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Disclosure, Twitter, and the Power of #WhyIDidntReport: Applying French and Raven's Bases of Power to Tweets from Victims of Sexual Violence

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Shortly following the #MeToo movement, victims of sexual violence used the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport on various social media platforms to chronicle why they had not disclosed their own experiences with sexual violence. To better understand why some victims of sexual violence choose to keep silent about their experiences, this project analyzed 2,370 public narratives on Twitter that included the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport. Utilizing French and Raven's (1959) five bases of social power (legitimate, expert, referent, coercive, and reward) as a theoretical framework, this research employed a modified grounded theory approach in order to determine which types of power are expressed as reasons victims did not disclose their sexual assault. The researchers found that four of the five power bases (legitimate, expert, referent, and coercive) were emergent reasons, while reward power was not prevalent. This study provides foundations for expanding the utility of social media platforms in studying social media narratives, application of French and Raven's (1959) social power theory, and a deeper understanding of the reasons why victims of sexual violence do not disclose or report as those decisions pertain to perceptions of power.

Keywords: sexual violence, Twitter, French and Raven, power bases, digital activism

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It began with a single tweet. On September 21, 2018, former President Donald Trump took to Twitter to criticize the public debate surrounding Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's allegations against then-Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh. Trump wrote: "I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as

bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents. I ask that she bring those filings forward so that we can learn date, time, and place!" (Bonos, 2018).

On the heels of the #MeToo movement, victims of sexual violence (who may also refer to themselves as survivors) addressed the president's query using the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport to chronicle why they hadn't disclosed their own experiences with sexual violence (Fortin, 2018). Online, #WhyIDidntReport (and its variants #WhyIDidnt and #WhyIDidntReportIt) appeared on multiple social media platforms, presenting compelling, candid narratives from assault victims on the multitude of factors that affected victim decisions about whether and to whom to disclose rape, sexual assault, stalking, sexual harassment and other forms of gendered violence. By the end of 2018, there were over 720,000 tweets using the #WhyIDidntReport hashtag (CBS News, 2018), which addressed reasons for not reporting formally to pursue legal or other forms of institutional justice, as well as not disclosing informally to friends, family, or other confidants.

The reach and impact of #WhyIDidntReport in the era of #MeToo provides an opportunity to better understand victims' decisions about whether, and to whom, to disclose their experiences of sexual violence, which may include rape, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, or stalking. Such an understanding is essential to ensuring equity and justice in the workplace, school, church, military, and other areas of society. Violence based on sex, gender identity, class, age or sexuality remains both prevalent, often hidden. By better understanding victims' motivations not to report formally or disclose informally, we offer a groundwork for exposing this violence, helping victims to heal, and building better responses and resources for them in the future.

To better understand why some victims of sexual violence keep silent about their experiences, we analyzed tweets that included the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport by using French and Raven's (1959) Bases of Social Power as a theoretical framework. Users' own words guided our understanding of this important decision. French and Raven proposed that power, or the perceptions of it, play an important role in the persuasion process, influencing others and their subsequent decision-making. This theoretical framework

broadens our scope of attention from *what* can be said to encourage or discourage formal reporting or disclosure of sexual violence, to *who* influences victims' decision-making and *why* some people may be more influential to this decision than others.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The central focus of this analysis is the role of power in victims' decisions to formally or informally disclose sexual violence. As a social power theory, French and Raven (1959) is distinct from the ideological power theories of Marxists, critical theorists, or post-structuralists. Their theory does not make claims about the conditions by which power relations, such as patriarchy, come into existence; rather, it describes the ways in which power relations, *including* patriarchy, take shape in specific situations. Thus, French and Raven's theory does not ask why, for example, males might have disproportionate access to particular types of power, but it does allow us to empirically assess *how* and in *what contexts* that social power operates.

This project's focus is how others' power (or perceptions of it) may discourage victims of sexual violence from seeking help and justice. Interestingly, French and Raven's framework has not been used yet to study such inhibitions as related to power, partly because the theory has often been treated as an arsenal of strategies for individuals (who French and Raven originally termed agents) to attempt to control or influence others. They identify five bases that have the potential to change a person's "behavior, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, [and] values" (1959, p. 151). These bases include legitimate power (drawn from a socially-sanctioned code or standard, such as a position held within social structure or organizational hierarchy), expert power (drawn from having mastery in a given area), referent power (power drawn from being an individual with whom or within a group that others identify with or want to identify with), coercive power (ability to punish others), and reward power (ability to offer something desired by others). An agent's use of power to influence or control others may be intentional or unintentional, as agents are not always aware of how others perceive their power.

Agent-focused applications of the theory have often served to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of different leadership strategies in various relationship types and settings, such as superior-subordinate relationships in business (Kovach, 2020), doctor-

patient relationships in healthcare (e.g., Gabel, 2012), correctional officer-prisoner relationships in prison (e.g., Ferdik & Smith, 2015), student-teacher relationships in the classroom (e.g., Elias & Mace, 2005), parent-child relationships in the home (e.g., Porta & Howe, 2012), and many others. Historically, the theory also has served to study gender-based differences in using different types of power (e.g., Schaap & Callejo, 2015; Rajan & Krishnan, 2002; Bisanz & Rule, 1989; Johnson, 1987; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Lips & Colwell, 1978). Our analysis is unique because it shifts the focus of assessment from agents to the interaction partners. We study how victims' perceptions of agents' power are used to explain and justify victims' decisions not to disclose or formally report sexual violence. This approach is consistent with French and Raven's (1959) original intent of studying "the reactions of the recipient" of power, rather than "the behavior of the agent who exerts power" (p. 150).

This project is also unique in that it studies these power bases inductively, starting not with the power bases to determine which are the most effective, but with the interaction partners' perceptions of the power bases at work in their situations. Hence, this study is less interested in the interaction partners' susceptibility to influence as contingent on their psychological or emotional state (i.e. self-esteem, mood, or pride; see Raven, 2008, p. 8-9), but on the power bases described by victims as influential to their decision-making.

This taxonomy of power bases is uniquely suited for studying the forces that repress disclosure of sexual violence because of its social conception of power, which theorizes power primarily as relational and positional attributes, rather than as a question of persuasive skill. All five original power bases describe a kind of leverage that an agent possesses prior to any articulation of arguments. Thus, the original taxonomy brings the focus to the social context in which victims' basic needs for safety and social belonging can counterbalance their desire to disclose sexual violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to further contextualize this study, the first section of the literature review focuses on the formal reports of sexual violence to law enforcement or within other institutional settings (e.g., employers, education system) in the pursuit of justice. Next,

research focusing specifically on informal online disclosures about sexual violence are summarized. Finally, how this study adds new knowledge to this field of inquiry is described.

Formal Reports of Sexual Violence

Former President Donald Trump questioned why Dr. Ford did not report the alleged assault to law enforcement (Bonos, 2018). In reality, few victims pursue formal avenues to report assault or rape (Feeney, 2019). For example, less than 35% of rape or sexual assault victims report the crime to the police (Langton et al., 2012; US Department of Justice, 2018).

Victims of sexual violence do not formally report to authorities (e.g., law enforcement, school administration, human resources, social workers) for multiple reasons including concerns about difficulties with the reporting process (Batt et al., 2015; Bullock & Beckson, 2011; Donnelly & Kenyon, 1996; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Sable et al., 2006; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011); emotional obstacles that inhibit reporting (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Sable et. al., 2006; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011); a misunderstanding of what constitutes sexual assault or rape (Batt, et. al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2016; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011); fear of or an ongoing relationship with the perpetrator (Sable, et. al., 2006) cultural factors that make the sexual violence difficult to acknowledge (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; McLean, 2013; Sable et al., 2006); victim use of drugs or alcohol prior to the attack (Wals, et. al., 2016), and fear of potential negative responses from responders (Ahrens et al., 2007; Bullock & Beckson, 2011). Clearly, there are many challenges to revealing sexual violence formally to those with the power to instigate investigations and seek punishments for alleged offenders.

Online Disclosure of and Responses to Sexual Violence and Harassment

Given the real and perceived barriers to reporting formally, it is no surprise that victims often turn to online forums to disclose in a relatively anonymous manner. Victims may be more likely to seek support online because sexual assault and rape are socially stigmatized (Andalibi et al., 2016; Andalibi et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2019), especially if they fear or have had negative responses from others (Andalibi et al., 2016; Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016; Smith, 2010; Webber & Wilmot, 2012), are socially isolated or in abusive

relationships (O'Neill, 2018), or are members of marginalized groups (Bogen et al., 2018; Sills et al., 2016).

In general, research on social media disclosures of sexual violence has focused on the reasons people choose to disclose online (Andalibi et. al., 2016; Andalibi et. al., 2018; Bogen et. al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2019; Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016; O'Neill, 2018; Smith, 2010; Sills et al., 2016; Webber & Wilmot, 2012), who is most likely to post online about sexual violence (Andalibi et al., 2016; Lokot, 2018), and the content and location of their posts (Andalibi et al., 2016; Andalibi et al., 2018; Bogen et al., 2019; Gallagher et. al., 2019; Garrett & Hassan, 2019; Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016; Hosterman et. al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; O'Neill, 2018; Schneider & Carpenter, 2020; Rentschler, 2014; Smith, 2010; Webber, 2014; Webber & Wilmot, 2012). Previously published research on the #WhyIDidntReport movement specifically focused upon barriers to reporting as described in tweets by college students (Griffin et al., 2021), a small sample of posts written in Hebrew to evaluate Israelis' reasons for not reporting (Dolev-Cohen et al., 2020), and testing the effectiveness of a machine-learning algorithm model to evaluate social media (Garrett & Hassan, 2019).

This Study's Rationale

Overall, this study expands previous work in several key ways. First, posts to the #WhyIDidntReport forum originated from all over the United States (Garrett & Hassan, 2019) and included a diverse range of identities, ages, and other victim characteristics. Much of the previous research on the decision to report or disclose tends to focus on college students (Griffin et. al., 2021; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Sable et. al, 2006; Zinzow & Thompson, 2011) and only women (McLean, 2013), so this study helps reveal factors influencing disclosure by a more diverse, broad-ranging group of victims. Second, many previous studies are either quantitative in approach or draw results from a small group of interviewees (Sabina & Ho, 2014). The nature of Twitter posts provides for a more in-depth, qualitative analysis from a broader pool of victim experiences and reasoning (many people communicate their experiences over multiple tweets, so their descriptions are not bound to 280 characters). Third, as described above, most previous research on social media disclosures focuses on why people choose to disclose on social media and the content and locations of their posts, but not on the reasons why they have not disclosed their

assaults elsewhere. Finally, and most importantly, this research demonstrates a new avenue of research by focusing on how French and Raven's (1959) bases of power are perceived by victims and serve as important influences on victims' decisions not to disclose. So, unlike other published research focused on disclosure of sexual violence in general or specifically on #WhyIDidntReport, this research examines why a large group of victims of sexual violence didn't disclose their experiences and the bases of power that influenced their decisions.

Therefore, this study poses the following research question:

> *RQ:* Which types of power, as communicated through #WhyIDidntReport social media narratives, are expressed as reasons why victims of sexual violence did not disclose?

This question examines the intersectionality between French and Raven's (1959) power bases and individuals' lived experiences including their reasons for not disclosing sexual violence, whether through a formal reporting process or informally amongst friends, family, or other confidants. The focus on the role of social power addresses key dimensions not previously examined about decisions not to disclose sexual violence in either formal or informal contexts.

METHODS

This project used a modified grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), analyzing tweets compiled during the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh and the resulting #WhyIDidntReport social movement that grew after his nomination.

Text Selection

Tweets containing the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport were compiled from two weeks during the 2018 Senate confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh. The 21,330 tweets accrued during this span represented a substantial data set from which to work. As part of the text selection, the researchers did not include variations of the hashtag (e.g. #WhyIDidntReportIt) because they contained fewer tweets overall and could potentially not have been associated with the actual #WhyIDidntReport movement.

Due to the subject matter, the unit of analysis was the individual's original public tweet (rather than a retweet or private message) that provided his/her narrative of

reasons for not disclosing sexual violence. The researchers gathered this data with Google Sheets using the Twitter Archiver Premium add-on. The following parameters were used to eliminate spam and to ensure comprehension for English-speaking researchers: tweets had to be in English and the account had to have at least five retweets. Each tweet served as an individual unit of analysis, regardless of whether it was a single tweet or a tweet within a thread. Additional types of tweets that were omitted included messages that were only a call to action, shared news items or links, a response to others' tweets, advertisements, memes, retweets, videos, an incomplete message, not publicly accessible, or speculation on reasons why someone else would not report sexual violence.

Data Analysis

The selected tweets were entered into the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT), a qualitative data analysis program that allows users to code, organize, and compare texts. A modified grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was applied during the initial analysis. Grounded theory methods specify systematic guidelines for collecting and analyzing data inductively in order to develop insights. It also allowed researchers to develop theoretical analyses that grow out of the data (Charmaz, 2000). This approach benefited the research project's purpose of examining the reasons individuals did not disclose sexual violence, as using a priori categories could have created the risk of missing data that had not been anticipated.

The use of grounded theory began with the researchers reviewing 100 tweets together to develop preliminary ideas of potential themes. To identify these potential themes, the researchers utilized Owen's (1984, 1985) grounded approach, called thematic analysis, which complements grounded theory by enabling researchers to inductively identify key meanings within texts. Owen stipulated three criteria for identifying themes: (a) recurrence of similar meanings at multiple points in a text (e.g., "they were strong," "they were overpowering," and "they were very muscular"); (b) repetition of key words or sentences at multiple junctures in a text (e.g., "I was drunk," "I had too much to drink," and "due to drinking too much"); and (c) forcefulness noted through exclamations, emotional outbursts, or dramatic pauses (e.g. "HE WAS MY FATHER!!!," "…no one ever spoke about it," and "I was completely physically and emotionally drained").

Following the initial coding, the researchers collaboratively and inductively identified themes related to the perception of power as a reason for not disclosing sexual violence that were highly similar to French and Raven's (1959) bases of powers. Given these similarities and the existing extensive body of research utilizing the power bases, the researchers decided to use the established framework to future analyze the data. Using the definitions created by French and Raven, a codebook was created to represent each of the five power bases and entered into the CAT database for an iteration of individually coding 50 messages by the research team. In addition, the researchers used a model of consensus-driven intercoder reliability (Kleman et al., 2009), discussing each coded message from the results of the second iteration of coding and any discrepancy in coding until the researchers reached consensus on what power base was present in each message. Appropriate codebook revisions and clarifications were made before beginning the final iteration of coding. In the final iteration of coding, the researchers divided into two teams of two and coded a total of 2,370 tweets. Once coding finished, the full research team discussed the coded messages and any discrepancy in coding until they reached consensus on final coding of the message. If consensus could not be reached, that message was not included as part of the final analysis.

To answer the research question, researchers reviewed all of the tweets coded as one of the bases of power expressing reasons why victims of sexual violence did not disclose. Recurring, repeating, and forcefully expressed reasons within each power code theme were placed into subcategories to allow for a concise way of summarizing why people did not disclose as related to social power dynamics.

RESULTS

Overall, the application of French and Raven's (1959) theory has led to an examination of how pre-existing power relations (the themes discussed below) shape the target's sense of inferiority and vulnerability in relation to authorities, the assailant, their friends and family, and their community. In discussing the themes that emerged from the data, all tweets are presented unaltered and quoted as posted, without grammatical or spelling corrections or annotations. The analysis of the tweets revealed a recurring theme

in which some victims had disclosed and received a negative response which then inhibited future disclosures. As such, these tweets were included in the final analysis.

Legitimate Power

French and Raven (1959) define legitimate power as the perception that the persuasive agent has a "right to prescribe behavior" (156). As positional power (Hayden 2000), legitimacy is always connected to some socially accepted standard of behavior (French & Raven, 1959). This is especially true in the highly gendered context of sexual violence, where legitimate power often manifests as an awareness of the illegitimate position of the victim in relation to a depersonalized system of justice and gender norms. The force of legitimate power is contingent on the degree to which targets internalize and accept the system of power, rather than the person in power. Accordingly, our analysis yielded two types of legitimate power: the first is legitimacy conferred by an agent's position of authority and the second is highly impersonal "agents" emerging from the victims' comparative positions of illegitimacy.

The first type of legitimate power manifests in figures of authority, which included teachers, supervisors, religious leaders, legal authorities, and family heads, all of whom derive their authority from a system of sociocultural norms. The tweets revealed victims' awareness of this socially-bestowed authority and agents' willingness to use that authority to discourage victims from disclosing. For instance:

- "My Commander and 1SG told me it would ruin his life and destroy his family"
- "the cop told me it was my fault"
- "Investigating officer told me I shouldn't have let it happen."
- "A high school coach and teacher cornered me. I got away before anything happened. He claimed he knew I wouldn't do anything and he was just trying to 'teach me a lesson'."

The second type of legitimate power was highly depersonalized and articulated as the victims' awareness of their illegitimate position in relation to social norms and institutions.

- "...it was more shameful to be gay than to be a sexual predator."
- "I was groomed to be the perfect little girl."
- "A good southern lady does not speak ill of her own family."

- "Date rape, women didn't complain about it Of course, it was the woman's fault."
- "36 years ago people felt that if you had had even one drink you were a slut and deserved it."
- "I was assaulted between ages of 14-16 by two Catholic priests. I never told anyone until my 50s. I'm now 70s. […] Who believed a young teen over the word of a Catholic priest in early sixties?"

Expressions of legitimate power have unveiled the sense of inferiority and powerlessness that victims of sexual assault experience when confronting figures of authority, such as police, teachers and parents. Victims seem to experience a social devaluation of their own identities as female or gay in relation to gendered norms and heteronormativity, which stifle reporting.

Expert Power

Expert power is understood as a person (or persons) having "some special knowledge or expertness" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 156). The strength of expert power is in direct proportion to the perception of mastery in the relevant topic. In the tweets, expert power was wielded in different ways with the first and most obvious being age. Those who are younger learn about the world from those who are older. Thus, a child or very young victim will have low expert power by comparison with an adult.

- "because he was my father and I thought that is how affection is supposed to be shown and plus I was 7 and scared"
- "Because when you're a child and you don't know any better, you believe them when they say "this is your fault. you deserve this."

In other cases, the expert's power came from perceptions of their professional knowledge and experience. In these situations, victims' claims were commonly dismissed by the experts and treated as unimportant. In other words, the expert used their power to downplay the severity of the sexual violence.

- "I tried, the detective told me not to, there were 'more important cases, be happy with your restraining order'..."
- "The police told me there was a 50/50 chance of winning my case because we had a sexual relationship prior."

- "Because when I told my boss about the incident, She told me I should feel flattered."
- "Because an 8th grade teacher had told us when women get raped, it's because they were asking for it"

In these examples, a person with presumed special knowledge or relevant experience negatively affected victims' decisions about disclosing sexual violence.

In keeping with French and Raven's original framework, we saw that those with influence, notably teachers, police, and family members, can wield more than one type of power. If influencers speak from a position of authority to assign blame or otherwise discourage the victim, we saw an example of legitimate power. If, on the other hand, people occupying those same roles speak as experts sharing their knowledge and experience, we saw expert power at work.

Referent Power

Referent power stems from the victim's identification with and desire to emulate the persuasive agent. Sometimes referent power can arise from the victims' desire to protect an interpersonal relationship. At other times, the perpetrator may have been valued not by the victim but by an admired individual or by a community whose association the victim desired to protect. Regardless of the form it takes, referent power is often an unintentional source of influence. The influencing agent may or may not know that the person being influenced identifies with or wants to be like them (French & Raven 1959).

Sometimes referent power was expressed in terms of romantic love.

- "He was my boyfriend, I loved and trusted him. A part of me didn't want him to get in trouble."
- "Because I was in love and I was scared. It felt like there would never be consequences for my rapist, because he was my boyfriend."

If the perpetrator enjoyed a high ranking within a group, members of that group would be likely to side with and protect the perpetrator whom they valued. Thus, disclosing the sexual violence could threaten the victim's place within that group.

- "because I was a young boy, the person that raped and assaulted me was a relative and a very respected community member."

- "I was afraid of what my catholic fam would think of me."
- "Our church held him on a pedestal even after death, and even my pastor chastised me for not showing him enough affection when he was sick,"
- "When they did find out, the family adults said I could report but I should think of the consequences (judgement in the community, my grandmother's health if she was told)"

Expressions of referent power revealed the victim's social and interpersonal vulnerabilities due to relational attachment to the perpetrator, their position of isolation within their social circles, or due to their subordinate position at work. In each case, the victim of sexual violence is put in a vulnerable position of dependence that forces them to protect and cultivate relationships with those who enjoy social recognition and higher positions of power.

Coercive Power

Coercive power rests on the perception that the agent has "the ability to mediate punishment" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 156). In the case of #WhyIDidntReport, coercive power involves the victim's perception that the agent can and will use external stimuli negatively if the victim discloses the sexual violence. Coercive power was often seen with threats of physical violence, devaluation of a victim's identity, shunning, or the like.

- "I was shunned by classmates and friends, threatened with violence, had violence inflicted. Was called a "sickie" by a teacher and a slut by a nun. And why I never reported again."
- "Because when I was molested as a child my entire family (minus my mom/sis) ridiculed me, called me a liar and NOTHING WAS DONE TO THE PREDATORS!"
- "When I told at 32, my whole family rejected me as a liar while others knew and kept quiet."

This kind of power is particularly virulent for gay victims, who risk reproach for their sexual orientation when sharing their experience of abuse.

- "I was bullied for being feminine, gay, not straight enough. I believed him when he told me that no one wld believe me and they wld say I wanted it. I believed him kept quiet"

- "Because I grew up in a homophobic community that felt like rape was God's punishment for little gay boys."
- "He wasn't a BYU student and said he'd tell the Honor Code office if I talked. I decided to be silent and hit the gym more. #byu had destroyed the academic success of multiple gay friends. I didn't want to jeopardize my degree."

And sometimes the coercive power takes the form of threats to financial stability or professional standing.

- "Because I was 11 and my mom would have lost her job and she was a single parent with 2 kids and no child support and my sister was very ill and in the hospital all the time."
- "I thought I'd lose my job. I didn't think anyone would believe me. I waited too long. I blamed myself. I didn't want people to know. I thought he'd get away with it anyway. I was ashamed. If i reportrd, it would be real"
- "I needed to keep the appearance of a relationship going so he would keep paying my college tuition so I could graduate with my degree in women's studies and fight against dirty, sex-obsessed patriarchs like him"

This theme demonstrates the range of material and psychological harm that victims fear to experience upon reporting their cases, and the oppressive effects they have on reporting. The victim's perception of powerlessness is marked by the prospect of losing a source of income, a relationship, or experiencing further abuse.

Reward Power

Reward power did not emerge as a significant theme in this study. When reward power did occasionally emerge from the data, it was consistently cross-coded with coercion. This is in keeping with French and Raven, who acknowledged that there can be "some difficulty in distinguishing between reward power and coercive power" and stated that the difference "depends upon the situation as it exists for [the recipient]" (p. 158. 1959).

DISCUSSION

This study is unique in that it examines a sizable aggregate of qualitative data through #WhyIDidntReport messages to evaluate how individuals choose if they will disclose sexual violence. The results demonstrate an extension of French and Raven's

(1959) power bases theory and has implications for practitioners working with victims of sexual violence. In addition, these findings provide a better understanding of the utility of social media for expressing culturally stigmatic information, especially in online contexts. This section includes a discussion of these findings with their implications for future research, as well as identification of certain limitations of this study.

The results of the current study advance French and Raven's (1959) social power theory by providing a current application to the social discourse about sexual violence. Based on the analysis, perceived power bases (legitimate, expert, referent, and coercive) identified in the messages of victims of sexual violence impacted if they decided to reveal their experiences. Interestingly, the power bases may not have been conscious strategies used by the alleged assailants or others to silence victims. Nonetheless, victims perceived these as forms of power that were influential to their decision-making processes to disclose or not.

Therefore, this study presents an innovative application of French & Raven's (1959) social power theory that diverges from common interpretations of the theory as limited to conceptualization of power bases utilized solely as potential resources for an agent seeking to influence others. By focusing on the target of persuasion, this study reveals that power bases can be social forces operating independently of *intentional* persuasive strategy. In order to be persuasive, power relations do not have to be interpersonally negotiated or established.

Indeed, the prevalence of descriptions of multiple power bases in these posts highlight how perceived power relations constrained the victim's consideration of possibilities for action. Future research should continue to develop a better understanding of victims' perceptions of power as essential steps to building more comprehensive knowledge of if, how, and to whom victims choose to communicate about sexual violence. Given the importance of these perceptions of power of people in both formal and informal roles to whom they may disclose, additional research into reasons why individuals choose to disclose or not should also further explore how these perceptions are created, changed, and vary amongst different populations of victims also is important.

The study's finding that social power relations function as principal persuasive factors in the victims' reluctance to report crimes of sexual violence highlights important

implications for the design and efficacy of victim support programs. First, it demonstrates that the source of the message to encourage reporting is at least as important as the message itself. Sexual assault counselors alone may not be as persuasive as figures who the victim sees as having referent, legitimate, expert, and/or coercive power. This knowledge can better help both the victims of sexual violence and the professionals who work with victims of trauma by identifying the types of perceived power present and seeking methods to counter that perceived power. A fuller understanding of the role of perception in victim's decision-making about disclosure can be used to inform best practices and policies developed by practitioners, emergency responders, educators, and lawmakers.

Second, the study underscores the ongoing urgent need for a broad-ranging change in understanding sexual assault from blaming and toward empowering the victim. Beyond resources and programs for victims, this requires public information campaigns and a continuation of the type of grassroots social movements such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #WhyIDidntReport. On a more positive note, this study demonstrates that victims of sexual assault have utilized a vocabulary of power that helps them process and describe their experience of injustice. In recognizing the power imbalances against them, these individuals may be more equipped to confront the root of their inhibitions to report, overcome them, and channel their actions toward more sustainable change.

Additionally, this study contributes to the discussion of the utility of social media platforms for self-disclosure and sharing of information historically stigmatized in culture. Research indicates individuals may turn to public, online communication platforms to reduce the fear of negative evaluation (Keaten & Kelly, 2008). Also, people lacking acceptable or available face-to-face channels of communication can utilize various digital platforms to share personal disclosures about themselves and their experiences (Houser et al., 2012). Because of these factors, it is not surprising that victims of sexual violence often seek alternative modes of support online due to the social stigma (Andalibi et al., 2016; Andalibi et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2019). Given that the number of social media platforms will continue to grow, it is imperative to further investigate the ways in which individuals use social media to disclose information related to a variety of culturally stigmatized topics and the utility of social media as a forum for doing so.

Finally, the current findings contribute to a body of research (e.g., Andalibi et al., 2016; Andalibi et al., 2018; Gallagher et al., 2019; Houser et al., 2012; Keaten & Kelly, 2008) regarding how online communication and social media can provide greater user autonomy related to disclosure, expression, and fulfillment of needs. In this study, the results indicate that individuals used Twitter to disclose what they felt unable to disclose in the past due to their perceptions of their own and others' power. Future research may examine other digital platforms and ongoing interactions on them.

Primarily, this study identifies themes of legitimate, expert, referent, and coercive power as those perceived to be reasons for not disclosing. This knowledge can help both the victims of sexual violence and those who work with and support victims of trauma by identifying the types of perceived power present and seeking methods to counter that perceived power.

Limitations

Naturally, there were a number of limitations to this study. While the focus was to examine which types of power were expressed as reasons for not disclosing sexual violence, the study could only rely on the primary researcher's *interpretation* of which types of power were expressed. It could be that an individual who disclosed their narrative through #WhyIDidntReport did not intend to discuss power directly or indirectly in their disclosure. Despite a theoretically sound process for inferring which types of power were present in the messages, the individual who actually posted may have a different interpretation of which types of power influenced the decision to not disclose. While victims of sexual violence are considered a vulnerable population for data collection and research, future research should consider the victims' personal understanding of and their attitudes towards the perception of power.

In addition, while the data collected was publicly accessible via Twitter, this study did not categorize individuals by sexuality, sex, or any other defining characteristics other than their decision not to disclose sexual violence. While many tweets provided information that made certain characteristics identifiable (e.g. age, sex identity), this study did not focus on identification. As demonstrated through the thematic analysis of the power themes in the messages, some of these attributes may be of interest for better understanding how individuals express and disclose narratives related to sexual violence

and the choice to not disclose. Future research may parse out certain demographic aspects to provide a better account for themes of similarities and differences.

Conclusion

What began with a tweet grew into a massive online movement that provided valuable social discourse about sexual violence. This study provides solid foundations for expanding the application of French and Raven's (1959) social power theory, the utility of social media platforms, and the comprehension of the reasons why victims of sexual violence do not disclose or report as those decisions pertain to perceptions of power. Careful analysis of #WhyIDidntReport posts reveals that perceptions of power are influential in the process of not disclosing or reporting sexual violence. As a result, the continued exploration of #WhyIDidntReport is encouraged. While the usage of #WhyIDidntReport may have diminished since 2018, the need to understand the communication related to the reporting of sexual violence has not.

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