her to the hospital for an operation of tubaligation after her childbirth. The father feared that her daughter might be prone to further attacks and become pregnant again.

In addition, this research project provides modest evidence (from the cases of Mỹ and Hạnh) about associations between sexual assault and HIV-related risk. It does, however, suggest that sexual abuse, especially involving penetration, poses HIV risks for the female rapees. For instance, Mỹ later found out that one of the gang rape defendants was
HIV positive. At the time of the research interview, Mỹ expressed a great deal of fear about contracting HIV from this defendant.

Another finding of the present study is that a history of sexual abuse seems to have an impact on sexual well-being among participants aged eighteen and over. Interestingly, sexual victimization can result in two pathways (Gold et al. 1999; Bartoi et al. 2000). In one pattern, negative feelings associated with the abuse make some participants more likely to have sexual difficulties (e.g., fear of sex, arousal dysfunction, and nonorgasmia). In this regard, Phượng’s story is a case in point. Sexually abused at the age of fourteen by a relative on her mother’s side, she later ended up working in prostitution. Phượng, now a twenty-six-year-old married woman, described an absence of sexual pleasure.

“I didn’t feel anything, it was empty, the thing (vagina) was empty… Even when I worked in prostitution, penetration was so easy, I didn’t feel anything, I just move it so (the client) may ejaculate quickly; myself I felt nothing. Even now with my husband I don’t have any pleasure, there’s nothing left… First I was forced, then I had to work in prostitution. Now I just let him do what he wants. When we just began dating there were times we made love in the park, but I was always alert, being afraid there might be other people watching. But he didn’t pay any attention.” (HY-PI200715)

Despite her involvement in prostitution, Phượng’s sexual dysfunction may also be linked to traumatic sexualization following her childhood sexual abuse, “a process in which a child’s sexualization, including both sexual feelings and sexual attitudes, is shaped in a developmentally inappropriate and interpersonally dysfunctional fashion as a result of sexual abuse” (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985: 531). Accordingly, the sexual component of the assault settles in and proceeds to evoke a negative reaction in the woman (cf. Godling, 1996). As plainly described in Phượng’s case, sexual difficulties can persist long after the assault. Other symptoms found among participants in this study include pain during intercourse and burning sensation in the sexual organs. Whereas low level of sexual interest and inability of achieving orgasm have been reported by several participants, others indicate a heightened interest in sexual activities like having more dating partners, such as the cases of Hồng and Thu.

In examining the linkages between a history of child sexual abuse and the degree of involvement in promiscuity or precocious sexual behavior, the study is compatible with
other research that has found an effect of self-blame (Arata, 2000). Women who have been assaulted and have experienced victim blaming following the incident may encounter feelings of guilt, shame and low self-worth with subsequent engagement in casual sex because the rapee perceives herself being only “worthy” (i.e. worthy of being loved) of a romantic relationship if sex is offered (cf. Gold et al. 1999). Moreover, Antonia Abbey et al. (1996) suggest that more men find forced sex more acceptable if a woman is known to have had sexual intercourse with other men and even more so if she has had experience of non consensual sex. This is illuminated in the narrative of Thu, a child victim of an acquaintance rape, as she talked about her current boyfriend:

“We got to know each other since last Christmas, all he wants is to have sex. He often says: ‘let me do it’. Hearing it so many times, I finally let him. I swear to you I don’t like it, I am scared. I would tell him: ‘I’m serious... I don’t dare to love you any more’. But he keeps on begging, so I give it to him. Especially after he has drunk beer, he becomes wild. Normally I let him do it once a week. And you know, I sometimes take a walk in the park, some guy would point at me and say: ‘Hey, she looks like a horny bitch.’ I respond by swearing back at them.” (HT-PI200716)

Thu regarded the relationship with her boyfriend as a “beg-and-give” exercise and she herself was in control of her sexual autonomy. But while she thought her behavior “normal,” others might interpret it as a sign of sexual overture. In Hanoi, for example, a “good girl” would not take a walk in the park all by herself, hence Thu’s action might be seen by others as provocative, to put it mildly. This was an act of defiance on Thu’s part, trying to show that she was no longer afraid, that she had survived and was coming to terms with her ordeal of sexual violence. Her perceptions of men’s sexual cues might be based on the level of force that she had experienced during her painful episode which served as some sort of a threshold. Then if her boyfriend used less force, Thu might overlook warning signs of potential for abuse from a sexually aggressive partner. Ironically, most of the young rapees in this study received explicit warnings from their own families about their potentially active sexual lifestyle. As Hong told me:

“They say that once you taste it, especially at such an early age, you get used to it, and you start sleeping around with different people.” (HN-PI200717)

These perceptions may have a negative impact on the rapee’s sense of self and her ability to relate to others. In fact the way Hong acted corresponds to a distorted state of mind
inherent in children of sexual abuse that there is something “wrong” about themselves, a mental condition that persists over time. Rapees who adopt this attributional attitude, therefore, may be vulnerable to being victimized again. It seems probable that high rates of sexual activity may be both risk factors and consequences of sexual assault (Arata, 2000). In addition, my study finds that family’s function is an important variable in mediating effects. In line with the results of earlier research (e.g., Brison, 2002; Nguyễn Thu Hương 2004), several women in this study mentioned how rape affected their views concerning men in general and their perceptions of certain types of men in particular. As Giang, an incest rapee, told me:

“Now if I look at men, any man, I think three out of ten have the face of a person who could do such thing to his daughter. Of course I keep it in my head. I wonder what they might do with their daughters. I am fearful for teen age girls, I think of their fathers, men who can do it at a thoughtless moment, may be they plan it before. I’m afraid. I like girls, but I’m afraid to have a daughter of my own later on when I get married.” (HN-PI200718)

Describing her distrust of men, Giang confided that the incest had affected her in ways that colored the prospect of her motherhood in the future, especially about having a daughter of her own. More specifically she was wary of men’s behavior after her experience of sexual aggression. She saw the impact of social hierarchy and male dominance on her own life, making her wary and distrusting of men in general. In her view she saw incest and child abuse as an acceptable part of everyday life. In making an attempt to externalize her trauma by assuming potential risks for others, Giang tried to reduce the risk of being blamed and hence restore her self-esteem. This is the core of her coping strategy that will be discussed in a later section of the chapter.

Taken together, this study seems to indicate that rapees go through assault-related PTSD in a variety of ways depending on factors such as age, life situation, the circumstances of the rape incident and specific personality traits. These differentials may be further influenced by whether the rapee receives social, familial or professional support, and the coping skills she apply in the aftermath of the incident.

Significant among these coping patterns and adjustment strategies are individuals’ efforts to make meanings of their experiences of sexual trauma, as will be discussed below.
It is noteworthy that the need to endow suffering with meaning seems to be shared across human cultures. Robert Lifton observes that survivors of traumatic experiences such as Hiroshima and the Nazi concentration camps and returning GIs from the Vietnam War continuously search for a “sense of inner form” (1978:42) - a search for meaning that involves issues of larger human connectedness, “a sense of being on the great chain of being” (1988:9). In the same vein Gammeltoft in her research in northern Vietnam found that a number of females who endured a late-term abortion attempted to find meaning in their suffering by drawing on a vast cultural repertoire that included poetry, sayings, proverbs and popular tales (Gammeltoft, 2006).

2. Making meaning in trauma narratives

In this section, my discussion joins a recent and growing interest in many disciplines and areas of research in applying methods of narrative analysis to individuals’ accounts of their experiences (Harvey et al. 1991, 2000; Foa et al. 1995; BenEzer, 1999; Schiffitrin, 2003). According to Crystal Park and Amy Ai (2006), when encountering stressful events, individuals appraise the meaning of the event in an attempt to make it consistent. In the present study, my respondents attributed a particular meaning to their stories that served as a turning point, leading to a shift in understanding and opening up possibilities to break out of the “plot” that had held them captive. Continuing their search for understanding, they reframed their experience, placed them in a different context, and embarked on an extended and arduous process that eventually enabled them to speak to others, to act, to become agents in re-telling their lives and reshaping their identities. By examining such accounts, I hope to shed light on how sexual assault is contained not in the events themselves but in the individuals’ descriptions of their experience. In this way, as argued by Susan Lea and Timothy Auburn (2001), human subjectivity and the broader ideological context are inextricably interrelated.

2.1. Naming the experience

During the conduct of this study, I came to realize that the verb bi [Vn.: subjected to harm] was generally used by the victims of sexual violence - as well as members of their family members - to describe their situations in ordinary conversations. They would only
use the label “victim” [Vn.: nạn nhân] or “the offended (party)” [Vn.: người bị hại] to refer to the person portrayed or identified as being raped or abused within the context of a trial or in legal proceedings. In the Vietnamese - English Dictionary, published by the Institute of Linguistics, the word bị means “be subjected to” or “be victim of” (p.49). Looking up in the Dictionary of Vietnamese, published in 1997 by the Center of Dictionary, the word “bị” as a verb, indicates that “the subject undergoes an unfortunate incident/ or is subjected to an unfavourable act” (p.58). For example, bị tai nạn [Vn.: having an accident], bị mất cấp [Vn.: being subject of a theft], while the equivalent of “victim” in Vietnamese is “nạn nhân,” which means “the person who suffers from an incident, a social catastrophe or an unjust regime” (p.635).

Now I examine the semantics of Vietnamese terms related to victimization of sexual assault. Interestingly most of the women I interviewed would prefer the term bị [Vn.: having been harmed, someone who has been subjected to a violent act]. Indeed they tended to regard themselves as being victimized for a definite length of time in the normative expectations. In general they showed an aversion to terms such as nạn nhân [Vn.: victim] and người sống sót [Vn.: survivor] probably because these terms imply long-term stigmatization. In their own “intrinsic narratives,” - to use John Hall’s concept - (Hall, 1999; cf. Dunn, 2005), the women made an attempt to leave behind their “victim identity” as part of the healing process, in developing their own coping strategies in the aftermath of their traumatic experience. A number of informants told me that for them the word nạn nhân [Vn.: victim] denotes someone who has suffered something truly catastrophic like a fire or a big flood. It may seem, then, that the image of raped women (apart from rape cases involving murder) is internalized in most people as something not “that serious” since their physical appearance has not changed that much after their ordeal. Moreover, a representation of raped women as nạn nhân might induce others to view them not as a “normal” person but rather as a “marked” individual, someone who has been inflicted by violence. At another level, the label “victim” may dissuade rather than encourage these women to overcome their traumatic experiences, specifically because the term conveys a sense of passivity associated with fear, powerlessness and despair. The same is true for the word người sống sót, literally meaning “survivor” in English, someone who manages to
stay alive after having gone through a disaster. This term carries potentially discrediting connotations as contained in the term nạn nhân [Vn.: victim] above.

By interpreting their personal experiences, these women show that they are capable of finding alternative ways to express what in English is commonly understood as “rape victim.” In their efforts to find suitable terms to describe their situation, the women tried to alleviate the psychological burden caused by prejudices attached to rape victimization. This endeavour leads to the construction of an alternative identity to replace the unbearable situation in which the individual is trapped with the rape stigma. In other words, it provides the basis for finding a new sense of agency as the result of the creation of a new narrative identity that re-relates the rape incident in the context of a new and different meaning (Ricoeur, 1991). Charles Taylor refers to this as “the meaning of a situation for an agent” (Taylor, 1987:42), which centers on the purposiveness and the self-consciousness of the individual. This is what Anthony Giddens terms “a moment of reflexivity” (Giddens, 1979:55-56), an awareness of the process in which the individual is able to see herself as the performer of the story as well to take charge in her search for a “narrative identity.” It is in these performances of stories that emerges a sense of individual agency (Holma and Aaltonen, 1997).

Then, how does the woman reorganize her world meaningfully? How is the reorganization of these meaning structures constructed socially through the interview? Seen from a narrative point of view, the participant brings in her life story, a self-interpreted narrative that is intimately merged with her suffering. This means that her personal experience becomes shared with the researcher in the process of dialogue where the meanings of her rape incident become “storied.” Much of the hermeneutic discussion in psychoanalysis can be applicable here. This is what has been termed “double hermeneutic” (Giddens, 1977: quoted in Phillips, 1996:66). That is, the human subject is always involved in self-interpretation, by virtue of the fact that human beings are “self-interpreting animals” (Taylor, 1985: 261). This interpretation is then subjected to a second-level interpretation by the “professional” interpreter, in this case the researcher/interviewer. This is where the existence of mutual language, a socially constructed frame for interpretation (Giddens, 1993), comes into play. Similarly in
Taylor’s words it is a shared language which provides a “public space, or common vantage point” (1985:273) that persons can share.

In most instances, the interviewed women used the term *chuyện đố* [Vn.: that story/that thing] to indicate what had happened to them. What I found interesting was that the term “rape” was hardly mentioned. Notably most victims of incest and acquaintance rape tended to use the phrase “(he) did that thing to me” [Vn.: làm chuyện đố với mình] to articulate their experience. The word *lambre* [Vn.: to do, to perform, to make], which appeared frequently in the transcripts to describe the sexual act, could mean anything from full penetration to less severe forms of sexual assault. This indicates an ambiguity on the part of the interviewees with regard to the components inherent in sexual violence where rape is often viewed as an expression of sexuality rather than violence in their understanding of the event. The relationship between these personal narratives and the cultural “master narratives” about women, sexual violence, trauma, and gender identity in the cultural-specific context of Vietnam can be observed in the following life-history interviews.

### 2.2. Telling the unmentionable and unbearable

Looking at the various ways the interviewed women tried to reconstruct their experiences, I paid attention to the availability of cultural repertoire of explanations and the language used in describing events of a sexual nature. With relatively young and/or innocent rapees with no prior sexual knowledge and/or experience, there might be difficulties in obtaining an intelligible account of what happened to them. This is best seen in the case of Giang. The case of Giang who was twenty-three at the time I interviewed her, is typical of the incest rapees I came across. What is striking is the way she recounted her experience and her attempt to articulate her own understanding of what happened against the backdrop of popular notions about rape.

“When I prepared to enter secondary school, my mother had to work shifts, some time the whole night long, but that thing occurred mostly during early afternoon when my mother worked on afternoon shifts. He often fondled me. I didn’t like it at all. I vaguely remember the unpleasant feelings when I had to lie next to him during siesta. He told me and my sister to put our legs next to his and touch it (meaning penis)... That’s what he
did, though he didn’t go as far as to put it inside me. That’s why I wasn’t sure whether
that thing did happen (that thing meaning rape). He did try to “do” it to me once… I was
sleeping then, I knew it but I kept my eyes shut, thinking that it would be better to let him
think I was not aware of what was happening. I was scared of my father. He was very
cruel. I knew this was what adults did. Now he was doing it. At the time I realized what
my father did had a name, something called dâm dê [Vn.: a lecherous act], I don’t know
whether it was rape or harassment as I understand these words now and as I am talking to
you. If the thing was rape there had to be some resistance, is that right? And it must have
been felt like it was done, with an end to it (meaning the act of penetration). But when
this happened I was sleeping, pretending I didn’t know it, and he didn’t get inside, he
didn’t want me to know. He did it on the sly therefore I couldn’t call it rape, I would call
it something like “taking advantage.” In any case in my mind I wouldn’t use that term,
because it is such a heavy term. I would feel sadder. Better to avoid it.” (HN-PI200719)

Giang told me that she had no words to describe what happened, the incident she still
referred to as chuyễn dô [Vn.: that story], avoiding words like “rape” or “incest” proper.
When experiencing abuse, Giang was silenced internally by the response of her body and
psyche. Her pretending to be asleep might be prompted by a conscious attempt to focus
on how best to avoid injury, and above all to deny the terror of the incestuous experience.
This is the creation of another state of consciousness, which, as Roberta Culbertson
(1995) explains, forms the basis of the compression of the self in the experience of
physical distress and numbness. At one point, Giang was confused about why he (her
father) was “doing it” to her. Then, she tried to instill a sense of aloofness to create some
measure of comfort for herself, attempting to disconnect herself from the awareness of
intense pain of the abuse itself. Interestingly, Giang tried to abstain herself temporarily
from acknowledging her incest history by using linguistic shorthand such as “that story.”
It was her way of self-empowerment in coping with the situation.

What emerges from the above excerpts is further confirmation of a consistent link
among cultural beliefs about what constitutes rape and individual women’s
interpretations of it. Specifically, Giang considered it rape when there was evidence of

39 In the case of certain kinds of abusive betrayals of children where escape is not a viable option, the
“psychic numbing” (Lifton, 1978), or ‘dissociation’ (Herman, 1992) are commonly understood to be a
necessary psychological defense against overwhelming images and stimuli, as if removing pain is a logical
end goal (cf. Freyd, 1994).
actual resistance (i.e. in verbal or physical forms) and penile penetration of the vagina. Giang had incorporated a stereotypic thinking about the nature of the sex act during rape into her viewpoint, especially with respect to the notion of vaginal penetration by the penis. This suggests that her conceptualization of the event was influenced by what she learned from popular culture. Probably what others said about rape and the law, and depictions of rape in the media all influenced her ideas as to what constituted rape. Giang no doubt was not aware of the fact that even the slightest degree of penetration might be sufficient for the perpetrator to be prosecuted for the offence of rape, a theme that will be explored in Chapter 6. It is worth mentioning that Giang later sought support from a female lawyer regarding the possibility of prosecution against her father.

On the other hand, Giang noted that it was an incident of non-consensual intercourse as her father tried to do “that thing” during her sleep. Clearly, Giang tried to negate the fact that she became awake by the act of abuse, denying her consciousness of the incident. Since the age of consent for sexual intercourse is thirteen years and she was under the age of thirteen at the time, her father’s action was considered as statutory rape regardless of whether there was consent or not. Her passivity might suggest “consent,” however “consent” in this case occurred in the context of limited options. She might be afraid that her usually cruel father would respond with physical violence if she resisted. Learning to accommodate the sexual abuse was the only alternative available. Furthermore, her reluctance to label the experience as rape or incest allowed her to avoid self-blame and shame when taking the role of the victim. By intentionally using terms such as làm dụng [Vn.: abuse/exploitation] and quấy rối [Vn.: harassment], Giang actively prevented the experience of incest from being internally acknowledged and catalogued in a manner that would allow her a measure of autonomy. Moreover, by taking such a mental stance she was able to control depression and sadness. Here the paradox is more than simply the difficulty of reporting an event that seems unmentionable even to oneself. It is the paradox of keeping (the) distance from one’s own experience, which is however the hallmark of survival, or “a long-term successful adjustment” (John Harvey et al. 1991).

Giang’s story is a vivid portrait of a vulnerable and helpless child from a provincial working-class family. The sexual abuse was seen as one form of corporeal punishment
she suffered at the hands of her brutal father. In such a situation, her emotional engagement in denying the reality of sexual abuse was commensurate with her attempts to protect herself from further violence. By contrast, the following incestuous instance of Hỏng occurred in the family of an affluent official right in the heart of the capital of Hanoi.

“From the age of five, young as I was I felt there was something strange when my father and I were alone. When I attended the 6th class (aged twelve) I liked a boy in my class and wrote about him in my diary. My father read it, threatened to tell my schoolteacher and my mother who was very strict about such things. She’d make a big fuss out of this. After that he forced me “to do it” as if to punish me. Then he bought me all kinds of things. My mother never gave me anything. During that time, I felt something terrible would happen to me. Something like death, you know. I went out with friends a lot, afraid that I wouldn’t have the chance to do it again. After that thing happened he gave me anti-conception pills. Once he told me: “this is between you and me, there’s nothing to lose”. It’s like “I will teach you.” Really at that time I didn’t know precisely what that thing meant… Later on I began to think maybe my father was bèn hỏi [Vn.: exceedingly attached] to me, he was hooked on me… People told me he was doting on me ever since I was very young, always hugging and kissing me each time he came home. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Now when I see some lecherous-looking men, I thought how disgusting they are, then I realize there’s such a man in my family.” (HN-PI200720)

In this account, Hỏng was confronted with contradictory messages regarding loving care/punishment, attention/neglect, and obligation/resistance. In addition to the dependency and vulnerability, strategies employed by the father including inducements (e.g., privileges and material goods) further complicated Hỏng’s ability to recognize the situation as abusive. In reference to abuse dynamics, Hỏng seemed to draw on the feelings of intense attachment to her father. Hỏng perceived her incest as a form of bèn hỏi [Vn.: exceedingly attached]. On the one hand, it served as an “excuse” for the father, especially for what he had done to her. There was also the need for Hỏng to avoid uneasiness as well as shame and feelings of guilt that might be fed by the reactions of others to her childhood sexual abuse. Hỏng began to associate incestuous behavior with sexually hyperactive persons (Vn.: e.g., người dâm dê/ a lecherous person). This was in line with Giang’s perception of her father-abuser as người dâm dê. In the light of these
responses, my informants regarded their experiences as a sexual problem rather than a crime. Although these accounts mirror cultural messages about women being men’s property (i.e. a female’s duty is to service a man’s needs), Giang and Họng’s portrayal of their offenders as dâm dề [Vn.: lecherous], however, reveals part of their efforts to minimize the experiences of incest, shifting the focus to the perpetrators away from themselves. This shift of focus can be seen as a part of the meaning-making process in the aftermath of trauma (Park and Ai, 2006).

The quotations further reveal language barriers since precise wording was lacking to catalogue this experience, leading to narrative deficits for the event. In fact both Hỏng and Giang used the term làm [Vn.: have the thing done to me] in referring to their childhood abusive experiences. Since these instances are not discussed with parents, the linguistic representation of abuse may be further suppressed (Newman, 2007). Again, memories of a childhood trauma may overwhelm a person’s narrative ability because to narrate a child’s memory is not only to confront the confusions of violence but also to construct a culturally acceptable narrative unavailable to the child (Culbertson, 1995). In other words, the larger context of sexual culture serves to reduce the probability that explicit narratives concerning abuse will be generated.

Numerous researchers (see Rawson and Liamputong, 2010 for a review) indicate that sex has not traditionally been a subject for open public discussion in the context of Vietnamese culture. In other words, there was little official public concern with sexuality or sexual relations. However, since Đổi Mới there has been a growing interest in sex education, and studies on sexual relationships of high school and college students have been carried out. The results show that members of this age group have very limited knowledge of sexual matters (Hoàng Bá Thịnh, 1999). Clearly, girls are more often confused and worried as they enter their first relationship than their counterparts in the West. In spite of the fact that many publications on sexuality have appeared recently in bookstores, it does not mean that they are accessible for everyone. And there is a lack of formal sexual education as found in the stories of Giang, Hông and Nga as well as other child victims in this study.

It is worth noting that while the term hiếp dâm [Vn.: rape] is officially used in court cases and still widely used in popular parlance, the term xâm hại tình dục, literally
“sexual violation” has become increasingly commonplace in more formal settings such as government agencies, academic circles and the more “serious” media. The “taboo” nature of rape is reflected in the apparent reluctance to look at rape as a despicable act - a violent sexual act grounded in the physical and mental abuse of power - and the oblique euphemistic use of xâm hai tình dục [Vn.: sexual violation] in public discourses can be seen as a way of avoiding this sensitive subject in a patriarchal society like Vietnam. Especially, the lay public harbours dreadful impressions regarding the term “rape.” All the women in the study, to some extent, were reluctant to use the expression hiếp dâm [Vn.: rape] in recalling their experiences. As Giang rationalized:

“The word hiếp dâm is more likely to be applied in the context of criminology than the daily use of vocabulary. Because in ordinary life no one uses that term, right? That term makes me a little scared. The other word xâm hai [Vn.: violate, abuse] sounds less traumatic, even though it might still bring some pain to the person involved. But the latter is much preferred, compared to the first. Personally speaking, the mention of the first is already too much for me, reminding me about murder cases, which I finds even less severe than the rape situation.” (HN-PI200721)

Following this line of reasoning, the event is not likely to be erased from Giang’s memory; she purposefully Forget it in her daily life, a self conscious exercise of agency in control of the memory of her ordeal.

2.3. “Blame it on the booze:” an attempt to avoid rape stigma

To understand why the mention of this terrible term is upsetting for women in certain situations, it is necessary to look again at the way Nguyệt compared her experience of wife rape - presented at the beginning of this chapter - with the incident that occurred in the village where she was assaulted by an informant at the research setting. Nguyệt did not consider the incident as an attempted rape (as compared with the “real rape” by her husband), although she recognized it as “unwanted contact” mainly because she dreaded the stigma associated with rape victimization.

“Maybe it’s just that he had too many drinks. Afterwards he phoned me to apologize… It’s the drinks that caused it, he said. Maybe because of the apologies I thought it was not so serious after all. That day there was a wedding in the village - lots of comings and goings. The house I was staying was next to the main road. The landlady just went out. In
the alley several old women were chatting away. I was alone, crouching on the bed checking the report cards of my fieldwork. Then this guy came in, smelling of alcohol all over. I didn’t pay much attention, just said: “Where did you get so much to drink?” I wasn’t really on my guard because the night before the landlady happened to say something about this guy - that he was a well-behaved guy and so on. He asked where the landlady was, why I was alone like this, looking rather wild. I kept on working and scolded him: “why are you looking at me like this.” Then he moved toward me. He grabbed me from behind, tightening my hands. After some struggle I managed to escape his grip and ran outside to where some old women were sitting, shouting for help. The women looked at the state I was in, they were shocked themselves. One of them said: “He must be raving mad. How could he do it to someone like you. You’re much older than him.” The news spread quickly. Soon his parents came to apologize, adding “how could this scoundrel son of ours do this shameful thing! He’s already married, you know.” But no one mentioned the attempted rape by name. I wonder what happened if Mai, a younger, unmarried female member of our research group was attacked instead of me. Tuy, the (male) leader of our research group told us if that was the case we would have left for Hanoi the same day to avoid possible shame. I myself felt no shame after the incident. Shame and blame should go to this scoundrel alone. I felt myself a hardened person. I’m a married woman with a good position.” (HN-PI200722)

At first Nguyệt did not feel like a victim, instead she interpreted the incident as symptomatic of a broader social problem, the effect of alcohol abuse on human behaviour. What Nguyệt said about her experience and how others responded to the event shed light on the relationship between rape and the social construction of female sexuality and its implications for women. One of these is that female sexuality can be owned, and it can have different levels of worth and gradations of meaning. As the (male) research leader said, if the younger and unmarried colleague had been assaulted instead of Nguyệt, the consequences would have been much more serious. What the group leader said reflects the conception of a woman’s sexuality as a usable object that accrues or loses value depending on how it is used. In other words, the value of a woman’s sexuality, and hence her person, is based on the criterion of how many men have had access to her sexually. This is reflected in the widely-held belief that it is a worse offense to rape a virgin than a non-virgin. The greatest devaluation comes with intrusion into
“virgin territory.” Thus once having been “used,” a female’s sexual worth could not be much worse off by additional “usage.” As the thinking goes, a married and middle-aged woman is seen as *dan dĩ* [Vn.: which, in this context, can be understood as a “seasoned,” mature woman open to easy sex]. By her own interpretation, Nguyệt felt that her being assaulted did not bring shame on her precisely because she was a married woman, one with a respectable job. Nguyệt’s emphasis on her marital status was to emphasize the fact that she was “socially protected” as a wife, and she was by no means a woman of easy virtues.

Now about the role of alcohol in this episode. Nguyệt attributed the cause of the attack to excessive drinking. This connection justified a need for responsibility claiming, especially the “excuse” of male drunkenness in order to have sex. Thus the attack could be perceived as a “time-out” (Abbey *et al.* 1996) during which men do not stick to their usual behavioral standards. Nguyệt rationalized that alcohol consumption allows men to feel comfortable in using force to obtain sex when the woman’s lack of consent becomes less clear to them. However, as she tried to make sense of the incident, this justification enabled her to garner support from others, and more importantly to get away from potential shame pertaining to the sexual denotations of the attack, and the traumatic effects that might follow its disclosure. This process, in turn, changed her internal feelings of the event from one characterized by anger and panic at the attack, and a lack of respect for her own basic rights, to one characterized by anger at what she now perceived to be caused by excessive alcohol use.40

Also the non-normative nature of the attack may be seen in Nguyệt’s interpretation of the differential social norms of power, in which she saw herself as a more “superior” person compared to her assailant. Reading between the lines, the sexual attack on a middle-aged, married and urban professional might be construed as a shameful act on the attacker’s part, which put his virility and his very humanity in question. First the image of a local man - a married one at that - who had to resort to alcohol to act out his sexual desire, was not acceptable by the community. In any case no self respecting man in the

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40 It is grounded in the perception that heavy alcohol consumption often leads a drinker to an uncontrollable state of mind [Vn.: *không tự chịu kiểm soát được bản thân*], so among other things, sexual arousal can be expected. Because alcohol is perceived to correspond to “hot,” male characteristics, men can become “boiling” and act violently if they drink too much alcohol (Rydström, 2003).
village would try to rape a female guest (in this case a guest of honor, to some extent). The man was surely to suffer enormous status loss in the eyes of his fellow villagers; he was also a disgrace to his own family by committing such an odious act. For her part Nguyệt rationalized the attack as a violation of social norms concerning acceptable behaviour, involving a contestation of hierarchy and power. In doing so she was inclined to downplay the sexual component of the incident, with terms such as chi [Vn.: only] or thế thôi [Vn.: that was all] being frequently used.

One should not forget that Nguyệt had been victim of wife rape for a considerable length of time thus she was no stranger to sexual violence. It was unthinkable for her, however, that a rape could occur in such situational dynamics (i.e. by a “known” local man in the research setting). Furthermore, Nguyệt was fully aware that the assault could have been more violent if the attacked person had been her younger, unmarried and presumably “less (sexually) experienced” research colleague. Yet the rape of a married woman is generally considered to be less serious than that of an unmarried woman, given the fact that female virginity is an important issue. In short, by engaging in a denial of the experience of attempted rape, Nguyệt expected to solicit support from others, as well as to escape from the prospective stigma attached to sexual victimization.

2.4. Can a sex worker be raped?

Since this study covers several cases involving women working as sex workers it is worthwhile to examine the contentious claim that women in the sex trade always consent to sexual activity for money (Sullivan, 2003; Rafael and Shapiro, 2004). Take the case when the sex worker is forced to do the things she does not want, or with men she does not want to have sex with. A number of informants in my study expressed the view that a prostitute is raped when she is forced to serve extra clients or beyond the time agreed. However, some sex workers I talked to did not regard this experience as non-consensual sex. This is because their life as a prostitute was such that they became accustomed to the inherent risks of their trade, subjected to all kinds of ill-treatment ranging from kinky sex to extreme violence. The story of Vy, aged thirty, who worked as a part-time sex worker is an example of this.
“To tell you the truth, in this profession it’s not unusual to meet guys who wear “accessories” on their penis when doing it, causing a lot of pain…we are forced to do it with several guys at the same time. They do all kinds of things and some don’t even pay us in the end. It’s a private arrangement between us girls and the clients. If we cry out for help, that would ask for trouble, and who would report these things to the police anyway. This is our fate having to work in this trade. We do it voluntarily, and have to accept the consequences.” (HN-PI200723)

It is clear that Vy experienced some kind of “felt stigma” (Scambler and Paoli, 2008), denoting a fear of being discriminated against, as well as an internalized sense of shame and blame as bearer of the “whore stigma” (Corbin, 1986; Corbin and Sheridan, 1996; cf. Gouda, 1990; de Vries, 2001) that has long been attached to prostitution. Historically prostitutes have been looked down with disdain (see for example Đặng Văn Chi, 2008, for an account of the Vietnamese printed media’s stigmatising of prostitution in the early 1900s). Prostitution was seen as bán trọn/thần nuôi miệng [Vn.: sell one’s behind/body to feed one’s mouth], an occupation only fit for women lacking moral and intellectual qualities.

Indeed, in the case of Vy, she felt that rape is an occupational hazard, not a violation of basic rights. She might have internalised feelings of being a “bad” woman anyway, and thus not deserving of being treated with respect. Presumably, the perpetrators also follow the popular attitude that since the sex worker is paid for her service, sexual violence including rape is part of the deal. Likewise, the harm done to a prostitute cannot be that serious, the rape of a sex worker does not count. Moreover, it is necessary to note that, in the context of rape, the term xâm hại [Vn.: to violate] also carries an element of làm nhục [Vn.: to humiliate, to denigrate], thereby constituting an act of degrading personal dignity. Therefore, one of the public attitudes that I and my research assistants received during the flyer distribution seems to cling to this sense of integrity 41 (regarding the term xâm hại) to assume the impossibility of the rape of a prostitute. Anyway she

41 In a larger context, the systematic rape of women during wartime, for instance in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, can be seen as an extremely cruel form of torture, considered to be an integral part of strategic ethnic cleansing (Dike and Laustsen, 2005). For the latest and comprehensive account of the phenomenon of rape in the Vietnam War, see Weaver (2010).
already commits an unlawful act as a commercial sex worker in the first place.\textsuperscript{42} Hence, of all possible forms of rape, the one committed by clients on sex workers is the most overlooked. Seen in this light, sex workers rarely report rape cases to the police.

While many sex workers are not particularly keen in reporting sexual assault for fears of being charged/or arrested with prostitution offences, the situation is not that different concerning sex workers under the legal age of consent (i.e. 18). In my review of rape representations in the print media, which is the focus of Chapter 7, I have come across cases of sexual violence against under-age sex workers. Defendants were subsequently found not guilty of rape but were convicted of having sexual relation with a minor (see Chapter 6 for a discussion on legal aspects). Here one sees again the dividing line between children and adults in rape cases, because it is universally accepted that children and juveniles are simply minors, and therefore require additional protective measures. While this is true, it is premature to assume that rape claims by under-age sex workers are taken more seriously by the authorities as compared with older sex workers. This is a matter for further investigation.

As I have shown thus far, the women who survive sexual assault tend to put their ordeal behind them and move beyond the stage of shame and self-blame with stigmas attached to rape and incest. Above all, the stories told highlight the interplay between culturally available framings of their experiences and their own strivings to find explanations that are specifically meaningful to themselves. The important question is whether these personal explanations have an impact on their particular coping strategies following the incident and whether these perceptions play a role in the likelihood of disclosure. These will be my primary focus in the section below.

3. Disclosure vs. silence: Women's concerns and post-rape adjustment

The discussion so far highlights the various ways rapees label the event and assess the degrees of its seriousness. In the following I consider how women's initial thoughts and feelings about the incident help shape their decision-making process that precedes first

\textsuperscript{42} There are no provisions in the criminal code regarding prostitution itself. Instead, prostitutes are subjected to \textit{xử phạt hành chính} [Vn.:administrative fines] and their activities are effectively made illegal according to the Decrees concerning Administrative Transgression. For a further elaboration of the topic, see Nguyen-vo (2008:121-22).
disclosure and subsequent help-seeking strategies. Specifically, what emerges from the above narratives supports the proposition that women’s motives and concerns in reporting an assault depend on their relationship to the offender, which, in turn, affects their perceptions of the severity of the offense.

Before discussing the specific life stories in more details, it is important to point out the distinction between “disclosure” and “reporting.” In the stories under discussion, my focus is on abuse disclosure, rather than on actual reporting of the abuse to the authorities with judicial ramifications, as will be discussed in Chapter 6. Disclosure is a crucial first step in the process of reporting to appropriate authorities (Hanson et al. 1999). As Clare MacMartin points out, disclosure implies the revelation of previously concealed facts in terms of the individual transmission of information heretofore unknown to the recipients (1999: 507). The present study involves a number of adult females and young girls who suffered severe physical injury. These rapees, however, did not initiate the disclosure themselves, but their sexual assault was “accidentally” discovered, for example the physical injury in a child noticed by an adult who then reported it to the police. It is important to add that children rarely have the resources to report directly to the police or other agencies, therefore they may have to rely on an adult for facilitating abuse reporting. Moreover, one should take into account the social-cultural context of Vietnam where people often get things “done” through informal networks rather than seeking recourse to official channels (Gammeltoft and Herno, 2000). These stories and their reception will be analyzed in Chapter 5 focusing on the family’s response when an incident of rape comes to light.

3.1. Fears of derogation of family honor

Now I go back to the case of Nguyệt. By her own account, she was victimized by a spousal offender, describing herself as a sufferer of a “rape-like experience.” Her mention of the word hiệp dâm [Vn.: rape] in the context of husband-to-wife abuse indicates that she disagreed with the commonly-held belief that consent to marriage is also consent to sexual intercourse and as long as the marriage is valid, this sexual right cannot be revoked. However, the dire predicament she suffered at the hands of her husband made her consider the divorce option. She wanted to change the status quo, to overcome the
social prejudices about female passivity that kept her silent as a powerless and abused wife. Yet, when it came to weighing the pros and cons of an eventual divorce, she decided against disclosure. Here the motive that kept Nguyệt from revealing her experience was related to the fear of derogating family honor, particularly her own parents and her children. To be specific, what concerned Nguyệt most was the possibility that a divorced woman might be burdened with a social stigma (Nguyễn Thanh Tâm, 2002).

“Once I decided to sue for divorce. But after typing the first line “Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Application for divorce” I could not go on. I did not know whom to send it to, and where. Then I thought of my parents, then my children. If I went for a divorce, they would badmouth that I wasn’t behaving properly, that it was my husband who sued for divorce, he was the one who dropped me. And the children would grow up without the presence of their father. And what about my colleagues, what would they think about me? I was always fearful of what others would think about me. All this was in ‘98, ‘99… Just ten years ago, but things have changed so much since then. My parents told me to keep the matters within the family, if others knew about it they would laugh at us.”

(HN-PI200724)

Nguyệt’s reluctance to disclose her conjugal misery to her friends and family stems from the normative expectation for females regarding the maintenance of household harmony in Vietnamese society. Her attitude can be traced to cultural assumptions of resilience and endurance endowed by females (cf. Rydström, 2003b; Kwiatkowski, 2008). In this case, it is emblematic of her attempt to save “social face” by remaining silent. The reasoning is that to reveal the dark side of one’s own family - vách áo cho người xem lung [Vn.: bare one’s back for others to see] - would not only bring shame to the family but also to oneself (Nguyễn Thu Hương, 2004).

3.2. Ambiguities about rape experiences

It is worth noting that most subjects in this study often claimed that what happened to them was not serious enough to warrant disclosure, particularly when their experiences did not meet the internalized idea of what constitutes a “real” rape (sexual assaults involving strangers, act of penetration or serious injury on the part of the victims, etc.).

43 This formula is required for all official documents in the country.
This clearly has implications for the disclosure of sexual abuse incidents among family members, friends and other sources of social support. In the case of Nguyệt being attacked while doing fieldwork in a remote village, she was reluctant to acknowledge (even to herself) that what happened to her was in fact an attempted rape. The incident became public knowledge when she ran out of the house calling for help, yet she put the blame on the influence of alcohol. Her attitude was bolstered by cultural constructions regarding rape and female sexuality (penile penetration required), and the social salience of power and hierarchy. She decided that it was better to write it off as a minor incident of little consequence.

Here the judgment of sexual victimization can be influenced by the woman’s own understandings of what constitutes rape. For instance, Giang wondered whether her experience qualified as rape, because the abuse was not particularly violent, and did not involve the act of penetration. The fact that she often suffered corporal punishment at the hands of her violent father might heighten this feeling of confusion, leading her to regard the experience as another form of physical mistreatment. The fact that Giang remained silent for almost ten years was partly due to a perceived lack of options and partly due to the embarrassment caused by the sexual nature of the incident. Giang only broke her silence when she learned about the incestuous rape of her younger sister, Minh. It was to get her younger sister out of the abusive situation that Giang turned to her aunt for support.

“I told my aunt about what happened to (sister) Minh. She didn’t believe me at first. No way. I had to say that this thing also happened to me, describing it. She then began to believe me, but told me to keep this secret to myself, not to tell anyone.” (HN-PI200725)

Clearly, disclosing serious abuse is a hazardous affair. The aunt’s reluctance to acknowledge the incest at first testifies to the taboo and silence that surround the topic. To convince her aunt Giang had to disclose that she herself had suffered incest with her own “first-hand” experience. However, this relative advised Giang to keep it a secret for fears of bringing disgrace to the family as a whole (The question of rape in the context of kinship relations will be the central theme of Chapter 5). This kind of reaction led Giang to censor herself and remain silent about an experience she considered as shameful and stigmatizing.
“I thought I would never tell anyone about this (again), because I don’t want to create a negative image about myself and my family. Of course they (acquaintances/peers) might not show their feelings to me, but I think that deep down they would despise me and my father. Frankly, a person like my father is not worth thinking about, even for a minute. What happened to me is just because I am unfortunate to have such a father, and an insensitive mother also. That’s it. I had nothing to do with it as a kid… children are innocent by nature anyway.” (HN-PI200726)

Following this line of reasoning, she put the blame squarely on her father, and in doing so enhanced her ability to disengage herself from self-blame, trying to see the situation from a different perspective. This is a first step in replacing long-standing feelings of powerlessness by a new sense of agency. Here the psychoanalytic concept of “projection” comes into play, which concerns the subject’s “projective” descriptions of other people. That is “the projecting individual (in this case: Giang) ascribes characteristics, feelings, or motives onto another person” (her father) (Holmes, 1968). Also, Giang changes her beliefs about it so that these beliefs would be consistent with her (new) feelings. In the language of psychoanalysis, the example of Giang resembles the so-called complementary projection because Giang projects a trait that is different from her own, the projected trait is the complement of her own trait. As David Holmes explains, “the motivation or dynamic behind complementary projection can be conceived of as ego defensive in that it enables the person to see the world as consonant with and justifying her own feelings or actions” (1968: 251). In this way, there is a good deal of similarity between complementary projection and rationalization, which some researchers refer to as “rationalized projection” (Murstein and Pryer, 1959).

The case further suggests that disclosure recipients play a role in how rapees interpret their experiences. Reactions from others to disclosure of a stigmatized experience like sexual assault have in impact on the survivor’s appraisal of the incident (Ullman and Filipas, 2001). This finding opens up an interesting line of research on how women evaluate, weigh, and explain the social reactions they receive upon the disclosure.
3.3. It’s the relationship that matters

As indicated by accounts of the participants in this study, inhibitions about disclosing to some extent reflect the characteristics of the victim-offender relationship. This finding is consistent with prior research (Felson et al. 2002; Kaukinen, 2004; Felson and Pare, 2005) showing that women victimized by their male family members are less likely to report than rapees in other circumstances because they consider conflicts between family and close personal relations as issues that are more appropriately handled by the parties involved. Moreover, victims of intra-familial abuse are often reluctant to speak out because this would imply disloyalty toward a member of their own family (cf. Jonzon and Lindblad, 2004). It is also probable that this reluctance may be based on their economic dependence on the offender, or some emotional attachment to this person as Hỏng told me:

“At the time when it happened to me, there was no help phone to call. If I told my mother I wasn’t sure that she would believe me. I only told a close friend I thought I could trust. But she went around telling everybody. When my name was mentioned everyone I knew asked me about it. I denied it and they only half believed me. You know, I had to change school many times. But even at the new school, they kept asking me about it. My father had to escape to the South to avoid the pressure. It was terrible. In fact at the time I wasn’t sure about the nature of this thing. I only knew it was not right. I only asked Mrs. Đường (the social worker) about it. But I didn’t tell her all the details. I thought I was able to readjust myself. No one knew how serious the situation was. At any rate, he’s still my father.” (HN-PI200727)

Although Hỏng considered disclosing to her mother, she was afraid of being accused of lying, and so she kept the secret for a long time. When she turned thirteen, there was an experimental child abuse prevention program at her school. As she became aware of what had been happening to her, Hỏng told it to a close friend who later spread the story around. At first the relatives on her father’s side and her mother did not believe it. They said Hỏng made it up to cover up her loose relations with other boys. Even when she contacted the social worker from the child sexual abuse prevention program - the one who explained to her the incest nature of her experience - she did not make a full statement. As mentioned earlier her reluctance to tell may stem from a desire to protect her father, she did not want to get him in trouble because deep down she feared that it
might disrupt the source of family income, particularly the material comforts her father had been giving her.

In the beginning of 2008, after a prolonged conflict with her mother, Hông spoke out about her experience as an incest victim. Hông’s mother was shocked and finally came to believe her story, but could not make up her mind about reporting it to the authorities. At the time the mother was forced to walk a thin line. Hông’s father was recently arrested on corruption charges. While her paternal family was lobbying against a possible life sentence awaiting her father, Hông was living with her mother and two other sisters in the flat officially owned by her paternal grandparents. What if Hông and her mother decided to sue the father? How would Hông’s paternal family react to that? Hông told me she feared that further disclosure and eventual reporting would be emotionally and physically disastrous for her aging grandmother, since Hông’s father might be locked up for an extra period of time apart from the sentence for corruption if found guilty. Meanwhile her feelings of shame were too strong to overcome. Hông felt that talking to others would not help so she tried to forget about the incest and move on with her life. But Hông did not know that the post-memory of incest would continue to haunt her for a long time to come. After refraining from her initial attempt to disclose for several years, Hông once made a slip of the tongue to her boy friend:

“I didn’t mean to talk about it again, but, once I made a slip of the tongue. I remember that day Đình (her present boyfriend) and I were talking about something that was related to that (sexual abuse). God! He was in for a shock when I told him that thing happened to me. He asked me to say it again as he couldn’t believe it. I mean, it was something beyond his wildest imagination. Then he said, well, that thing could not have occurred without my consent. And, he said, ah, if it were true I couldn’t stay as calm as I was telling him the experience. His response kind of made me angry. I said to him, well what do you expect? Should I cry and moan when I tell you this secret? You know, he kept asking me why I could tell it in such a cold manner. He repeated that question a year later. Because he did not believe me. I was so frustrated that I told him: Ok, now you know the truth. If you want, we can continue the relationship, if not, just go away. I have felt already very bad about it. How could I make it up? And for what? If you can’t help me to forget what happened, why don’t you stop asking me about it?” And, well, he didn’t say a word about it since then, you know.” (HN-PI200728)
The story reflects the boyfriend’s doubts about Hông’s integrity, even questioning her personal character. In effect, this reaction only exacerbates her fears of being blamed by others. Nevertheless, Hông’s anger at her boyfriend in a way helps her to externalize her pain as she tries to understand what is wrong with him.

Even more surprising is the finding that despite cultural norms for emotional constraint, women who do not show outward manifestations of intense fear, helplessness or horror appear to have a hard time getting adequate support from family and friends or from community resources. For example, in asking Hông “how” she could recount her terrible experience in such a cold and detached manner, the boyfriend had expected a show of emotional outburst, a stereotypic expectation of a “real” victim’s reaction brought on by recollection of her terrible experience. Since the rape victim is consigned to the image of someone who has been traumatized and therefore ill, a calm and reasonable person does not fit with this framing, therefore her story is not credible. There is an ironic twist here since the focus on the observable and measurable symptoms lead to a denial of the harm of rape among those whose experiences do not match normative expectations. Unfortunately, this stereotypical imagination of “the victim” appears to be all too common. Four of the interviewed women in this study cited their calm composure as a reason for others to doubt the truthfulness of their stories. Thus speaking out about the assault to insensitive interlocutors may have detrimental consequences for the victims as they are subjected to further trauma at the hands of the very people they turn to for help (Ahrens, 2006). The experience may seem like a “second rape,” a phenomenon known as “secondary victimization” (Campbell et al. 2001; Ullman and Filipas, 2001).

This reminds us that the fundamental relational character of the self is highlighted by the dependence of survivors on others’ attitudes toward them in the aftermath of the trauma (Brison, 2002). From the accounts recorded in my study, negative reactions often serve as a silencing function. For example, Hông who initially broke the silence and spoke out about the incest quickly reconsidered the situation and opted for silence. In the case of Phương, fears of negative reactions combined with embarrassment caused her to remain silent for several years. For Phương, her first disclosure was my interview with her. Likewise, Nguyệt mentioned the fact that my interview opened up the possibility to break out of her wife-rape secrecy that previously imprisoned her. Furthermore, even
among those who did tell someone at some point of time after the assault, it was to seek support from informal social assistance members (i.e. family, friends) rather than from formal support providers, such as mental health professionals and physicians. At any rate, as pointed out by Yu-Wen Ying (2001), mental health services are inadequate, inappropriate and/or inaccessible in Southeast Asia. And considering culturally-biased stigmas associated with mental health disturbances, it is not surprising that only a couple of cases were reported to social work professionals in this research.

3.4. Post-rape adjustment: self silencing or burying the pain in a secret drawer

While the reasons to keep silent or refrain from disclosing are complex, the decision can be seen primarily as a form of self-protection (Ahrens, 2006). Having lost faith in the efficacy of disclosure, these women choose to heal themselves by using avoidance - that is avoiding to think about the incident - as a coping mechanism. In doing so they are more like actors making strategic and rational choices rather than just passive victims. For instance in her interview Giang used the metaphor of ngăn kéo bí mật [Vn.: secret drawer] in which she stored her memory of incest.

“It’s like storing (the incest) in a drawer, but a secret one. If necessary you open the drawer and look at it then close it again. It’s possible you’ll never touch that drawer.” (HN-PI200729)

At one level, it can be seen as an exercise in emotional suppression to deal with the experience of incest. By putting the painful experience into a drawer, she tried to insulate its memory from her waking life. On another level, she was well aware that the memory itself might get out of control and return unexpectedly and repeatedly to interrupt the normal course of her life. Here the kind of memory termed “episodic memory” (Tulving, 1984) can be seen in the mental exercise that Giang was going through. It is this memory structure that allows people to mentally travel back in time and remember events previously observed through experience. The memory traces of the event continue to exist in the present, and when they are retrieved, the person remembers the event (Tulving, 2002). In its simplest form, episodic memory can be considered as what one “remembers” including contextualized information about a specific event. This helps visualize how the metaphor ngăn kéo bí mật [Vn.: secret drawer] actually works. This
“immutability” is referred by Cathy Winkler (2002) as an emotional tattoo that will remain a part of remembrance, suggesting that recall of the incident is close to consciousness (Bletzer and Koss, 2006).

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that remembering does not mean re-experiencing the past. And to remember, according to Susan Sontag (2003), is not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture. In this respect, Giang did not endure its effects in a passive manner, but she knew there was something she could do to find a way forward. Realizing the chance of having to “open the secret drawer” and retrieve the memories, she might acquire the fortitude to “look at what is in the drawer” and directly confront intrusive thoughts, and then to “close the drawer again.” In that sense, the act of “closing the drawer” enabled her to gain control of certain aspects of the memories, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that makes them a part of the past. This can be interpreted as an adaptive survival strategy, whereas she has no other way of regaining a sense of control. Thus by using cognitive strategies (Arata, 1999), Giang appeared to be at an earlier stage of successful adaptation (Emm and McKenry, 1988) in the healing process.

Similarly, Nguyệt initially considered “swallowing” the pain as the best “solution” to cope with her wife-rape experience. This is tantamount to burying the pain deep into the inner recesses of the self, something like drinking the pain “so that life could continue” (Das, 2004:332). Significantly, the women are to carry the pains, sufferings, and testimonies of sexual assault in their bodies. This finding is consistent with other studies that have indicated that the ways in which the women experience their personal emotions of suffering may be construed as discrete (Green, 1994; Lempert, 1997).

In the instance of Vy cited earlier, she attributed her experience of “prostitute rape” to misfortune. Since her involvement in prostitution prevented her from using the legal system to redress the wrongdoings done to her, Vy invoked the curse of fate in trying to make sense of her plight. It is worth noting that Vy tried to posit herself as a hardened woman - creating a kind of self empowerment in the face of cruelty.

“You know, my job is just to open the legs to earn some money. It doesn’t matter much if I do it once more (even not being paid for that). I don’t count… I consider it my unlucky day.” (HN-PI200730)
By adopting such an attitude, Vy tries to attenuate the severity of the act of violence, making it bearable so that she could get on with her daily existence as a commercial sex worker. Evidently, when women cannot speak out about their experiences, they often find a way to convert that passivity into some sort of agency in an effort to deal with their traumatic memories. Thus, in a real sense, abused women can accept and transform their silence into positive sentiments and descriptions. At times, silence may well be perceived as a solution. Although it is by no means an ideal solution it is an understandable option because the decision to keep silent about the assault has a certain advantage in a context of limited alternatives.

Summary

The core of this chapter is based on rapees’ personal narratives. In examining the traumatic consequences suffered by these women, my findings tend to indicate that while symptoms of psychological distress manifest differently from case to case, the majority of these women experience some forms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at a certain stage in their lifetime, no matter whether the trauma is disclosed or not. Disclosure (to family and friends) and reporting (to public authorities) of rape-related incidents mostly depend on the nature of offender-victim relationship. Early disclosure and reporting occur often in cases involving strangers as offenders, whereas incidents within family circles are slow to come out.

It is notable that there are a variety of reasons why women often choose not to disclose their victimization. These include fears of family disruption, of being blamed by others for the incident, or simply of not being taken seriously. Given the social stigma and taboo that surround the topic of rape, disclosing serious abuse is a hazardous affair. It is worth noting that some subjects in this study often claim that what happens to them is not serious enough to warrant disclosure, particularly when their experiences do not meet their internalized idea of what constitutes a “real” rape (sexual assaults involving strangers, act of penetration, serious injury, etc.). This clearly has implications for the disclosure of sexual abuse to family members, friends and other sources of social support.
While the reasons to keep silent or refrain from disclosing are complex, the decision can be seen primarily as a form of self-protection.

Furthermore, the chapter also deals with the dimension of personal agency: the capacity of victims to engage in meaningful ways in coping with the aftermath of sexual violence. Of particular interest is the strategy of self silencing in which victims try to repress the knowledge - and memories - of the traumatic incident in an effort to free themselves from past suffering. The narratives also bear out the influence of cultural representations upon the individual’s perceptions or understanding of rape. These life stories posit individual feelings and meanings as inevitably embedded in the larger social, historical, and cultural relations, illustrating the permeability of the dividing line between the individual and the social. In the next chapter I shall attempt to learn about how women’s agency is enabled, represented and contested along the lines of class, ethnicity, gender, family and kinship set against the backdrop of social mobility during the whole disclosure process.

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