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Communicating Support: Applying Communication Theory  
To Assess and Improve Disclosure Encounters with Sexual Assault Survivors

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## Abstract

The epidemic of sexual violence is a far too common occurrence within the United States. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010), an estimated one in five women and one in 71 men are raped in their lifetime. This problem is perpetuated by a variety of factors, including lack of reporting. According to the Department of Justice (2003), rape is the most under-reported crime, with an estimated 63% of sexual assaults not being reported to police. Even when reports do occur, many survivors have negative experience in their reporting encounters, due in part to the responses of those to whom they choose to disclose. This in turn creates a complicated series of obstacles for survivors of this particular form of trauma and often lengthens their road to recovery. Informed by scholarship in communication and related fields, this project communicatively examines the impact of those responses to sexual violence disclosures. It further proposes theory-supported means to improve responders' trauma-informed responses to abuse survivors' disclosures. Standpoint, facework, communication privacy management, and muted group theories are consulted to help shape improved interpersonal interactions between support providers and survivors.

## Communicating Support: Applying Communication Theory

### To Assess and Improve Disclosure Encounters with Sexual Assault Survivors

As a college student I have come to learn that almost everyone around me has somehow been affected or victimized by the issue of sexual violence. After two years of developing and presiding over a student-run organization on my university's campus, participating at local and national levels to address and combat sexual and gender-based violence, as well as studying the issue further within much of my communication studies, it only felt fitting to end my journey at the University of Portland with a capstone that investigates the issue I'm so passionate about.

When understanding the problem of sexual violence, the way individuals, groups, or organizations respond to admissions of sexual trauma is significant in the post-assault experience of a survivor. It should be noted that the term *survivor* is used throughout this paper, for it is seen as more empowering terminology than identifying those affected by sexual violence as victims. Based on research within communication and other related fields, this paper provides communicative means to understand shortcomings, as well as methods of intentional, trauma-informed responses to support providers in order to improve interpersonal encounters between survivors of sexual violence and those to whom they disclose their assaults.

### **Positioning the Problem**

The epidemic of sexual violence is a far too common occurrence within the United States. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010), an estimated one in five women and one in 71 men are raped within their lifetime. This problem is perpetuated by a variety of factors, such as lack of reporting. According to the Department of Justice (2003), rape is the most under-reported crime, with an estimated 63% of sexual assaults not being reported to police. However, even when reports do occur, many survivors have

negative experience in their reporting encounters, due largely in part to the responses to those whom they choose to disclose. This in turn creates a complicating series of obstacles for survivors of this particular form of trauma, and often makes for a strenuous road to recovery. Informed by scholarship in communication and related fields, this project examines communicatively the impact of those responses to disclosures of sexual violence, and proposes ways to improve encounters between survivors and those to whom they disclose their assaults by providing intentional communication responses to support providers. Through Standpoint Theory, Facework, Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory, and Muted Group Theory (MGT), this paper provides tenets of these communication phenomena in order to shape justification for these proposed forms of interpersonal interactions between support providers and survivors.

### **Disclosure to Support Providers**

When trying to understand best practices of support for survivors of sexual violence, understanding forms of interpersonal disclosure encounters is crucial. Sexual assault is widely understood as a very traumatic experience. Sexual assault often results in significant issues for survivors, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (Ullman & Filipas, 2001, p. 1028). The effect of trauma on a survivor manifests in many forms, and if they choose to disclose their assault they often face more victimization through the support seeking process.

### **Formal vs. Informal**

When survivors of sexual violence seek support post-assault through disclosure, there are two types of disclosure and support: formal and informal (Ahrens, Cabral, & Abeling, 2009, Sabina & Ho, 2014; Ullman & Filipas, 2001; Ullman, 2000). Formal disclosure and support

refers to instances where people disclose in a more structured setting, such as when they file a report to some authority (such as police) and follows an official protocol to discuss what happened to them. If for a variety of reasons someone feels that they cannot disclose to an authority, they often may disclose informally, to spouses or partners, friends, or families (Middleton, et. al., 2016). This type of disclosure/support is informal, as it is usually between survivors and people they know more intimately, or with whom have an existing or prior relationship.

Research suggests that while assault is a vastly underreported crime, survivors are more likely to disclose to informal support providers than to formal support providers such as police or medical personnel (Ahrens, et. al., 2009; Sabina & Ho, 2014; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Research shows several reasons why many survivors choose not to formally disclose or formally seek support. These reasons include potential fear of not being believed, guilt that they may somehow be to blame for the assault, worry that they may receive retaliation from their attacker, or concern that they may be labeled as a victim in the process (Ahrens, et. al., 2009; Campbell, 1998; Middleton, et. al., 2016; Sabina & Ho, 2014). Any one of those ill-perceptions easily might be signaled with formal communication encounters when poorly done, without sufficient attention to navigating identity and relational messages fully present in such encounters (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006). For all these reasons, including the complex ways formal support systems vary in how they provide support (e.g. a hospital providing medical treatment versus a crisis center focused on healing versus a police station focused on solving a crime), there are many obstacles to initiate formal disclosure for survivors of sexual violence. Campbell (1998) illustrates ways formal support services differ:

Community resources for rape victims are often piecemeal and uncoordinated as different systems perform different functions. For example, victims go to the hospital for the rape exam and evidence collection; to the police station to meet with a detective; to the state's attorney to discuss prosecution; to the rape crisis center for information and crisis counseling; and to many other agencies as well (p. 356).

All of these providers serve their specific functions, but with the multiple reporting options and their differing intentions, often survivors do not seek formal support or even disclose to a formal support provider, so as not to have to deal with the varying systems and the potentially re-traumatization sometimes faced through involvement with formal support networks' procedures.

The reasons why survivors of sexual violence disclose or do not disclose are varied and circumstantial dependent on their experience of assault, but certain groups have more access to resources and formal and/or informal support services than others. For college students from 18-24 years of age sexual violence occurs at a higher rate than any other time in their lives (Sabina & Ho, 2014, p. 201). While this does happen at vastly higher rates, colleges are very unique in how they are set up to support students, "The college campus is one that provides a microcosm of the services available in the larger community. For example, campuses may have their own health center, counseling center, police officers, policies, and judicial process" (Sabina & Ho, 2014, p. 202). Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, and Turner (2003) defined campus authorities as campus law enforcement, resident hall advisors, deans, professors, other college authorities, and on-campus bosses, employers, or supervisors" (as cited in Sabina & Ho, 2014, p. 203). Here not only do survivors have access to formal "support providers" on campus, there is a close-knit and familial sense when they live on a college campus that offers informal support from friends, classmates, roommates, etc. (Sabina & Ho, 2014).

In total, these support networks make a difference in a survivor's post-assault experience, and lead to positive or negative outcomes for affected individual(s). Understanding the complex network of providers available for formal and informal disclosure is important to learning how to best service and support survivors of sexual violence.

### **Reactions Matter**

While there may be a multitude of support services, both formal and informal, research shows that survivors' wellness post-assault is considerably dependent on how support providers react to their disclosures. Ullman (1996a) identified in a Social Reactions Questionnaire (SRQ) the seven types of reactions to sexual assault from support providers, formal and informal alike: emotional support, tangible aid/information support, victim blame, taking control, distraction, treating the survivor differently post-assault, and egocentric behavior from the (potential) support provider (as cited in Ullman, 2000, p. 258). She classified the first two as positive social reactions, noting emotional support and tangible aid or action as being registered as positive from survivors of assault. She typified the latter five as negative: (1) Putting blame on the survivor for what occurred is harmful to supporting them post-assault, (2) taking control of their decisions post-assault – i.e. telling them what they should or should not do – is harmful, (3) using distraction and telling a survivor to move on post assault is not conducive to healing, (4) treating the survivor differently and stigmatizing their experience is problematic, and last but not least, (5) exhibiting egocentric “responses where the support provider focused on his or her own needs instead of the victim” is seen as unsupportive and not in the best interest of the survivor and their healing (Ullman, 2000, p. 258).

These reactions may vary, and are dependent on the relationship the person, group, or organization has in association with the survivor (Ullman, 2000). In cases of formal disclosure,



there are more barriers to disclose and more potential negative reactions that limited survivors' willingness to disclose to these support providers (Sabina & Ho, 2014). Contrastingly, while many survivors are more willing to disclose to an informal support survivor such as a friend, roommate, or family member, there are still negative social reactions when there is a personal relationship between the support provider(s) and the survivor (Sabina & Yo, 2014; Middleton, et. al., 2016). More interestingly, many survivors experience reactions of sufficient acknowledgement and validation of their experience from their informal support provider(s), but those providers often don't have sufficient knowledge of tangible resources or information for other support services for survivors (Middleton, et. al., 2016).

These support providers can make a world of change for those who disclose their assault(s), as survivors are attentive to the messages and within a support provider's response that may reinforce their concerns about reporting at all. Both formal and informal support services can negatively impact a survivor if they choose to disclose their assault, which is why many fear disclosing it in the first place. Given the immense role support networks play in the experience of a survivor post-assault, there is reason to implore comprehensive tools in order to effectively respond to survivors of sexual violence who choose to disclose their experience. Providing methods of response for those within support networks – formal or informal – can create a more positive outcome for a survivor post-assault and reduce their likelihood of further feelings of victimization (Ullman, 2000). This report now applies several communication theories to explain the logic of best practices.

### **Recognizing Standpoints in Communication Encounters**

Disclosure and reactions to such disclosure from a support provider affect the experience of someone victimized by sexual violence, therefore it is imperative to learn appropriate

responses to admissions of victimization for providers operating in these interpersonal contexts.

In understanding how to most effectively and appropriately respond to these forms of disclosure, support providers (both formal and informal) must primarily be cognizant of context and identities that exist amidst the interaction (Wilson, Fauci, & Goodman, 2015). This means the provider or network must understand their position or relationship in conjunction with the survivor, and in order to effectively support the survivor, they must be aware of how different systems of injustice and oppression factor into a survivor's ability or willingness to disclose. Standpoint Theory articulates that social positioning in a culture relative to others shapes not only what individuals know but also how they interact with others (Wood, 2009). Standpoint also acknowledges the presence of symbolic privilege and marginalization within identities that further impact interactions, as well as the materialistic resources accessible to individuals because of their social and symbolic positioning (Wood, 2009).

The tools provided in this paper to better assess and respond disclosures of sexual violence are intended to be effective regardless of a support provider's standpoint in society or within an organizational frame, but it must be noted that these are certain factors to be aware of before entering into a space and dialogue with a survivor about their trauma, as survivors of sexual violence are also bringing in their standpoints. Additionally, if a support provider feels that their position may compromise any of the intentions for effective and trauma-informed response, it may be best if they redirect the survivor to other resources or support networks that may better serve their needs. This can be the case for those who are required to report any disclosure of alleged sexual assault to proper authorities even against the wishes of the survivor.

**Self-Face and Privacy Management: Establishing Emotional Safety and Trust**

Forming appropriate responses intends to minimize further victimization for the affected survivor, as well as create a path for healing. Research suggests that support providers ought to focus on establishing emotional safety and trust with the survivor within the encounter (Wilson, Fauci, & Goodman, 2015; Hope, 2018; Conley & Griffith, 2016). This is crucial to ensuring that the survivor is entering into a space where they are able to disclose without fear of blame, judgment, or retaliation from those with whom they are sharing this (Wilson, et. al., 2015). In admissions of one's sexual trauma, often there is facework concern from the survivor for self-face in the encounter: "Face is the desired self-image that individuals present to others. One's face is not static; rather, face may be adapted according to a variety of situational or relational concerns about efficiency, privacy, or appropriateness" (Samp, 2015).

In recognition of a survivor's potential threat to self-face and facework, it is in the best interest of the support provider to meet them with reassurance that their disclosure will not be met with such blame, judgment, or retaliation as they may fear. This further encourages the emotional security and trust from the support survivor that they are intending to communicate. This tactic also centers the needs of the survivor and establishes that the primary concern of this interaction is their well-being and recovery from this trauma. Therefore, it can create a space that is non-threatening and in turn may help them feel more comfortable sharing this information.

Support providers are not only encouraged to create a comfortable environment for disclosures, but also be able to appropriately respond and assess the specific disclosure once it takes place. Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory illustrates how individuals manage privacy through communication (Petronio, 2009). Two of the basic principles within CPM explain that individuals feel it is their right to control private information and exercise such

control through revealing or concealing, and that those with whom they share this information become co-owners of the confidential information (Petronio, 2009). In disclosures of sexual assault, support providers become these co-owners of sensitive information, and it is ultimately up to these providers to respect those boundaries in order to create emotional safety and trust with the survivor in these encounters. Now, as mentioned prior, this may differ depending on one's position or relationship in conjunction with a survivor; however, both formal and informal support providers should understand their role when entering into this encounter, as not to minimize trust or potentially pose threat to the emotional safety or self-face of a survivor disclosing this information.

### **Unmuting: Prioritizing Choice and Empowerment**

Once support providers have entered into the encounter and a disclosure has been shared, research suggests prioritizing choice and empowerment for the survivor is effective in creating a more positive interview experience for them, post-assault (Wilson, Fauci, & Goodman, 2015; Hope, 2018; Conley & Griffith, 2016). Muted Group Theory (MGT), “focuses on the ways that the communication practices of dominant groups suppress, mute, or devalue the words, ideas, and discourses of subordinate groups” (Kramarae, 2009). This theory also understands that because these dominant groups encode the language for the culture, less privileged groups often feel and are muted because we lack the codes or language to perfectly articulate their oppression (Burnett, et. al., 2009). In addition, “The speech of those in subordinate groups is often disrespected, and their knowledge often not considered sufficient for decision or policy making” (Kramarae, 2009). Individuals victimized by sexual violence can be understood as a marginalized or muted group, as they often feel silenced and subordinated after their assault by dominant groups because they simply may not have the codes or language to explain their abuse.

Because of this, support providers must be patient, communicatively resourceful, and wary that survivors may not readily be able to describe what happen, or may not even be able to name the experience for what it is. Support providers should assist the survivor in naming and unpacking their experience in a way that feels right to the survivor, and through this provide validation of the experience. Affirmation from the support provider is crucial in responses to a disclosure of sexual assault. This naming and validation response can empower survivor post-assault because they may feel heard and understood.

Now, even though acknowledgement and validation from support providers is crucial, many providers (especially informal ones) often don't have sufficient information or knowledge of tangible aid or resources for survivors to seek other support providers (Middleton, et. al., 2016). Keeping this in mind, support providers should communicate to survivors the options and choices they have in order to further empower them post-assault (Wilson, Fauci, & Goodman, 2015; Hope, 2018; Conley & Griffith, 2016). This means supplying the survivor with multiple resources for adequate care and healing beyond their specific disclosure encounter, especially if the support provider themselves does not have the knowledge to help the survivor effectively. Presenting survivors with individuals, groups, or organization that can offer them more options effective, trauma-informed care allows the survivor an active voice and choice in their healing process.

### **Conclusion**

For support providers, these interpersonal encounters can be extremely difficult to navigate, but utilizing mindful strategies when approaching and engaging in disclosures of sexual violence can be helpful knowing how to appropriately respond to and support survivors. These three pieces – identifying identity and context, establishing emotional safety and trust, and

prioritizing choice and empowerment – all work together to minimize further victimization from those who experience sexual violence, as well as provide ways that effectively communicate support to these survivors in their post-assault experiences. The theories consulted here help explain why those practices likely have these effects.

This paper looks predominantly through an interpersonal communication lens. Responding productively to interpersonal disclosures of sexual violence helps sustain a space where survivors can feel supported enough in their post-assault experience to pursue appropriate help and advocacy at organizational and societal levels. Implementing skilled interpersonal response-ability across members of large organizations (such as universities) can help broaden and deepen a tangible culture of support within that organization. Further research could be done to examine these interactions effects at organizational and larger systems-levels. Research also could explore exactly how organizations that train and communicate serious interpersonal support for assault survivors may be helping prevent further sexual violence in that setting.

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