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The Outside Looking in: Examining Reasoning Behind the Choice to Report Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

“I realized that, in this world, there would be many instances where my body would not feel like my body.”

(Heather Burtman, “My Body Doesn’t Belong to You”, 2010)

This essay looks into reasons women have for reporting or not reporting domestic violence and sexual assault. While this topic has received a considerable amount of research from scholars, it still has not received the attention it should. When the #MeToo movement went viral, these issues started to become more salient in society, however there was still backlash, insinuating that there is still a large amount of misunderstanding around the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. In this paper, I use my outsider looking in lens to examine reasoning behind the choice to report. Through looking at previous research in addition to my own case studies, I discover personal and institutional reasoning involved in the choice to report, in addition to details such as severity and assailant.

Introduction

This paper addresses the reasons women have for reporting or not reporting domestic violence and sexual assault. While this topic has received a considerable amount of

research from scholars, it still has not received the attention it should. Reasons behind reporting are quite interesting, in my opinion, and amidst the rising #MeToo and Time's Up™ movements, the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault have become more and more salient. Indeed, through these movements, we have been lucky enough to see a revolution beginning in our era. Women have come together in solidarity to show one another that it is okay to speak up about lived experiences with domestic and sexual violence. There are people willing to listen, understand, and sympathize with the unfortunate narratives hidden for so long, as if they are crimes that the women committed onto themselves.

Despite these gains, a backlash against the movement exists simultaneously. Conservative groups and individuals, in particular, have voiced that they believe the movement is an attack on men. A particular argument that those opposed to #MeToo often bring up is the idea that those who have been violated or assaulted in the past should have brought it forward directly after the attack occurred, not now. Another argument public opinion often brings forward against the movement is, why should we believe these women? Just because the women say that this

happened to them, does that necessarily make it true? What if they simply want something, such as money or fame, and are lying in order to receive it? At the 2018 Women's March in New Jersey, the state's first lady, Tammy Murphy, told the crowd in her speech that she had been sexually assaulted in the past. The comments I found underneath an online article pertaining to Murphy's speech were simply appalling (Carrera, 2018). One man in particular responded, "No she wasn't. There's no way in hell somebody was that goddamn desperate." He accompanied his comment with a GIF that read "WHORE."

Why is it so difficult to believe victims of domestic and sexual violence? Why are these crimes so different from others in terms of credibility? A very possible explanation is that women often speak out about the issue. Immediately after a woman comes out with her story, the audience must first look at who she is, what she looks like, and her sexual history in order to make the choice for themselves if this really happened or not. This topic is important because women deserve to have their voices heard rather than drowned out by these sorts of assumptions. I hope readers of this essay will begin to understand better that there is more to a story than what one sees on

the outside, particularly in cases of sexual assault and domestic violence.

In this paper, I use my lens as an outsider looking in. I ask: what is it like to be a woman who has had a fortunate life of never personally experiencing violence against women while consistently hearing stories from those that have? Since I cannot know what motivates women to report or not report from my own lived experiences, I examine case studies of two female victims of sexual assault who attend a public college in western New York. I use these case studies to gain insight on what factors in particular point women in the direction that they take after their incident. Only through stepping into the shoes of someone who has experienced domestic violence or sexual assault can we all understand what goes through the minds of victims both during and after the occurrence. It is important to note, however, that these crimes are by no means exclusively directed towards women; men, transgender, and non-binary individuals also regularly suffer from these acts. However, this study specifically focuses on women as victims due to my own status as a woman who is on the outside looking in. As part of my case study analysis, I discuss previous research on reasoning women have for reporting or not reporting their sexual

assault/domestic violence cases, and what led me to want to research this topic using an outsider-looking-in stance.

Prominent Factors for Why Women (Do Not) Report: Severity and Assailant

What factors operate in a victim's decision to report or not report an incident of sexual assault? Scholars point towards several contributing factors. Interestingly enough, Sable, Danis, Mauzy, and Gallagher (2006) state that the same reasons that kept individuals from reporting their cases decades ago are still very much relevant today, despite institutional efforts to dismantle those barriers. A commonly cited reason to not report is that the attack simply was not severe enough to be considered an issue that needed reporting (Felson, Messner, & Hosken, 2002; Spencer, Mallory, Toews, Stith, & Wood, 2017). Spencer et al. (2017) found this to be the most common reason why victims did not report their incidents. This gives way to the idea that certain kinds of abuse and violence are acceptable, and therefore, women do not identify them as malicious "enough" to report. This mentality could come from previous educational experiences dealing with violence against women. Such education

may have implied that only actions that are physical, violent, and severe can fit into the definitions of domestic violence and sexual assault.

In addition to severity, another prominent factor in reporting or not reporting one's case is the perpetrator him/herself. Jones, Alexander, Wynn, Rossman, and Dunnuck (2009), Spencer et al. (2017), and Sable et al. (2006) found that victims often cited that they did not want the assailant to get in trouble, or go to jail. This desire to protect the assailant may stem from knowing the person, and therefore, feeling obligated to keep them safe. Indeed, women are more likely to report if their attacker is a stranger (Felson et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2009). Jones et al.'s (2009) study found that about three-quarters of victims know their attacker, which is also consistent with data from the U.S. Department of Justice (Planty, Langton, Krebs, Berzofsky, & Smiley-McDonald, 2013). Since women are far more likely to know their attacker than not, this could contribute to women's strong desire to not report because they feel as though they must keep this significant other, friend, or family member out of the hands of the law.

Aside from relationship issues, the attacker also plays a role, in that women who do not wish to report often cite fear

that the perpetrator will attack again because she has accused him (Sable et al., 2006). Conversely, women may also report *because of* the fact that the perpetrator will strike again. This was one of the most common reasons for calling the police in Felson et al.'s (2002) study. In this way, retaliation could work either as a barrier or catalyst in a woman's decision-making process to report or not report an assault. In sum, factors related to the assailant have the capacity to play a large role in whether or not a survivor reports an incident of sexual and/or intimate partner violence.

Personal Factors

Although previous literature cites severity of attack and attack assailant as large factors in the choice to report, internal or personal reasons to report or not report often play a significant role as well. Sexual assault and domestic violence are traumatizing acts that can greatly impact one's sense of self. Deitz, Williams, Rife, and Cantrell (2015) found that victims could internalize a feeling of self-stigma, which in turn could lead to an increase in mental illness and decrease in self-esteem. This indicates that the incident could often leave one feeling ashamed and deviant, and therefore, the victim feels the need to hide it. This sense of self-stigma could be even more

salient for those who live in communities that are very conservative with discussions of sexuality. If a community chooses to paint instances of sexuality (even those that are consensual) as taboo and malicious, women would likely feel a stronger desire to keep the occurrence to themselves in fear of disgust and ostracism from her family and/or peers.

Indeed, shame and embarrassment have shown to be common reasons for a woman's choice to not report (Jones et al., 2009; Sable et al., 2006). Though less often cited compared to environmental reasons, such as relationship with the perpetrator (Jones et al., 2009), psychological reasons are still often at play, and they indicate that many women find themselves at least slightly at fault for the attack. Perhaps they feel that they did something wrong to put themselves in the situation, or that there were tactics that they should have taken in order to get themselves out of it. This evidences victim blaming and what is known as rape culture within our society. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth (1993), editors of *Transforming a Rape Culture*, define rape culture as a society where sexual aggression by males is encouraged, and violence against women is often seen as a fact of life, even sexy.

As mentioned above, within rape culture is the element of victim-blaming, in which society blames women for being attacked rather than putting fault on the assailant for his/her decisions. A victim's usage of drugs and alcohol at the time of the incident (Spencer et al., 2017), or even simply having a recent history of drug or alcohol usage (Jones et al., 2009), has also been shown to prevent some women from reporting violence. Again, these factors contribute to rape culture. If being under the influence contributes to one's disinclination to report, this could be because she does not specifically remember what happened, or she believes that she should have done something to stop the attack but was not mentally or physically capable of doing so at the time. As we know, individuals who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs are not capable of sexual consent, so it does not make sense to blame an intoxicated person for not saying no. Thus, we cannot put blame on the victim herself for making the decision to be under the influence, and for not being more active rather than passive in the assault. Once again, these reasons blame the victim, and unfortunately, she internalizes them to be rational, though they put no blame on her assailant.

Institutional Factors: Who Should I Talk to, and Who Will Believe Me?

It is also important to consider the relevant institutional factors when it comes to a woman's choice to report. Research has shown that victims of violence are concerned about both confidentiality and believability when it comes to reporting (Sable et al., 2006). This lack of trust in institutional systems could stem from a woman's lack of understanding about the resources that are available to her if she has experienced domestic violence or sexual assault. Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016), Sable et al. (2006), and Spencer et al. (2017) all found that victims oftentimes lacked knowledge on how to go about reporting their cases. Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016) even discovered in their study based on college women that both non-victims and victims of sexual and partner violence expressed that they were not familiar with the reporting resources their campus had to offer. Why is it common for students not to know about sexual assault resources, particularly on a college campus? Perhaps colleges and universities hold other student life resources (such as offices related to extracurricular) and policies (such as zero-tolerance for alcohol and drugs) to

a higher standard than those related to violence against women.

In addition to a lack of knowledge about, and confidentiality within, the reporting system, research has also shown that victims often possess a lack of trust towards the system. Jones et al. (2009) found that a significant reason for not reporting was that the victim felt the police would not be sensitive towards the situation, or would end up blaming her instead of the attacker. Likewise, Sable et al. (2006) found that victims did not see a reason to report, as the case would not be responded to properly enough for there to be a successful prosecution. Indeed, this mentality is warranted; according to RAINN (the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 2014), for every 1,000 rapes, 994 rapists will walk free. Criminal justice is known to mistreat cases that fall under the category of violence against women, and thus, women are reluctant to go through the process of reporting at all. Without trust in the prosecution system, there is essentially no reason for the reporting of abuse.

Conceptual Framework

In early September 2017, it seemed as though I kept coming across friend after friend of mine who was telling me about an incident of violence against women

that she was currently dealing with, or that she had dealt with in the past. At the end of that day, after having listened to about four stories about male-on-female violence, I sat in my room in anger. Why was it that men felt this sense of entitlement over us? Why is it that the issue of violence against women is so extremely prevalent in our society and yet, perpetrators are very rarely brought into the hands of the law?

Due to my passion for the topic of violence against women, I decided this was an area that I wanted to better understand. I focused on the reporting aspect of the issue because, upon discovering my friends' instances of assault and abuse, I noticed a common theme among them all: none reported the incident to an authority figure. I consistently asked myself why this might be.

To examine women's choices to report their domestic violence and sexual assault cases, in Fall 2017, I interviewed four women at a public college in western New York about their experiences with violence and what guided their decision to report or not. I conducted each interview in a public space, mostly academic buildings, and I told participants ahead of time that they could choose to opt out of speaking with me at any time if they felt the need to do

so. In this essay, I discuss two of the stories that I gathered and use these stories to gain a more descriptive understanding of ways survivors of violence describe their reporting experiences. At the outset of my research, I developed the perspective common to people fortunate enough to never have been assaulted or have a reason to report sexual violence. I believed that all women need to report their incidents immediately, in order to give themselves a feeling of closure and also to save any future victims from being hurt by a perpetrator.

I had the view of an outsider.

As an outsider, how could I possibly tell these women what their response should be? How could I develop a standpoint on the issue when I had never been a victim? I am an outsider looking in (Collins, 1986). I have had several friends confide in me about their experiences with sexual or domestic violence. Not only is this violence something that impacts me as their confidant, it is also something that I possess a good amount of knowledge on as a Women and Gender Studies student. I am able to understand these private troubles under the larger gaze of public issues, applying feminist concepts to personal narratives.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) discusses the idea of the outsider within concept in her article “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought.” Though Collins (1986) presents the concept as related to black women looking at a male-dominated, white-dominated world, this could also apply to looking at victims of sexual and domestic violence. While I do possess a decent amount of knowledge on the topic, I am still an outsider. My Women and Gender studies make me an outsider within. Collins (1986) states that being an outsider brings a questioning process to the table and allows one to escape any “taken-for-granted assumptions” that may impact those on the inside (p. 27). Looking from the outside allows you to see things from a fresh perspective, questioning the established norms that are at play. While possessing a fresh perspective is important, equally important is listening to and understanding those who are on the inside. Injecting my own opinions into stories which I knew nothing about was not only nonsensical, it was also unfair. Only through looking into these women’s lives as that outsider within could I fully understand their narratives and reasoning.

Through being an outsider looking in, I began to better understand the viewpoint of someone who has gone through this violence. What if the victim was close to the perpetrator and did not want to see them prosecuted or genuinely believed that (s)he did not *mean* to be harmful? What if the woman truly believed that the action was not severe enough to report, possibly because she has been abused in the past and it is now normalized for her?

I also began to view the issue from an intersectional lens, taking into account the varying identities that women may possess. For instance, though women of all socioeconomic statuses may worry about the shame society places on victims, women from higher statuses may feel that discussing the violence they experienced would threaten their presumed work and home life standing. Women from lower statuses might be concerned that reporting a crime could mean losing their own or a partner’s income and further their financial troubles. Women of color, because of racism, may be afraid that their allegations will not be taken seriously and may reinforce their marginality. Lesbian women may not understand that they themselves can experience sexual assault or domestic violence due to the heteronormativity that tends to

surround these discussions. They may also fear that, if they do come forward with their case, they will have to be out with their sexuality even though they do not want to disclose this information. Women of all identities are at risk when they report their incidents. However, women whose sexual identity, race, and class intersect, such as black and lesbian for example, find themselves further scrutinized. This scrutiny creates an even greater chance of putting their work, family, and personal stability at risk.

Case Studies

The two case studies that I used gave me an opportunity to look deeper into the lives and situations of two victims of sexual assault/domestic violence. Both of these women had significant lived experiences to tell that were important to listen to, not only for them to release their stories, but also for the sake of providing a better understanding of women's experience with violence and reasons they chose not to report the crime.

Linda¹

Linda is a straight, white woman whose boyfriend stalked her. While Linda was aware that occupying dominant identities such as heterosexual and

Caucasian allowed her some privilege in the situation, she still chose not to report the stalking. She was afraid that her boyfriend would retaliate, especially since he had been in the military and therefore came off as an intimidating, potentially dangerous man. The primary reason Linda chose not to report the stalking was she did not see the incident as a big enough issue. Specifically, she stated that "he was just stalking me" and "he was just being annoying." Additionally, she said that she did not even really have knowledge on what stalking was at the time. Linda was quite uncertain about the incident in general, even stopping to ask me at one point whether she was "crazy" for believing what she believed about the violence.

Linda illustrates an interesting perspective that ties in quite well with existing research. As Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016), Sable et al. (2006), and Spencer et al. (2017) found to be common among victims of violence, Linda was too afraid and confused about the situation to know how to respond to it. She did not possess the proper knowledge that would have allowed her to understand what stalking is, how to spot it, and also to understand that it is an issue. In Linda's mind, stalking was

¹ Pseudonym

not violent but a rather mundane act, and therefore, she did not see a need to report it. This directly corresponds with research by Felson et al. (2002) and Spencer et al. (2017), which states that victims do not always see the severity in their circumstances, and therefore, do not believe that they have a reason to report. As an outsider who also possesses knowledge on the topic of domestic violence, I see this case immediately point to a need for a greater level of education on domestic violence and sexual assault, preferably starting somewhere in the middle school years. If women such as Linda continue to water down their instances of violence against women, seeing them as normal and unimportant, this allows us as both society and individuals to understand that certain acts of violence are acceptable and should simply be expected if you are a woman. In reality, however, any instance of violence, sexualization, or objectification against woman should simply not be tolerated, as they are all perpetuations of abuses in patriarchal power and dominance.

Linda also feared for her own safety, believing that if she were to take action against her stalker he would retaliate. Again, this directly relates to research by

Sable et al. (2006), which stated that women fear retaliation if they report their cases. In this way, it appears that domestic violence cases can turn into a Catch-22; whether or not survivors report their cases, they could get hurt again. Indeed, women are often cornered by their assailants to the point at which they feel there is no way out. This relates back to the need for more confidentiality and safety for women who report these cases. If a woman does not feel as though she can safely report to someone without the assailant finding out, she may lose her desire to report. This aspect of Linda's case again addresses a need for more education about how the reporting process works. She faced several barriers in combating the violence that her partner had placed upon her, leading her to feel the need to downplay what was occurring to her and not report it.

Carly²

Carly, another victim of stalking, dealt with elements of stalking in a different way than Linda. Carly is a white, lesbian student whose girlfriend was both physically and emotionally abusive. Barriers that stood in Carly's way from reporting her abuse were that it was her

² Pseudonym

girlfriend, so she did not want to harm the relationship with someone that she loved, and also, that her girlfriend was struggling with mental health issues, saying she would kill herself if the relationship ended. Particularly, though, Carly's sexuality played a large role in her lack of desire to report. As a lesbian, she did not even know that she could report or file a restraining order, and she believed that people would say that she was lying and that women cannot be abusive to other women. Carly felt ashamed of what was happening, though she did end up reporting the incident when it turned to stalking, as it began to affect the relationship at that time.

Carly's story also follows previous research results that affirm her situation. As a lesbian woman, she did not quite understand that her relationship could even be abusive, as she had only learned about abuse from a heteronormative perspective. Due to this, she feared that her situation would be looked down upon, or not even believed at all. This corresponds well with the study by Frankland and Brown (2014), which pointed out the lack of research existing on same-sex domestic violence (SSDV). Considering non-heterosexual violence has gone vastly understudied, it makes sense that little education on SSDV exists, either, creating a lack of

understanding around violence in lesbian relationships.

Indeed, Carly's incident shows us the important element of intersectionality when it comes to domestic violence—in this case, the importance of sexuality. This shows that, as predicted, lesbian women are certainly at a disadvantage when victimized. Non-heterosexual women, in general, are left out of everyday conversations of partner violence, as these discussions so often center around the idea of a man and a woman in a relationship, with the man normally painted as the abuser. Due to this stereotypical image, non-heterosexual women are led to believe that, unfortunately, if their abuser is not male, their case has no validity. Carly's case, therefore, shows us the importance of educating on the topic of domestic violence and sexual assault with an intersectional lens. It is necessary to realize that, due to their varying backgrounds, women's identities cause them to approach their incidents and reporting choices differently from one another.

Carly did not know where to go when she found herself in a violent relationship, corresponding with the findings of Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016), Sable et al. (2006), and Spencer et al. (2017), and she did not see a need to

even report the situation until after stalking had occurred on top of physical and emotional abuse. As with Linda's case, this resonates with the research by Felson et al. (2002) and Spencer et al. (2017) regarding the important role that case severity plays on one's decision to report. Moreover, Carly did not know how to respond properly to a situation where her partner was threatening suicide if Carly was to break up with her. This must have put a great deal of anxiety upon her. She did not know that the proper response was to let someone else know, so as to take this worry off of her shoulders.

Linda and Carly's narratives give us a glimpse into the lived experiences of women who have encountered sexual assault and domestic violence. Through using my outsider looking within lens (Collins, 1986), I was able to further understand reasons behind a woman's choice to report or not report instances of violence. In particular, these women pointed towards the relevance of severity of the case, fear of retaliation, and an overall lack of understanding when it comes to what constitutes violence and how one should go about reporting it. Also important to note, when examining a woman's reasoning to report or not report, we must consider the stereotypes that marginalized

women face. For instance, while lesbian women may not even know that they can experience domestic violence as seen in Carly's case, it is possible that their cases may not be taken seriously. Our society tends only to see men as abusers, and thus, a violent lesbian relationship does not seem logical to some. Therefore, the expectations placed on certain groups of people can play a role in a woman's choice to report. In sum, though these are only two case studies that cannot be generalized to larger populations, they are still valid, real-life experiences which show us where improvement is needed, both institutionally and interpersonally, when it comes to discussions of sexual assault and domestic violence.

Conclusion

Looking back on my perceptions of domestic violence and sexual assault from a year ago, I can see the faults with my beliefs. I thought that there was no reason for survivors not to report their case to an authority figure and that they had the moral obligation to save other women from being preyed upon. Over the course of this research, however, I learned the faults within this belief. I learned how to be an outsider looking within (Collins, 1986). I learned how to use my own knowledge on sociology and women and gender to understand and

advocate for others. This has made all the difference on my ability to empathize and show compassion for those whose voices are too often silenced.

I believe that it is everyone's obligation to look deeper when it comes to complex social issues. It is never acceptable to say, "She was asking for it." It is never acceptable to say, "Why didn't she report sooner?" It is never acceptable to say, "How do we know she is telling the truth?" Now is the time to listen to women, to trust women. It is time we as a society begin looking at structures within complex issues. How can we transform the criminal justice system to instill more confidence in women, and ensure that their cases will be handled appropriately? How can we let more people know about Title IX sexual harassment legislation? How do we make sure that women understand that all cases are important, and that all perpetrators should be held responsible?

Under the same principle, it is time we start to see the oppressions of women. When I read Heather Burtman's (2010) paper "My Body Doesn't Belong to You" last July, it spoke to me on a certain level. Though I am not a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault, there have been times where my body has not felt like my body. There have been times that a man has led me to

believe that I am an object. Feeling objectified is one of the worst things that I have ever felt. It makes me feel as though I need to shower off the comments that have been placed upon me, so that I can return to my most basic self, in which I am not defined by these oppressors. I know my worth, and I know that I am the subject of my life. To experience objectification to the extent that you are left with physical or mental scars is something that I hope to never experience. However, I know that others have experienced it. These women deserve to be the subjects of their lives. Future women deserve to be the subjects of their lives. They deserve to learn, thrive, and grow in an environment that does not teach them that a man has the ability to take their success out from under them. They deserve not to be taught that walking home alone is a death sentence, or that leaving your drink out of your sight at a party guarantees rape. As equal members of society, women deserve the equal right of simply living without a disproportionate amount of threats thrown at them from every direction.

We are all outsiders looking in, in some capacity. Whether it be in terms of identities, such as race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or in terms of experiences, like domestic violence and

sexual assault. We all possess certain unconscious biases and perspectives that are rather basic and do not take into account the nuanced structures and emotions that are involved in other people's lives. Because of this, it is important that we listen to one another.

Only through active listening and understanding can we create social change. With such change, we can allow each member of society the right to grow, without defining them based upon their marginalized identities.

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