

Victim Impact Statements and the Construction of the Ideal Victim

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to understand how the victim impact statements of the *People of the State of Michigan v. Lawrence Gerard* case both resist and reinforce the construction of the ideal victim.

Based on the literature, I have analyzed the following components of the victim impact statements:

- Vocabulary used to describe victim/survivors¹
- What they can and cannot control in these situations²
- How they are powerless to the systems that protect their abusers³
- How they overcome their experiences⁴

Theoretical Framework and Methods

The data came from inourownwords.us, which compiled the 204 victim impact statements from the victims of Larry Nassar⁴. I randomly selected a sample of ten statements from the thirty unnamed victims. I used discourse analysis to uncover themes in the data.

Findings and Discussion

Vocabulary

- Victim versus Survivor
 - Victim: weak, unaware, helpless, passive¹
 - Survivor: strength, powerful, alive¹

These words are used to both *resist* and *reinforce* the construction of the ideal victim.

The negative words were used to describe a victim, while survivors were described in positive terms.

What can/can't be controlled

- Consent²
 - Not having the choice to give consent²
 - Forced to see doctor due to reputation
 - No other options were given
 - Many trusted his abilities, gave in to what was happening to them

Individuals explained that they were not able to give consent⁴.

This lack of agency reinforces the ideal victim:

- Seen as powerless and naïve

Outside Authorities

- The victim-survivors described being ignored by those they thought would listen to them
 - Organizational silencing³
 - Not in a position of power/authority
- The victim/survivors described being silenced by outside organizations.

This reinforces the construction of the ideal victim – meek and without control over their lives. Those who are silenced repeatedly are more likely to be silenced again.³

Healing and Recovery

- The Victim Impact Statements were framed as an opportunity for the victim/survivors to see themselves as survivors in the most positive way

Individuals who have the chance to overcome these situations find themselves to be better healed than those who remain silent⁴.

- Gives power to survivors
- Allows them to control their experiences

"Thoughts of him will not keep us from accomplishing and living our lives"⁴

Conclusions

The literature suggests that vocabulary used to describe the victim/survivor and ideas about control of the situation and power from outside authorities are used to construct the ideal victim.

In the data, there are patterns that reinforce the construction of the ideal victim:

- Using negative descriptions
- Revoking their right to consent
- Stating that powerful organizations silence them

However, there is evidence that in the Victim Impact Statements, the victim/survivors themselves are resisting many of the claims made by the popular media. They are doing this through:

- Describing themselves as powerful
- Using the Victim Impact Statements to control the narratives of their experiences

Works Cited

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3. Fernando, Dulini and Ajnesh Prasad. 2019. "Sex-Based Harassment and Organizational Silencing: How Women are Led to Reluctant Acquiescence in Academia." *Human Relations* 72 (10), pp. 1566-1594, doi: 1565-1594.
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Acknowledgments

This project is dedicated to the those affected by Larry Nassar's abuse, as well as those struggling with sexual abuse across the world. You are not victims; you are survivors and you are not alone.