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I Want to Get This off My Chest: When Perpetrators Publicly Disclose how They Raped Their Victims

In 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a study that declared that the rates of sexual violence in the United States were comparable to the rates of those in the war-torn Congo, a nation where rape is considered a weapon of war and about 1,000 women are raped daily (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010). Shortly after, the Pentagon reported that sexual assault in the military was at an all-time high, with about 26,000 service members victimized that year (Cloud, 2013). Then, The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) revealed that every two minutes an American is sexually assaulted (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 2014), and the World Health Organization prepared to deem violence against women a global epidemic (World Health Organization, 2013). In short, sexual assault posed a serious threat to women's health and little progress seemed to be made on stemming the issue.

While sexual assault awareness gained momentum, social media garnered global attention as well. Facebook announced that it had collected one billion users reaching one in every seven people worldwide (Smith, Segall, & Cowley, 2012). Twitter saw users collectively send about 175 million tweets per day (Honigman, 2012), Reddit boasted 37 billion page views annually (Blog.reddit, 2012), and the Pew Research Center revealed that 72 percent of American adults used some form of social media (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Against that backdrop, an anonymous online user turned to social media to try to better understand why perpetrators commit sexual assault. The person used the popular social media website, reddit.com, to posit: "Reddit's had a few threads about sexual assault victims, but are there any redditors from the other side of the story? What were your motivations? Do you regret it?" Within hours, dozens of self-described perpetrators responded to this prompt by sharing their stories of sexual assault. Within days, that number grew into the hundreds, and comments on the initial post reached into the thousands by week's end, sparking a viral national news story, with institutions such as Jezebel, the Huffington Post, and TIME writing articles about the

phenomenon. This thread presented our research team with a series of narratives from perpetrators different from those usually studied.

Many of the studies regarding sexual violence rely on either survivor narratives or a non-representative sample of perpetrators. Specifically, much research uses data collected from convicted perpetrators, even though they comprise a minority of sexual assailants. Jailed individuals endure a process – including indictment and conviction – experienced by about only 3 percent of perpetrators (Tjaden, & Thoennes, 2006). Researchers choose to gather data from this portion of the population because these individuals are available and accessible, having already been identified as perpetrators (Fulu, Garcia-Moreno, Jewkes, & Roselli, 2013.) Furthermore, researchers using this population do not have to endure the trying process of recruiting members of the public. Few non-convicted perpetrators are likely to reveal their actions, as admission of assault has potential negative consequences, legal, social, or otherwise (Wild, 1988). For this reason, it is unusual to have a set of sexual assault narratives from non-incarcerated perpetrators. However, an anonymous online site allows perpetrators a safe place to reveal their actions, with no threat of in-person judgment or legal ramification.

Collecting data from an online community offers many potential rewards, such as a potentially broader sample able to more freely share their experiences in a space deemed safe because it is anonymous. However, it is also important to recognize that this method also presents possible complications. For example, people in differing socio-economic positions might not have the same regular access to online spaces, limiting the generalizability of the sample. Also, the anonymous nature of the site means that the data might not be consistent, as individuals could create multiple user names to present numerous identities and varying narratives.

Despite these potential limitations, the data present a unique opportunity to gain insight into the reason perpetrators choose to disclose. While little is known about why perpetrators disclose, much research exists on what causes sexual assault survivors to reveal details about an incident. Self-disclosure of a rape has been found to alleviate anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as to improve the overall state of an individual's mental health (Smyth,

Pennebaker, & Arigo, 2012). Research has also found that writing about emotional topics via online methods, such as e-mail, can significantly increase positive health outcomes (Sheese, Brown, & Graziano, 2004).

These findings are parallel to research that shows that maintaining secrets impacts psychological and physiological health (Vrij, Nunkoosing, Paterson, Oosterwegel, & Soukara, 2003). Total secrecy about personal events remains rare, as most individuals choose to share their secret with at least one other person. Furthermore, maintaining secrecy about serious issues revealed negative health effects, ostensibly a result of such long-held emotions as guilt and regret. However, “opening up” about a long-held secret produced positive health impacts (Pennebaker, 1997). Those who chose to disclose secrets in what they deemed as safe space experienced improved well-being.

By using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), this present study investigates the origin of the perpetrators’ desire to disclose and investigates this by using the perpetrators’ first-hand accounts of sexual assault to better understand the nature of sexual assault perpetration when disclosure takes place in an anonymous setting. Based on existing research, we sought to answer the question of which emotions are most experienced by perpetrators, and we expected that perpetrators used an anonymous platform to reveal secrets as they confronted such feelings as guilt, regret, and a desire to ease their own conscience.

Method

In 2005, the social news website reddit.com appeared online. Dubbing itself as the “front page of the Internet,” the online bulletin board allowed registered users to submit content such as stories, links to other websites, pictures, and videos. The site rapidly became a phenomenon, and by 2012, it boasted such impressive statistics as more than 5.2 billion monthly visits and 3 million registered users (Weber, 2012).

The site works much like Facebook, in that registered users can post content and other users can comment on the item at hand. However, reddit.com differs from other social media sites in that it incorporates a voting system. Instead of “liking” a comment, such as on Facebook, users give either an “up-vote” or a “down-vote” to posts. These votes determine where the post

appears on the website. Only the most popular content makes it to the front page. Items with poor readership are displayed on later pages. User comments made on posts are submitted to the same voting system, with each comment moving up or down based on user votes.

This study started in July 2012, when a member of our research team discovered a reddit post which read: “Reddit’s had a few threads about sexual assault victims, but are there any redditors from the other side of the story? What were your motivations? Do you regret it?,” The post came from an anonymous online user of the social media website. No one involved with this research played a role in posting the prompt or had any prior knowledge of the prompt.

We began collecting the comments shared in response to the post. Due to the overwhelming popularity of and participation in the controversial post, we decided to only gather the first-hand narratives posted in the first two days after the prompt appeared. We decided to collect from only the first two days in order to avoid analyzing posts that had been possibly been written as a result of the news coverage of the post. This initial culling resulted in 12,000 comments. Researchers then further parsed the data by focusing only on posts that included first-hand accounts of sexual perpetration, eliminating comments that were just posted in response to a narrative. This was done as researchers sought to solely study sexual assault rather than comments posted as a reaction to sexual assault. The data were then further reduced by including only stories of male-to-female violence, as this is the most common type of sexual assault (United States Department of Justice, 2005). Additionally, only the top posts that received comments were added to the data set. Reddit has a history of strong user curation, with posts that most impact the reader rising to the top through the rating system. We reasoned that the number of collective upvotes and downvotes could assist in determining which stories had the greatest impact on readers. Finally, stories of child abuse were removed from the collection, as we wanted to investigate only narratives of adult sexual assault. This left 78 first-hand accounts of male sexual assault perpetration.

All data remained anonymous, as reddit.com does not require identifying information to post comments. However, some users chose to create a “throwaway account,” which is an online profile created for the sole purpose of posting comments in a controversial thread.

Due to the nature of the content, an iterative and inductive qualitative method was the most appropriate approach to data analysis, as it allowed researchers to discover themes among the data rather than looking for pre-conceived themes.

To reduce author bias, researchers individually read the narratives, allowing themes to emerge from the stories. From there, researchers gathered in a group setting to share the themes they discovered. Researchers then compared the themes they found to those uncovered by the rest of the research team, identifying which themes repeatedly appeared in the narratives. At that point, researchers were able to identify which themes remained most prominent, and further examination of the themes continued as researchers translated themes into codes, which are a word or phrase explicitly describing data, while themes are more subtle and inclusive (Saldana, 2013).

Again, researchers individually defined codes, according to their own interpretation of the data, and again, researchers gathered in a group setting to compare the wording of their codes to the codes created by other researchers. From there, researchers discussed, clarified, and further honed the wording for the codes until a consensus was reached and all agreed on a universal code for the emotion or phenomenon shared by the perpetrators. After multiple rounds of an iterative discussion regarding themes and codes, researchers then focused on identifying patterns and similarities across the stories. This attempt to better determine interconnectivity between themes was accomplished by a team of three individuals coding the stories using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas TI.

Results

The results of this study answer the initial research question of which emotions are most commonly expressed by sexual perpetrators. As hypothesized, men's decision to publicly disclose their experiences as a perpetrator of sexual assault produced such stated emotions as guilt, regret, and a need to ease one's conscience. However, further analysis revealed the unexpected findings of perpetrator confusion regarding the sexual assault, as well as questioning whether or not actions were inappropriate or criminal.

Analysis of the results will first describe characteristics of those involved in the described sexual assault. We then will address the various methods perpetrators used during the assaults. Then, we examine the perpetrators' stated feelings about the sexual assault. Finally, we will discuss how these feelings resulted in a state of confusion and questioning.

Characteristics and assault methods

First, it is important to note that we found that the majority of perpetrators said they knew their victim prior to the assault, with perpetrators describing victims as partners, ex-partners, friends, acquaintances, or family members. Additionally, perpetrators reported using a variety of methods to commit sexual assault, including verbal pressure, alcohol and drugs, incapacitation, force, or a combination.

Guilt or regret

Many perpetrators stated that they chose to disclose their actions on reddit because they felt guilt or regret about their actions. One perpetrator said that he felt "fucking sick" with himself and said that he regretted that act that had "left a mark on my conscience for years." Another perpetrator said that he did not consider a sexual encounter with a partner to be sexual assault until she told him she considered it as such. He wrote, "I have never in my life felt as shitty and depressed as when she told me that she felt what happened was rape. I never and will never feel as low as what happened that night." While some perpetrators offered context for their assault, providing intricate details about the event, others chose to omit any narrative about the assault and instead only commented on their feelings about their experience. One perpetrator shared no background about committing an assault, and only said, "I am sorry. Completely and utterly sorry." Although a minority of perpetrators clearly stated that they felt no remorse for their actions, a majority of those who shared their narrative in some way expressed feelings of guilt and remorse.

Easing of conscience

Furthermore, a large portion of respondents said that they participated in the reddit thread because they wanted to ease their consciences. Perpetrators said they were revealing their secret

in an effort to achieve emotional healing, expressing their need for catharsis with such statements as, “I just need to get this off my chest.” They went on to reveal that they had “done a number of fucked up things,” and they “just want[ed] someone to read this confession.” Numerous narratives included comments such as “I wish I knew how to apologize for this,” and one perpetrator even went so far as to say, “[Posting on this thread is my] therapy, I guess... I feel better for sharing.”

Warning to others

A subset of perpetrators said that they had decided to share their stories because they wanted to make amends by serving as a “warning to others.” One perpetrator wrote, “I hope someone... even just one person... reads this...” Another said, “So, I hope this doesn’t get buried (in the other comments on the forum) because this is the only time I have ever talked about this, ever, and I hope my catharsis can be helpful for someone.”

Questioning

Such feelings of guilt and remorse were anticipated. However, many of the respondents said that they shared their stories of sexual assault not necessarily because they experienced remorse, but rather because they experienced confusion about their actions during the described sexual assault.

For example, one respondent said that he wanted the online community to help him determine whether his actions constituted assault. He questioned whether he had crossed a line when he assumed consent during a sexual encounter and said he would “like to hear your opinions if I can get them.” He further went on to write, “I would really like to hear some opinions as to whether what I did was wrong or not, and if so, how wrong it was.” Another perpetrator said, “Never shared this before and not sure if it’s considered rape, although I would like your opinion.” While this need to question actions was not expressed by a majority of respondents, the emotional content associated with these narratives was quite strong.

In summary, the most reoccurring themes to emerge were those of guilt, remorse, and a need to ease one’s conscience. An additional and unexpected theme of questioning one’s own

actions also provided interesting insight into perpetrators' mindsets. The data discovered in these narratives led to the conclusion that perpetrators' stated emotions and reactions regarding the sexual assault seemed to directly affect their decisions to publicly disclose.

Discussion

Our study involved a different social media source than those most frequently used in previous research, presenting unique challenges in gathering and sorting data. With vast amounts of data in the form of comments on the thread, we had to create a process of distilling the comments into a manageable data set. Consistent coding remained a challenge up until several rounds of definition revising and recoding of the stories. Due to the anonymous nature of reddit, our study also lacked demographic information on the participants selected.

The largest themes to emerge, remorse and guilt, present a series of further research questions and public policy implications. Most importantly, if the perpetrators knew what they were doing was wrong, why did they still do it? Many perpetrators reported using a variety of tactics, such as alcohol use or force, to further the sexual encounter and openly admitted to assaulting their victims. Researchers could probe into perpetrators' accounts to explore key intervention points and examine the justifications that overrode the perpetrators' sense of wrongdoing at the time of the assault.

Additionally, researchers could explore what triggered guilt and the need to share their story at a later time. The need to disclose the stories of perpetration anonymously suggests that there are minimal outlets for people to ask questions about sex in person. Many perpetrators also expressed confusion about what consent meant and how to determine if their partner was consenting. In spite of online resources, in person representatives or therapists available to answer their questions, the perpetrators turned toward each other and their peers to further understand their experiences and negative emotions.

Future studies could make use of discussion groups and peer led activities to investigate perpetrator disclosure and examine what beliefs, attitudes, and behavior contributed to the perpetration of sexual assault. By opening discussions about consent and sexual assault, public

health officials and researchers could further understand what misconceptions people have and create targeted campaigns to address them in a sex-positive manner. Additionally researchers could explore any different outcomes between professionally-led and peer-led sexual assault prevention programs.

Furthermore, researchers could utilize social media to gather more information on people's attitudes and behaviors towards sexual assault and healthy sex practices. While social media is commonly used as a method of recruitment, few studies utilize the actual content in social media as a basis for qualitative or quantitative research. Future studies could exemplify how to evaluate content from social media to inform public health experts on common misconceptions about consent and sexual assault. More specifically, researchers could look outside of the usual social media targets of research, Facebook and Twitter, and examine alternative methods of collecting and disseminating information on other forms of social media.

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