

**“I will tell you a story of grief, and you will listen” (Graham 2012):
Questioning the Importance of Speaking Out about Sexual Violence**
Nicci Shall

Researching, writing and delivering the conference paper was an incredible, if challenging process. Academically, I learnt about how to conduct my own independent research; specifically, I learnt that a certain point you have to stop reading and have confidence that you are ready to write. It was a wonderful experience to have academic feedback on ideas that I had been thinking about and developing for two terms, and very exciting. It was also exciting to be able to give feedback to my peers. Personally, I was very nervous about delivering the paper as I generally feel quite shy and anxious in such situations. I almost opted not to take the full unit course to avoid the conference. However, I am so glad that I did take part. I found it helpful to write my conference paper in a big font and divide it into small sections so that I remembered to look up at the audience. I practiced with friends and the mirror. The thing that helped the most was something Clare Hemmings suggested in a seminar – pretending to be confident act acting confident as a way of feeling confident. In the end I enjoyed it so much that I will be taking part in another conference in July.

“I will tell you a story of grief, and you will listen” (Graham, 2012): Questioning the Importance of Speaking Out about Sexual Violence

I spoke out about sexual violence I have experienced at a demonstration on International Women's day in 2012. The protest was against the Student Union offering a platform for Dominique Strauss Khan to speak about his leadership of the International Monetary Fund. This was in spite of ongoing legal proceedings against him for sexual assault. ‘Speaking Out’ is a widespread form of activism that happens both in physical space and cyber space within the feminist movement. It involves a survivor of sexual violence sharing their experience in testimonial form, with the goal of self-empowerment and empowering others. It interrupts the public sphere with experiences that are associated with shame and hidden from public view. The atmosphere was electric at this event; outrage and anger seemed to be harnessed to positive ends. The title of this paper, “I will tell you a story of grief, and you will listen” is taken from a poem written about the survivors who spoke out. It couldn't have been more different to speaking out through filing a police report, where I was interrogated about my account for over eight hours and challenged on every point of my testimony.

In this paper I will be questioning the assumed importance of speaking out. I am aware of the irony of beginning a paper that questions speaking out by speaking out myself. I have done so to illustrate the tension at the core of my paper between acknowledging that speaking out can feel empowering, even as I suggest to you that its privileged role within anti-rape activism is problematic. I argue that speaking out through testimony is problematic because it reinforces a distinction between agency and victimisation that also underpins the logic of victim blaming. This is where a survivor is blamed for the violence they have experienced; a culture of victim blaming pervades society. By problematising speaking out I hope to open imaginative space for the reconsideration of approaches to challenging rape culture. I hope this practical goal will prevent my account from being divorced from the material experience with which it is concerned.

It can be argued that speaking out only presents problems because it tends to be received with hostility. There is a broad consensus within feminist psychological literature that the response of the person to whom one speaks out is of central importance. If the listener responds with appropriate sympathy and support, then the experience can be empowering and healing, particularly within a therapeutic context. If the listener is hostile and explicitly or implicitly blames the survivor then the experience can be traumatic. This has been described as a “second rape” by psychologists such as Rebecca Campbell and Sheela Raja (1999). In a legal setting, survivors' testimonies are subjected to cross examination. This can exacerbate trauma and in many instances it tragically leads to suicide. Changes introduced by the Crown Prosecution Service this year (2015) have presented a tool kit for policemen to treat survivors of sexual violence more gently and to be more receptive to believing testimonies. By this logic, a change to the way in which speaking out is responded to should enable more people to speak out and increase rates of empowerment and recovery. Simultaneously, this should increase both the rate of reporting sexual violence and the conviction rate for rape, both of which are especially low in the UK. However, I suggest to you that this solution is insufficient because it fails to interrupt the privileged position of the testimony itself, as a method through which empowerment and recovery can be achieved. I argue that testimony needs to be interrupted because of the epistemological and ethical problems it presents.

The form of knowledge conveyed through testimony needs further examination. Testimony is a subjective form of knowledge that is associated primarily with emotion. Within a broadly liberal society that frames knowing through an Enlightenment discourse, emotional forms of knowing are subjugated to reason. In contrast to reason which is seen as objective, emotional knowledge is understood to be subjective and therefore less reliable. Nevertheless, the testimony is expected to be internally coherent, consistent and logical. It is expected to contain only so-called facts. However, as a post-structuralist critique would suggest, such an account

may be impossible. Linda Alcoff (1995: 101) has articulated: “speaking for myself, I (momentarily) create my self... a self that is more unified than any subjective experience can support.” This form of truth may not be internally consistent, because the way that one understands one's own experience is liable to change. Further, the speech act of articulating an experience articulates and reforms it. So, although it may be more consistent to convey inconsistencies, should a testimony contain contradictions it is viewed as suspect or in-authentic. In light of this, speaking the truth in a legal context may be incommensurable with articulations of experience through testimony.

In addition, speaking out through testimony provokes ethical problems through the privileging of affective circulations of empathy and understanding. It is presumed that the person or people who hear the testimony will be able to understand the experience and that this comprehension will aid personal healing, prosecution of the perpetrator or change rape culture. However, I suggest that making such assumptions is ethically problematic in three main ways. Firstly, the assumption that experiences of violence can be articulated can have negative implications for the survivor. Referring to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Veena Das (1997) argues that it may be beyond the capacity language to articulate particular experiences of pain. She notes that within her ethnographic work on post-partition India and Pakistan and the widespread sexual violence that took place, women did not explicitly describe assault but rather alluded to experience through metaphors, or through describing their experience before, or after, the assault. So, by being expected to articulate oneself through language, the survivor may be compelled to misrepresent their experience.

Secondly, by articulating this experience through testimony to an audience, it is assumed that the survivors want to receive empathy. However, this might not be the case. Empathy may be projected onto the survivor by the listener without the former's consent. The listener may be reinterpreting what they hear and imposing their own ideas and categories onto the survivor. This may dis-empower the survivor even further. As Clare Hemmings (2012: 153) has argued “to be

empathised with could be a horrific prospect, indeed, one resulting in dissolution of the other's sense of self".

Thirdly, the assumption that the listener will be capable of empathising and that they have the ability to enact change may be misleading. I would suggest that the individualising tendency of testimony separates the account of sexual assault from the structures through which it is embedded within society, thereby isolating the survivor. Despite this, we may nevertheless be left with the impression that speaking out, in and of itself, contributes to political change because, in some contexts, the empathy that is circulated towards the speaker can feel empowering. However, this sense of empowerment cannot be equated with challenging societal structures that contribute to the ongoing proliferation of rape culture.

I now suggest to you that this separation of testimony and empathy from a social context of differentiated power relations reinforces a binary of speech and silence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994: 4) notes that silence is "as pointed and performative as speech". Here, Sedgwick highlights the importance of deconstructing the binary between speech and silence to reveal the multiple manifestations and meanings that it masks. How are various forms of speech and silence distributed between survivors of sexual violence? Sara Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of emotions as "sticky" in their circulation, attaching to some bodies more than others, can help illustrate this point. Empathy is attached to some bodies and their accounts of sexual assault, increasing the likelihood of speaking out. Accounts involving violent sexual assault at the hands of a stranger are more likely to receive empathy. This is because they maintain the attention of the listener as they reinforce what the listener understands by sexual violence as a crime inflicted by a violent stranger. Meanwhile, empathy is directed away from survivors where sexual violence takes a different form. Their experience may not be perceived as unequivocally harmful and listening to their accounts may prompt ambivalent feelings in the listener, as they may fail to reinforce pervading ideas of what sexual assault means. Survivors in marginalised positions or who have experienced violence on multiple dimensions of

disadvantage may also be silenced due to a lack of opportunity to speak, due to a disinterested listener, or due to mistrust towards those who are willing to listen.

So, we have seen that the speech/silence binary is embedded within differential power relations. I suggest that through this binary, speech is associated with agency and activism, whilst silence is linked to victimisation. Survivors are encouraged to report their abuse to the police and to speak out as a way of helping others. This employs a particular understanding of agency that is conflated with being outwardly active or demonstrative. Such an understanding resembles the radical feminist depiction of agency that typically embodies masculine violence against defenceless and eternally feminine victims. During sexual assault, exhibiting this conception of agency might involve physically fighting back. This masks other forms of agency. For example, one may freeze or disassociate from the moment. Similarly, speaking out about an experience of sexual violence may be one expression of agency but it is not the sole method. Das (1997) notes that survivors of sexual violence in the post-partition violence in India used their agency to remain silent about their experiences. They did so through moving their pain from the surface to the depths of their bodies. Pain is actively carried, like an unborn baby.

Notably, any discussion of agency in relation to sexual assault, be it during or after the event, is used to attribute responsibility to victims for their experiences of sexual assault. It is as if a survivor having any autonomy at all should have enabled them to stop the assault. As they did not do so, they must have on some level wanted to engage in a sexual act. This pernicious argument is widely known as victim-blaming. By exploring the various forms that agency can take and its inter-relation with victimisation, it may be feasible to reveal the inadequacies of such an argument. As Elizabeth Schneider (1993: 399) has suggested, sexuality itself “may simultaneously be a source... of women's agency and resistance.” It is the simplification of this contradiction that is problematic and reductive in theorising sexual assault because it removes

the possibility that someone may experience sexual assault in spite of resisting; that they can be an agent and a victim at the same time.

I end by arguing that victim-blaming is re-entrenched by expecting survivors of sexual violence to enact agency through the narrow form of speaking out. This gives survivors a hefty responsibility for ending sexual violence; the continued entrenchment of victim-blaming can thus be blamed on those who do not report to the police and those who do not speak out about their experiences, despite the problematic nature of delivering testimony that I have examined in this paper. Thus, the very process of speaking out implicitly reinforces victim-blaming. Further, the separation between agent and victim, and the transformation of the survivor into an activist from a victim through speaking out, cast doubt on their status as a victim in the first place. Meanwhile, the perpetrator remains invisible and unaccountable. Not only are they viewed as innocent, but often they are seen as victims of false allegations.

I hope I have convinced you of the need to complicate the binary of speech and silence on the one hand, and agency and victimisation on the other, as a way of opening imaginative space for re-conceptualisations of methods through which survivors can be empowered and through which victim-blaming can be addressed.

Bibliography

AHMED, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

ALCOFF, L. (1995) The Problem of Speaking for Others. In: Roof, J. & Wiegman, R. (eds). *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*. United States of America: University of Illinois.

CAMPBELL, R. & RAJA, S. (1999) Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims: Insights from Mental Health Professionals Who Treat Survivors of Violence. *Violence and Victims* 14(3), p. 261-275.

DAS, V. (1997) Language and the Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain. In: Kleinman, A. Das, V. & Lock, M. (eds). *Social Suffering*. California: University of California Press.

GRAHAM, R. (2012) *Speak Out (Protest Against Rape Culture)*. [Online] Available from: <<http://www.gender-agenda.org.uk/speak-out-protest-against-rape-culture/>>. (1 April 2015)

HEMMINGS, C. (2012) Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation. *Feminist Theory* 13(2), p. 147-161.

SCHNEIDER, E. (1993) Feminism and the False Dichotomy of Victimization and Agency. *New York Law School Review* 38, p. 387-400.

SEDGWICK, E.K. (1994) *Epistemology of the Closet*. London: Penguin Books.