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Locker Room Talk: Dialogic Navigations of the Discursive Arena of Campus Sexual Assault

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LOCKER ROOM TALK: DIALOGIC NAVIGATIONS OF THE
DISCURSIVE ARENA OF CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT

A Master's Thesis Creative Project
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This creative Master's thesis project records a set of experiences of a graduate teaching assistant's engagement with student, faculty, and staff activists in sexual assault on a Southeastern university campus during the academic years of 2015—2016 and 2016—2017. Using literature, interviews, dialogic engagement, and participant observation, I document, discuss, and analyze discursive norms and campus interventions, specifically in the context of campus rape culture. I outline my philosophical commitments, relate my experiences meeting with members of the university community, and offer my findings and reflections in a thematic report. The implications make a strong case for the importance of dialogic interventions as the preferred method to address assault, assert the need for collaboration among campus entities, and assess the nature of current models of campus activism.

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CHAPTER ONE

CLEMSON AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Clemson University, built on the rolling fields of a former Southern plantation, now cultivates core values of unity, family, and intensity. One of its maxims, “All In,” is apparent immediately upon arrival. Students gather beneath sprawling trees on sunny lawns, and they always greet visitors with a smile. Like any campus, Clemson suffers from a silenced problem: sexual assault.

This paper is an exploration of campus sexual assault through a lens of discursive norms. As will soon become clear, Clemson is a typical American college campus: assault happens, few talk about it, the university does what it can to prevent and eradicate it. My first chapter provides a brief background on sexual assault relative to communicative practices on Clemson’s campus, situating it in the climate of contemporary North American culture, particularly in the United States. My second chapter articulates the theoretical commitments I undertook in my creative project, rooting them in public deliberation and supportive feminism. My third chapter presents the outcomes and understandings gained through the process of a creative dialogue project called *Locker Room Talk*. Throughout, I interweave my experiences working with a group of student grass-roots organizers on Clemson’s campus to conduct a dialogue session that sought to bridge the aforementioned disconnect between the students and the university in regard to assault prevention and redemption. I conclude with my major conclusions and insights: while Clemson does much to combat rape-supportive practices

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on campus, student perceptions do not always match that of faculty and staff. This disconnect is at the heart of communication surrounding assault on university campuses.

From the outset, I wish to emphasize this project as a process: it takes many twists and turns. As a graduate teaching assistant on Clemson's campus, I am both student and teacher; because I am both, in some ways I am neither. This circuitry mirrors the nature of the topic at hand, as it is a well-traveled one.

A National Issue

Clemson is not unique. Sexual assault is a rampant, hard-to-solve problem in contemporary culture, particularly on college campuses (Breitenbecher, 2000; Franklin, 2010). For example, a Boston Globe article highlights how the Harvard men's soccer team was shut down for the season after a series of sexually explicit "scouting report" of freshman players on the women's team (Anderson & Gross, November 3, 2016). This sort of "boyish" behavior is instantly recognizable to anyone who is familiar with the context of higher education over the past several decades. Penalty is certainly warranted for behaviors such as those displayed by members of collegiate athletics teams, even necessary; however, this sort of "crackdown" is more complicated than it appears. One female Harvard student, quoted in Anderson and Gross' article, proposed that the institution was simply "scapegoating the soccer team," suggesting that there are many more opportunities for disciplinary action related to the issue of sexual assault on campus that have not been pursued. Another student suggested that this punishment was likely an institutional effort to create strategic distance from the "negative image associated with sexual assault and harassment" (Anderson & Gross). This is a key point to note in my

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discussion of Clemson students, as they experienced similar levels of mistrust toward “the establishment,” perhaps rooted in the lack of education and the complex history of institutional efforts against assault.

Distancing occurs in all levels of discourse surrounding assault. According to Littleton and Henderson (2009), in their review of research, between 47 and 73 percent of women whose experiences fit the definition of rape do not label it as such. Of college women who report sexual assault, 40.4% claim to have not felt threatened or victimized by the experience (Orchowski, Untied, & Gidyca, 2013). Further, as noted by former US President Barack Obama at the launch of the national *It's On Us* campaign, “An estimated one in five women has been sexually assaulted during her college years ... of those assaults, only 12 percent are reported” (The White House, 2014). These subtle distancing mechanisms are troubling and suggest an unfortunate communicative relationship between public discourses about sexual assault and the responses of those individuals and institutions that comprise our public.

The topic of sexual assault on college campuses has gained attention in the past two years. The *It's On Us* campaign was launched in the fall of 2014 by President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and a White House task force (The White House, 2014). A 2015 documentary about sexual assault on college campuses, *The Hunting Ground*, received two Emmy Award nominations, is now recognized as a CNN film, and has been screened at hundreds of college campuses across the country and at the White House in alignment with the *It's On Us* campaign (Dick, Ziering, Herdy, Scully, & Blavin, 2015). While these efforts have increased awareness of the realities of assault,

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awareness alone does not change the daily lived experiences of students. A few members of the Harvard women's soccer team wrote in an open letter response to the men's team's actions and suspensions that we all need to "strive to share a mutual respect through our own actions and words" (Clayman et al., 2016, par. 10). This mutual respect that the Harvard students seek plays a key role in my discussion.

Before I proceed, a word on the "definitions" of sexual assault seems in order. While various scholars, authors, and public authorities have sought to place parameters on what it means to be sexually assaulted, I ascribe no boundaries: assault is any variety of unwanted sexually aggressive and unwanted attention, from the most "minor" of infractions to the most invasive, including non-consensual sex (Breitenbecher, 2000; Rich & Rodriguez, 2007). While the "stereotypical" infraction is a male perpetrator and female victim, this is not always the case. Scarce (1997), in his chronicle of the stigma and shame surrounding male on male rape, noted in particular the level of silencing and misunderstanding that occurs to male rape victims. While many of my participants worked from a base knowledge of assault as male-to-female, I chose to focus on this as a particularly *human* problem—it affects all.

A Rape Supportive Culture

In 2002, the National Institute of Justice identified campus sexual assault as one of the most under-reported crimes today. Decades prior, Johnson (1980) posited that contemporary culture is to blame. More specifically, Schwartz (1997) argued that North America has a "rape-supportive culture" due to the way that talk surrounding sexual assault reinforces rather than discourages it (p. 7); indeed, attitudes toward sexual assault

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and rape play key roles in the prevalence of sexual violence (Breitenbecher, 2000). Sexual violence is often silenced in our society (Ahrens, 2006; Boehm & Itzhaky, 2004; Johnson, 1980; Konrad, 1993; Murray, Crowe, & Akers, 2015), dismissing victims' experiences and perpetuating little change in the social and cultural communicative practices that comprise individuals' daily lives. In fact, one of my interview participants (whom I introduce in Chapter 3), succinctly noted that "it's perceived that it takes a lot to murder someone, but rape is not seen as egregious an act [as murder]." She emphasized the need to change cultural perceptions about rape, as will soon become clear.

I understand societal structures as created, maintained, and changed through discourse (Baxter, 2004; Penman, 2000); that is, our communication constructs our social world and lived experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For instance, scholars identify "rape myths" (such as blaming the victim), which are commonly accepted and help to support the imbalance of power that creates our rape-supportive culture (Boeringer, 1999; McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Even "the language choices available for women who have experienced sexual violence are influenced by the dominant culture's construction of sexual violence" (Young & Maquire, 2003, p. 50; see also Koelsch, 2014). No matter the cause we choose to ascribe to sexual assault, we cannot consider the issue without considering the discourse surrounding it. In light of this, critically examining the current realities of sexual assault on college campuses necessitates attention to the discourses and communicative practices involved (Ahrens, 2006; Boehm & Itzhaky, 2004; Konrad, 1993).

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Take, for instance, the media coverage of the most recent national presidential debate season. One candidate, Hillary Clinton, was criticized for denying the voices of women who claim to have been assaulted by her husband while he was in public office. Then-candidate Donald Trump was repeatedly called on to defend his sexual infractions. During a presidential debate on October 9, 2016, Trump was called on to explain the sexually violent nature of a recorded conversation leaked onto mainstream media (CBS News, 2016). The moderator of the debate called Trump's actions "sexual assault," and Trump dismissed them as "locker room talk," or innocent banter in which, supposedly, the majority of men engage (CBS News, 2016). Michelle Obama, the First Lady, later urged the public to take notice of Trump's claims, calling them "not something we can ignore" (Opelka, 2016). In response to the Harvard scandal and in reference to Donald Trump's dismissal of sexual assault behavior, the six Harvard women from the soccer team wrote in their open letter, "'Locker room talk' is not an excuse ... The whole world is the locker room" (Clayman et al., 2016, par. 10). I therefore take the "locker room" as a metaphor for the cacophonous space we occupy — the walls are solid and reverberant.

These parts are just small pieces of larger societal discourses that have stabilizing power in our rape-supportive culture. As explained by Lockwood, Harris, and Hanchey (2014), "sexual violence [exists in] a constellation of action, meaning, institutions, and relations ... [and] includes rape, other sexual assault, and intimate partner violence" and cannot be understood without attention to "the structures and discourses that enable those acts" (p. 323). These include face-to-face talk, the realm of online communication, and a barrage of mass media, including all forms of popular culture: film, advertising, products,

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entertainment, and more. As the scope of this paper cannot do justice to a discussion of mainstream media, suffice it to say that rape-supportive messages are the mass media's main course. These messages, along with the values and actions they engender, have shaped our inherited narratives. Students on university campuses absorb messages from all sides about what it means to be men and women in a rape supportive society, and then must navigate them alone, often away from home for the first time.

The Clemson Community

Sexual assault statistics for Clemson University are “consistent with national level data,” according to Healthy Campus, the university's platform to provide campus initiatives for health and well-being (Healthy Campus, 2016). Citing a study published by Clemson faculty (Thompson & Kingree, 2010), Healthy Campus reported that “approximately 20 percent of first-year women at Clemson University experience some type of sexual victimization.” More specifically, the report stated that: “15 percent experienced unwanted sexual contact; 5 percent experienced sexual coercion; 5 percent experienced attempted rape; 3 percent experienced completed rape.” Pertinently, most women knew the offender.

Campus Safety: A Brief History

Clemson's history of anti-assault activism has been a complex one. Like many campus, awareness and activism has increased in the past decade. A key player in this grassroots movement on campus has been Student Body President (2016-2017) Joey Wilson, who introduced me to students in the movement. These students systemically and repeatedly have engaged in initiatives to provide advocacy and allies for assault victims

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on campus, and they have all been enthusiastically committed to the cause (J. Wilson, personal communication, August 27, 2016). Worthy of note, however, is that the members in Joey Wilson's grassroots group, which I will refer to throughout this manuscript as the "student ad hoc committee," have considered themselves the "first" students to do anything about rape on campus, whereas faculty and staff told a different story. This section will describe a historical narrative of sexual assault on Clemson's campus from the perspective of both the students I interacted with and some faculty and staff members that I interviewed.

One of the major achievements of the student ad hoc committee was the coordination of Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Clemson University on November 23, 2015, to launch the campus chapter of the *It's On Us* campaign (Clemson TVa, 2016). This campaign urged colleges and universities to partner with a White House task force in promotion of personal pledges to: (1) recognize that non-consensual sex is sexual assault, (2) identify situations in which sexual assault may occur, (3) intervene in situations where consent has not or cannot be given, and (4) create an environment in which sexual assault is unacceptable and survivors are supported (*It's on Us*).

To introduce Vice President Biden to the stage, Joey Wilson gave his own speech to bring the issue of sexual assault close to home for the "Clemson family" in attendance at the event:

It is unacceptable that sexual assault occurs at a school we call home, and it's on us to change that. As members of the Clemson family, we need to look out for each other; we need to protect our friends and family. We need to *come together*,

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talk about the issue, stop blaming the victim, create an environment supportive of survivors, and *start making active efforts to change* the status quo, first on our campus and then on other campuses around the nation, too. The bottom line is that this change won't happen because of me, and it won't happen just because of you. It's on all of us to make that change...The only way we can effectively combat it is through a *collaborative effort*. We must work together – students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members. We must not point fingers, but *engage each other in real conversations about making a change*.

(Clemson TVb, November 11, 2015, emphasis added)

This emphasis on the Clemson family and collaboration are important here. Indeed, at least for the students that I met with, there was a (perceived or real) disconnection between disparate members of campus when it comes to sexual assault. Their meetings were always rooted in struggle—of a campus made of many separate entities. The students' emphasis on coming together inherently pointed to a between-the-lines disconnection, one that might be, as yet, unspoken. I hoped to help the students talk about this unspoken disconnect.

One way in which individuals were considering the real conversations that occurred on campus was evident in the *Clemson Says No More* PSA, posted to the Clemson Women's Leadership Facebook page. In the video, several well-known students, faculty, staff, and even the Tiger mascot, challenged rape-supportive norms through a series of short statements, including: "No more 'boys will be boys,'" "No more 'why didn't she just leave?'" "No more 'what was she wearing?'" "No more 'we don't talk

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about that” (Clemson Women’s Leadership, October 31, 2016). While there is a clear need for powerful social mediated messages like this, we have not yet explored the full potential of focused, communicatively-driven opportunities to level some of the lateral structures of misunderstanding present in campus interventions. My project is one that worked specifically toward a discursive escape of the locker room walls – one that took on the adage of “smarter, not harder,” and quality over the institutionalized quantity of mass-campaigning. It did this by exploring the delicately posed nuances of give and take, push and pull from the dozens of discrete-yet-connected entities that make up the discursive landscape of a college campus.

Efforts Against Assault

Because colloquial accounts seemed inconsistent, I interviewed several members of the faculty and staff on campus to try and understand how sexual assault has been understood and addressed before my time on this campus. Megan Fallon, the Interpersonal Violence Coordinator, working from the Office of Access and Equity on campus, was hired in the school year of 2014-2015. In the few years since she came to campus, programming for sexual assault has increased exponentially, but her work is not the first to have occurred on campus. My faculty interviews reported that the Sexual Violence Task Force began on campus in 2012, after Thompson and Kingree (2010) performed a campus-wide study that sparked further research into campus statistics and practices. Several of the faculty members I interviewed have been here since the early 2000s and remember events in that period.

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As it turns out, there have been and continue to be many events and programs designed to prevent, mitigate, and educate about sexual assault on Clemson's campus. Aspire, a subset of Healthy Campus, has a wide variety of information on sexual health and interpersonal violence. Freshmen are given Title IX training when they arrive on campus. The counseling center on campus is active in assisting survivors and promoting healthy behaviors. Just a few of the campus-sponsored organizations devoted to this topic include the Tigers Fighting Trafficking, It's On Us, the Out of the Darkness Walk, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, Take Back the Night, Denim Day, Safe Harbor collection, the Clothesline project, the Day of Solidarity, the annual Marjorie Putnam Memorial Lecture, the Women's Leadership Conference, the Values Summit, and self-defense training.

When I met with Dr. Heidi Zinzow, she noted the wide variety of efforts being taken on campus and the eagerness of the administration and faculty to coordinate efforts against sexual assault. Dr. Zinzow is a licensed clinical psychologist and professor in the Psychology Department, whose work is focused primarily on trauma. She also serves on the Clemson University Sexual Violence Task Force. She especially noted the enthusiasm of law enforcement on campus and the helpfulness of administrative officials in aiding survivors to receive the assistance they need after an assault. She also explained her personal commitment to assisting student organizations and encouraging them to combine their efforts.

Jennifer Goree, the Director of Healthy Campus, has been on campus in various capacities since 2004. She talked optimistically about awareness, education, and prevention events on campus. "When I got here," she said, "Clemson was doing what

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most universities were doing, which is focusing on awareness events.” She noted the nationwide increased emphasis on assault prevention over the past decade, as universities have made efforts to reduce the amount of assault that happens on their campuses. “At Clemson we were already moving in this direction” before other campuses, she said, calling Clemson “way ahead of the curve,” and “certainly on par with other top 20 institutions.”

By contrast, members of the student ad hoc committee felt that the university does little to prevent sexual assault at Clemson. They feel they are often told “no” when trying to bring about changes regarding assault, and they framed the situation in almost revolutionary terms. Students in the committee often said they felt justice was meted unfairly, and that victims had little information or support. They felt that the measures taken by the university were peremptory and heavy-handed, and that men were “guilty until proven innocent.” One of the students in my dialogue session said that she felt the university cared more about football than survivors of assault on campus. I myself navigated several barriers and closed doors in my pursuit of this project. Certainly, not every student’s experience is the same, but there are students on Clemson’s campus that feel they do not receive proper support from “the establishment” when it comes to activism, awareness, and education on campus assault.

Extrapolating from these anecdotes and experiences, it seems that while institutional efforts have taken place on campus through formal channels led and supported by established university structures, faculty, and staff, there appears to be a disconnect between the students’ perceptions on campus and a lack of continuity in these

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interventions. Students seem to think that nothing is being done, while faculty and staff believe that everything possible is being done, and the resulting dissonances may have significant ramifications. At the very least, there is a clear breakdown in communication between these groups on campus, as faculty tended to report that students would “reinvent the wheel” rather than support existing causes. This was particularly troubled by the evidence I saw from student organizers, who worried that male students were guilty by association. These students voiced personal concerns but felt silenced by a culture that promotes violence and leaves victim and perpetrator alike holding the bag of redemption (as I will explicate later).

On top of all this, the efforts of activist groups (both official and grassroots) were interwoven in a larger discourse comprised of mass mediated messages ranging from popular culture to nightly news, Clemson’s Healthy Campus campaigns aimed at behavior change that have implicit and explicit messages about sexual assault, and Safe Alerts that popped up in email and text messages following reported sexual assaults on campus. These messages come from myriad directions: student groups, campus organizations, and university-sponsored campaigns, just to name a few. A notable one that took place during the tenure of my project took the form of an email message sent campus wide from the university police department, stating that an assault had been reported. The email was later recalled, reassuring the community that nothing had happened. While the incident was indeed a false alarm, office and hallway talk reflected a vague sense that *something* had happened, and the university’s quick suppression of the

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report did little to alleviate the silence surrounding campus rape (Clemson University Police, September 19, 2016, personal communication).

One faculty member I interviewed has been part of the Clemson family for more than two decades, first as an undergraduate student, then as a Master's student, and now as a lecturer in the Department of Communication. Marianne Glaser often mentors students who confide in her about their own experiences with sexual assault on campus. She surmised that while students perceive change on campus as slow, this may be partially due to the way that campus policies are enacted (that is, gradually and with due process). She referred to her experiences with her father, who served as the Director of Facilities, Maintenance and Operations at Clemson. According to Marianne, her father remembers organized teams of students, faculty, and staff who would assist with checking the lighting on campus. This group would walk around and ensure that the light poles were placed close enough together to provide optimal campus safety. This safety measure may not immediately strike the casual observer as an effort against assault, and yet, it shows that members of the campus community were considering the safety of students here long before we had a Title IX specialist in the Office of Access and Equity.

Marianne also spoke with me about the student perspective on assault. It is possible that few students think about things like campus lighting when they consider how best to combat assault on campus, and yet the facility directors have been highly concerned with these things in the past. Indeed, she noted that students may lack a historical perspective, as they are only on campus for a few years at a time, while faculty and staff may believe that multiple changes take place on a regular basis. In our

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interview, Marianne celebrated the value of fresh, young minds that push for improvements on campus, yet worried that there was a disconnect between the students and the faculty and staff on how change is completed and communicated. It was during this meeting with Marianne that this disconnection between knowledge and efforts became a primary focus of my project. From that moment, dialogic efforts against assault took a backseat to pinpointing the communicative disconnect between various entities on campus.

Focusing on Daily Behavior

The students and faculty I met with are part of a specific kind of context (a college campus), and this shapes their perception of reality. Scholars have found that the everyday language and communicative action of individuals greatly affect their views of reality and understandings of self, relationships, and community (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Jean Kilbourne noted in her documentary about the objectification and over-sexualization of women in advertising, *Killing Us Softly*, that, because we constantly “swim” in discourse, we cannot help but breathe in a little water (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010). For college students, conceptions of self and agency are integrally tied to the discourses of their cultural context. Consider, for instance, the daily life of a college student: the majority of each day is guided by an enforced schedule of classes, practices, mandated requirements for participation in various organizations, work that is completed in anticipation of critique, and existence within an institutional structure in which they have very little perceived power. This could be why research on the effectiveness of

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assault interventions consistently finds that comprehensive, wide-ranging programs are most effective (as I explore more fully later) (DeGue, 2014).

In regard to the discourses of sexual assault within these social structures, as is evident in the recent efforts at Clemson University, leadership at academic institutions play a large role in how assault is perceived and responded to on campuses (Harris, 2013). These sorts of “top-down” interventions allow the university to mitigate public criticism, but may be doing little to change communicative norms at the individual level. Individuals may be participating in awareness interventions, but may not be critically examining the way they (and others) think and talk about sexual assault in the normative nitty-gritty of daily living. At the very least, students perceive the university as doing little to support them. Perhaps allowing students to engage in intentional sensemaking about sexual assault may empower them, as individuals, to shoulder the mantle of communicative change in such a way that is genuine and impactful. Perhaps a stirring in the “grassroots” of a discursive society may do more toward a rape-averse culture than a broad-stroke suppression of the problem— an approach more akin to silencing than the president of Harvard might be willing to admit.

By suggesting that rape is communicatively maintained, I do not wish to suggest that victims are subject to the nebulous authority of public opinion, rather than their attackers. Nor do I wish to assume that perpetrators cannot help themselves, but are mystically led to violent acts through some clouded haze of rape-supportive hypnotism. On the contrary, each individual player in these events has agency and responsibility—the victims to seek healing, the perpetrators to choose not to commit sexual violence. The

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campus community and society at large, as bystanders, activists, or otherwise, have a similar responsibility. I do assert, however, that because discourse is so influential and society is shaped by our collective talk, a powerful way of critiquing and challenging this system is through discursive methods. Though this idea is not always supported in literature (for example, see Bachman, Paternoster & Ward, 1992), other scholars suggest that social stigma and sanctions play an important role in offenders' behavior (Bosson et al, 2015; DeKesedery & Kelly, 1995; Martin, 2016; Potter, 2016; Romero-Sanchez & Megias, 2015).

I do not wish to suggest, either, through this idea of language having power, that I can directly shape the thoughts and actions of Clemson's students. Pinker (1994), in his famous treatise on "the language instinct," argued that language in no way controls thought, but that thought is a separate entity. The relationship between thoughts (or, more pertinently, beliefs) and behavior is an intriguing one. Few college students would openly profess themselves as likely to be a victim of assault—even less likely to be a perpetrator. However, communicative practices have a significant effect on societal norms, and therefore, behavior (Foucault, 1978; Gal, 1995; Okorie & Bamidele, 2016). Thus, talk surrounding sexual assault may be indirectly molded and shaped by thoughtful reframing.

It seems that this may be more effective if the students themselves do the molding and the shaping. Though campus interventions may be focused on mass campaigns, punishing the perpetrator, or combatting silencing, I have no such aspirations. This project is a collection of experiences: observations and insights from my year-long exploration of Clemson's campus culture as related to sexual assault gained through

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involvement in student-led initiatives, participation in the student grassroots movement meetings and activities, interviews with faculty, staff, and students, and my attempts and experiences in enacting value and impact in a community in which I have a vested interest, care and concern. Now that I have established a brief picture of the university climate, my second chapter will delve into my research process as shaped by my understanding of discursive activities guided by core beliefs of public deliberation.

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CHAPTER TWO

SUPPORTIVE FEMINIST DIALOGUE

My first encounter with Joey Wilson was an informal meeting to try and get to know him and see how he felt about my ideas and desire to align my thesis project with his efforts. We met at All In coffee shop, a local establishment where students do homework on lounge chairs and sofas. The “All In” maxim is important in the Clemson family, as it embodies commitment and unity. As I waited at a corner table, I heard Joey networking in the next room before I saw him. Before he made his way over to me, I noted his enthusiasm and that another student was chatting with him about the multiple committees in which he was involved. In this chapter, I articulate my philosophical commitments as a backdrop for the dialogue session

Joey’s gusto for change on campus was immediately apparent as he explained how he was already in the process of organizing a grassroots group on campus, all of the members interested and invested in promoting sexual assault awareness and education on campus. He called this group an “ad hoc” committee—a term used in Greek life, taken from Latin, and designating a committee set aside for a specific purpose. He immediately invited me to attend and assured me of his help in every way.

In our conversation, we both shared our concern that the students who already engaged in sexual assault activism are not the students we need to reach. These students were invaluable but limited, as sexual assault was everyone’s problem. Joey’s biggest concern was education and policy changes on campus. My priorities differed slightly, but I knew he would be a primary resource in finding students with whom I could engage.

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Deliberative Democracy through Dialogue

Joey and his peers are navigating a complex system. Since its earliest days, the study of communication has been concerned with the nuances of public opinion. As Wander (1976) succinctly noted, “in a given society, there may exist any number of conflicting interpretations of reality” (p. 226). This vast conglomeration of ideas, opinions, and beliefs, interwoven in endless piles of written and spoken word, is a chaotic one. In such a diverse array of human opinion, conflict and confusion are inevitable, yet individuals and institutions seek for solutions that result in the common good (Doxtader, 1995; Goodnight, 1982). Scholars have defined this concept and termed it “deliberative democracy,” though it also goes by other names.

Whole libraries have been written on a process known as “public deliberation”—a tool by which groups of individuals may meet together and discursively solve conflicts (Baxter, 2004; Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004; Penman, 2000). Public deliberation, therefore, is the “process through which” deliberative democracy occurs (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, p. 317). Deliberative democracy as a concept has been identified by scholars as extant since the world began, from the “city-states of ancient Greece to the town hall meetings of colonial New England to the salons and cafes of Paris to, most recently, internet forums and chat rooms” (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, p. 315-316). Like Habermas’ (1964) concept of the public sphere, deliberative democracy is a conceptual framework that is concerned with how public opinions are formed. While scholars have questioned whether Habermas’ idealized concept of democracy is viable or

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not (Fraser, 1990), I choose to focus particularly on the *process* of dialogue, as well as the overall arena of public thought.

Public deliberation, indeed, has been used to study many different contexts and situations. In health contexts, public deliberation has been used to give patients a say in healthcare policies (Abelson, 2009; Cook, 2011; Gostin, 2009; Parker, 2000; Siegel, 2014). In other contexts, deliberation can assist in issues of public spaces (Napoli, 2015), education (O'Connell & McKenzie, 1995; McGowan & Kaiser, 2014; Sheeler et al, 2015), politics (Brighouse, 1995; Britt, 2007; Frost & Makarov, 1998; Sunstein, 1996) environmental issues (Rowlett et al, 2008; Thompson & Gerber, 2003; Zwart, 2003), religion (Britt, 2007; Lafont, 2007; Smith, 2014), and others.

Scholars do not always agree on the effectiveness of public deliberation, however, either as a concept or as a method. A notable one is Fraser (1990), who wrote extensively on the nature of the public sphere, and whether it is not too idealistic to exist. Asen (1999) asserted that both the public sphere and deliberation are “inherently flawed” noting that the “bourgeois” (p. 119) public sphere has a tendency to suppress and silence certain voices. Asen proposed that in the process of deliberative democracy and deliberation, we must not aim to homogenize the public sphere. In a discursive case study of deliberative debates surrounding the de-segregation of a New Jersey school district, Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) found that while there was some success and consensus gained by the deliberative process, there are always complications in the process. One of these complications that limits effectiveness of democratic discussions is power dynamics among members engaged in dialogue (Mendelberg & Oleske).

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Despite the messy, problematic nature of public dialogue, much of past literature paints an idyllic picture of collaborative speech-made-action as an invaluable way to engage in and hopefully solve difficult issues. Goodnight (1982) called it an art: “a way to share in the construction of the future” (p. 251). It seems more likely, however, that public deliberation cannot be pigeon-holed into qualifications of successful or not, but rather as a communicative performance aimed at constructing more humanizing future social realities which exist as a significant moment within a much larger social dialogue with a complex history and uncertain future (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981).

The Role of Disagreement

As noted above, difference of opinion is an integral part of dialogues about sexual assault, and scholars have fortuitously argued that difference is key to dialogue (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Penman, 2000). Baxter (2006) suggested that “all of communication ... is in the play of difference” (p. 102). One of the most important contexts in which public deliberation becomes important is when the topic is beset by tensions and contradictions. Solomon and Abelson (2004) wrote, “while public deliberation need not produce a consensus, it has the unique capability to bring divergent views to the table and into conversation with the goal of collectively addressing thorny problems” (p. 2).

This project aimed to address an extremely thorny problem. Black and Weiderhold (2014) emphasized the importance of “civil disagreement” in public dialogue sessions, emphasizing that “in the political ideal of civil society, public discourse consists of robust discussion of diverse and potentially opposing ideas in a forum where all

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participants in the conversation adhere to and honor prescribed rules and precedents” (p. 287). Participants must be allowed and even encouraged to express their subjective experiences and ideas in a way that is respected, constructive, and productive to enhancing shared understanding. This robust sort of discussion is a major goal of this project, as assault on college campuses encompasses many markers of difference including perpetrator vs. victim, administration vs. student, establishment vs. grassroots, and even the nuanced differences of individuals from different backgrounds and their personalized experiences and perspectives on assault.

While the boundaries of the public sphere are certainly problematic, public deliberation can and has been used both as a concept and method to understand discourse and to enact social change. Citing Bakhtin (1990), scholars noted that communication constructs our social world, and argued that the “essence of dialogue is its simultaneous fusion with, yet differentiation from, another” (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004, p. 114). Warnke (2000) set the concept of democratic deliberation within the context of modern feminism. She argued that Habermas’ conceptualization of feminist concerns as clarification and re-clarification of needs is problematic, and that a fluid and flexible discourse of feminist ideas is necessary to rectify current social issues. Similarly, Koehn (1998) argued the necessity of a “care ethic” in dealing with those of differing opinions, as will be demonstrated later. Thus far, we have a sound argument for sexual assault as a candidate for discursive reframing through public deliberation.

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Democratic Dialogue and Sexual Assault

As it is clear that assault is a significant issue in higher education and society at large, academic writing is full of suggestions and proposed interventions. A vast majority of these are focused on teaching women to protect themselves (Brooks, 2011; de Lange, 2015; Hertzog & Jodie, 2009; Rich & Rodriguez, 2007; Testa & Livingston, 2009) and a few target educating males on bystander interventions and appropriate behavior (Foubert, Godin, & Tatum, 2010; Mabry & Turner, 2016; McMahon & Dick, 2011), but still less focus on bringing males and females together in dialogic ways (Holcomb et al, 1993; Holcomb et al, 2002).

Yeater and O'Donahue (1999) argued in a lengthy discussion on preventing sexual assault for the need to keep male and female students separate in intervention settings, even going so far as to assert that it “may be advantageous to keep potential rapists, who may be members of mixed-gender workshops, ignorant of those strategies that may decrease a female’s risk of victimization” (p. 759). This assertion, I propose, falls into the everyday trap of victim-blaming and perpetrator-indulgent behavior that allows our culture to support rape. If we accept scholarly beliefs in constitutive communication, we cannot keep male and female students separate and expect to critically assess Schwartz’s (1997) “rape-supportive” culture. All members of a rape-supportive society must view all other members as fellow-members, changing both attitudes and behavior together.

A few scholars have proposed alternative, discursive ways of viewing and combatting assault. For example, Potter (2016) recently suggested that to reduce sexual

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assault on campuses, administrations should use similar tactics as past efforts to reduce drunk driving. She acknowledged the differences between drunk driving accidents and sexual assault, but also pointed out that, just like previous views on drunk drivers, perpetrators of assault are excused as non-typical or impaired at the time of the incident. In the past 40 years, according to Potter, public beliefs about drunk drivers have been shifted by activism toward a more criminal outlook—we now view drunk drivers as willful perpetrators of violence, rather than as victims themselves. Potter’s suggestion underscores the potential value of working harder as a social collective to acknowledge acts of sexual assault as a criminal behavior, not innocent “locker room talk,” and to truly listen to and support the voices of victims.

In a similar vein, Alcoff and Gray (1993) used a Foucauldian perspective to suggest that victims of sexual assault are often treated in pathological ways. They argued “that survivor discourse is closer to the discourse of the mad, as Foucault discusses it, than to the discourse of the repressed” (p. 269). Through a discussion of victimhood in contemporary media examples, they argued that survivors of sexual assault are either not allowed to speak out or are treated as fragile and in need of help. This neither assists the victims nor punishes the perpetrators, and is created through framing via talk.

Even more specifically, Romero-Sanchez & Megias (2015), in a rare qualitative study specifically about how college undergraduates talk about assault and rape, found that “men tended to list biochemical causes (such as alcohol consumption, physiological need and frustrated sexual energy) as precipitating factors, whereas women tended to refer to ideological or socio-cultural factors” (p. 652). This small finding seems telling,

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since it points to a disconnection between gendered understandings of assault. Mabry and Turner (2016) found that “descriptive norms played a significant role in behavioral intentions” while studying the effects of bystander interventions in potential assault (p. 286). Koelsch (2014) further asserted that our ideas about a survivor’s lack of agency during an assault continue afterward, because discourse subjects them as victims. Each of these examples suggests that there may be great value in exploring the discursive environments of college campus in regard to sexual assault.

While many authors on the subject of sexual violence maintain a bleak and critical view, I propose that mere criticism is not enough. Koehn (1998) critiqued the feminist ethic by proposing an alternative model for change — a “dialogic ethic” instead. This system is built upon Socratic “giving and listening” (p. 104), and, similarly to other proposed deliberative systems, demonstrated how collaboration is a superior way to other more combative methods of seeking social change. Taking Koehn’s belief in this supportive dialogue, I further propose that creating space for individuals to engage in meaningful talk and examination of sexual assault on college campuses may do more than traditional methods of “waging war” against assault. Perhaps a small group of students, changing their discursive practices on a micro level, may represent the macro-arena of a wider student body. Indeed, as Gastil (2014) argued, a “more deliberative democracy will do the most to speed the discovery and implementation of remedies to social disparities, persistent intolerance, and infringements on basic human rights” (p. 3).

There is, then, perhaps something we can do about discursive practices surrounding assault, both online and off — a revival of Foss and Griffin’s (1995)

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Invitational Rhetoric through dialogue about assault. Foss and Griffin re-framed the concept of rhetoric in such a way that precludes the need to “win” an argument or position. Traditional rhetoric, they argued, focuses only on the effectiveness of a rhetor’s message, positioning audience as opponent. Invitational rhetoric is a viewpoint that emphasizes “interactional goals” over persuasive goals. In this line of thinking, the ends do not justify the means. Rather, invitational rhetoric “enables rhetors to disengage from the dominance and mastery so common to a system of oppression” (p. 16).

This system of oppression is key to the discussion of sexual assault on campus, if we consider again the examples from the beginning of this work. Dominance and mastery sit at the pinnacle of a vertical dialectic, made of a communicative system of top-down reasoning. Harris (2013), in an organizational conceptualization of campus rape, argued that the causes of campus sexual violence are deeply rooted in communicative practices of the institutions where they happen. Harris focused on the leadership in those institutions, who reinforced instances of sexual violence on their campuses through the messages they implicitly conveyed through talk.

This sort of top-down understanding of where responsibility lies is illuminating to the experiences of students on Clemson’s campus. As insiders of a rape-supportive culture, they see only the interior of a vertical power structure of institution-grassroots, producer-consumer, male-female, perpetrator-victim. To push back through any traditional channels of critique is to operate within this stable, hierarchical configuration. Like the proverbial frog at the bottom of the well, for every step forward, we

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idiomatically slip two steps back within the confines of a firmly rooted communicative structure.

This, then, begs the question: how can we, as communicators, break this vertical chain? We need a lateral movement into more equitable discourse surrounding assault. This is done, in Foss and Griffin's (1995) words, through "an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does" (p. 5). In a case like assault, all involved parties could perceive others as fellow seekers of social change. Through discursive reframing, opposite sides of perceived dichotomies could shift their messages to ones of inclusion. Rape-supportive could give way to rape-averse.

Cultural Agency

This project takes on a broad appreciation of what Taylor (2004) called "social imaginaries." Drawing heavily on Anderson's (1983) imagined communities, Taylor (2004) argued that the social imaginary "enables ... the practices of a society" (p. 2). Thus, the perceived way of viewing assault on Clemson's campus creates and maintains the way we perform our normative roles as bystanders, activists, administrators, victims, and perpetrators, and yet it is not as "real" as we may think. Here follows a brief review of the ways campus rape is studied and addressed in scholarly literature. I have by no means included every way assault prevention has been discussed, but focus as much as possible on communicative methods.

DeGue (2014) reported to the White House Task Force I mentioned earlier that the most effective strategies are "comprehensive"—that is, changes must be made across individuals, their relationships, and their physical, social and cultural environments.

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Further, brief, one-session interventions were found to be largely ineffective. This finding is supported by Anderson and Whiston (2016), who conducted a meta-analysis encapsulating 69 studies and 18,172 participants. Banyard, Plante, and Moynihan (2005) wrote extensively about the role of bystanders in combatting assault on college campuses. They provide a comprehensive review of assault interventions coupled with an empirically supported study on rape attitudes and bystander behavior. Their results emphasized the importance of shifting language and behavior away from victim-blaming to bystander supportive behaviors.

Mabry and Turner (2016) proposed normative social behavior theory as a potentially more effective way to address campus assault. Their statistical analysis of male university students on college campuses assessed public service announcements (PSAs) and their effect on bystander behavior. The results are telling: negatively-framed PSAs (eg, “do not do these behaviors”) were less effective in influencing students who were already unlikely to participate in positive bystander behaviors. Indeed, positive and empowering PSAs (i.e., “do these behaviors”) did more to influence men who were likely to stand by and do nothing than negative, punitive ones. It is also important to note that Mabry and Turner asked their participants about the verbal behaviors used to both describe and interact with women – gendered dialogue, rather than strictly talk about assault.

Similarly, Koelsch (2014) explored how the current cultural scripts surrounding assault do not allow victims a sense of agency in their own lived experiences. She noted that “describing a woman who has suffered a sexual assault as a victim implies

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blamelessness and innocence, but it is also a disempowering term” (p. 16). Further, “discourses represent sets of prevailing ideas or cultural messages about the way things are and the way things should be ... our relationships to those discourses shape not only *what* we see, but *how* we see — what we imagine is possible and what we take for granted” (Koelsch, p.16, emphasis in original). Even more pertinently, “although throughout our daily lives we experience our subjectivities as isolated from one another, these subjectivities themselves are part of larger cultural conversations” (Stolorrow & Atwood, 1992, as cited in Koelsch p. 14). So, “while we might experience ourselves as capable of making many purely independent decisions, our agency is limited by our cultural connectedness,” or perhaps, our cultural separateness (Koelsch, p. 14).

This cultural separateness is here framed negatively, as a cultural disconnection and isolation. Fortunately, there is another inherent aspect of public dialogue — it is framed through public deliberation and exploration of differences. How, then, do we shift dialogue on campus from institutionally generated behavior-change messages to that of encouraging individuals to recognize their agency and social responsibility? Mabry and Turner (2016) suggested that interpersonal interactions, like in-person trainings and social support through peer group meetings, might carry much more weight than a widespread public service announcement. PSAs, they argued, are “only one piece of a comprehensive sexual assault prevention program” (p. 287).

I therefore propose a creative take on public deliberation, not as an attempt to create space for dialogue rooted in difference of opinion about debatable topics, but as space for dialogue rooted in difference of perspective. In the next chapter, I outline the

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culminating event of my project: *Locker Room Talk*. This was a dialogue session designed to explore assault on Clemson's campus from the above perspectives. More particularly, I tried to enable my participants to transcend common dichotomies of difference such as male-female, victim-perpetrator and over-generalized labels of identity such as race, sexuality, social role — all of which serve to over-simplify the complex, communicative realities of sexual assault. A major dichotomy I focused on was the previously explained disconnect between the students and the establishment, as noted previously.

This dialogue session partially allowed the students to engage in narrative imagination, which “both synthesizes and deconstructs the knowledge we acquire from being in the world” in effort to “perceive a new ‘wholeness,’ a new reality or potential reality” (Andrews, 2014, p. 14). This encouraged the students to engage with one another and pursue what Harter and Rawlins (2011) called “the worlding of possibilities” – the actualizing of “contemplative spaces for inventing other worlds” (p. 269) in recognition of real needs in the community and consideration of the collective lived experiences of individuals. More importantly, Frank (2012) argued that “what is unquestionably necessary is to begin research without a preconception of what ought to change; that would foreclose dialogue” (p. 38).

Indeed, I did all in my power to create a supportive environment in which individuals could examine their social context in light of the discourses of sexual assault that they encounter and their experiences related to the existence of the social issue of sexual assault, empowering them to envision alternative social realities in which they

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have agency to contribute to the changes they see as necessary and possible. I made every attempt not to engage in the common, top-down practice of presenting sexual assault as an institutional dragon the students must collectively slay; rather, I tried to facilitate them in greeting both their fellow peers and the realities of sexual assault with the empathy and conscience required to make dialogic changes consistent with Koehn's (1998) feminist ethics.

As my goal was to fulfill a specific need, it is up to the members of the community to determine what these needs are; thus, I sought as much guidance from the community as is feasible at every point in the project. Because the solution to sexual assault is clearly nebulous (based on the discussion above), I hold no preconceptions of a best solution for this college community. This project focused on processes, rather than outcomes, and I allowed it, as much as possible, to build itself (as is clear from its circuitous path). This method is based on Frank's (2012) belief in the ability of stories to "reshape the past and imaginatively project the future" (p. 33). Dialogic narrative analysis (DNA) is concerned with speaking "*with* a research participant rather than about him or her" (p. 34). As a co-learner and fellow-human with my student participants, the dialogue session was wholly focused on allowing the students to teach me – I merely provided the spark of the conversation. My analysis, then, takes Frank's goals of "increasing people's possibilities for hearing themselves and others" (p. 37).

Throughout my project, I asked: What are the narratives of sexual assault on Clemson's campus and how are they circulated? How do the discourses of sexual assault provide or limit resources for individuals on Clemson's campus? In what ways do sexual

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assault discourses divide or align individuals and groups? How do college students understand themselves in relation to sexual assault narratives, as well as their responsibility and agency in social change? What are the consequences of current discourses of sexual assault and what are the possibilities that might be realized by student-generated ideas for changing the campus climate? While I found few “answers” to these questions, my experience provided some key insight into communicative practices on campus.

The above discussions set the stage for a dialogic crumbling of “locker room” walls through supportive discussion of differing ideas in a way that allows students to engage with the topic of sexual assault from a personal, day-to-day perspective. Through our active efforts to enter into public dialogue, individuals may offer themselves as engaged listeners in what Rawlins (2009) called a “creative, ethical, and mutually affirming” relationship (p. 205) in which individuals may “stand with other human beings in all our potentials, fallibilities, vulnerabilities, and multiplicities” (p. 213). This communicative space might enable us to actively construct the reality in which we wish to live – one in which our actions reflect what Buber (1970, 1935) suggested to be the most humanizing of relations in which individuals take an ethical stance toward one another in and work to realistically envision others’ realities and perspectives. I sought to help students, through the exploration of varied perspectives, come to see each member of the project as a fellow-seeker of a positive campus change, rather than mere cogs in an institutionalized rape-silencing apparatus.

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The Student Ad Hoc Committee

The first time I met with the student ad hoc committee, we met in the glistening new Watt Center near the library on campus. This was a room filled with the newest technology, but we simply sat around a conference table and talked. Joey uses a brisk, business-like meeting format with an agenda and a purpose. There were around ten students there, of varying gender, race, major, and experience. Besides me, there was one other graduate student: Taylor, who works in the Office of Access and Equity. There were no full-time faculty or staff present. I noted that many of the students seemed acquainted with each other, or quickly became acquainted as we chatted before the meeting started. Each student was engaged, asking questions and taking notes. Most had at least one comment or contribution in the general discussion. I mostly listened, but twice Joey called on me to share some insight and briefly share my plan for my thesis work. As both a graduate student and someone involved in “research” (from their perspective), I was considered knowledgeable, even though the other graduate student was better able to share facts and insight.

One male student expressed concern for men on campus, respectfully asserting his advocacy for men as guilty by association. He noted that most men are not guilty of committing assault, and yet are the prime targets of interventions. He discussed the existence of unregistered fraternities on campus, due to the “combative” way the university interacts with fraternities. This student felt that fraternity members were “equated” with perpetrators of sexual assault, and were thus closed off to hearing any messages about sexual assault. He noted that “[sexual assault] can feel like it’s your

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fault” even if it is not. The other members quickly chimed in in support, noting that fraternity brothers need to not feel stereotyped if they are to be receptive to messages that support non-violent behaviors. At this meeting, at least, group members were supportive of male students and their needs.

This meeting mostly consisted of discussing potential changes that might be made on campus, including the possible instatement of a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) in our campus clinic, which, the students noted, has no rape kits. They discussed how victims must go to regional hospitals, which are approximately half an hour’s drive from campus. They discussed the training that is provided to freshman students their first semester, and how it is poorly received and seems ineffective. Though not explicitly stated by the students, this meeting built the foundation of supportive feminism for my project through the way the students discussed collaboration and care. It also underscored the complex, constitutive nature of the environment the students live in on Clemson’s campus.

These students, perhaps, did not realize it, but they were engaging a specific kind of philosophical practice. Foucault wrote extensively on the power/knowledge structures created by discourse (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Though Foucault offers no pragmatic solutions through discursive practice, it can be inferred that since a Foucauldian perspective places the agency of oppression on those who subject themselves through discourse, these same agents could affect that discursive arena through purposeful shifting of discursive power. This shift could occur through talk, materiality, and practice.

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The next time I attended an ad hoc meeting was several months later. In the whirlwind of committees and events, the students found it hard to meet regularly. This time, Joey followed up with the concerns they addressed in the last meeting and informed the group on the upcoming plans for Sexual Assault Awareness month in the approaching April. Again, a young man cautiously advocated for men's rights in sexual assault, this time specifically in regards to those who are wrongly accused. A few of us (myself included) did our best to reassure him that wrong accusations do in fact occur; however, Joey emphasized that *first* we must protect victims at all costs. I sensed the young man who raised the objection felt slightly overruled. Joey's concern for victims over the falsely accused may point back to the urgency felt by students that nothing is being done to combat sexual assault on our campus. This young man's delicate, polite assertion of rights underscores the sensitive, nuanced complexity of assaults on campus. As is clear, the boundaries, practices, and talk about assault are messy, ambiguous, and hotly contested. This micro-discourse in which a young man was arguably silenced in his advocacy for a separate type of victim (that is, those who wrongfully go through the judicial process) adds another layer of difficulty into a macro-discourse that is already deeply troubled.

In the documentary film *Tough Guise*, Jackson Katz outlines the way Western culture shames and hardens young men through media, practices, and talk. He argues that young men are held to impossible standards of masculinity and are led to exert force in order to achieve social acceptance (Earp, Katz, Young, Jhally, Rabinovitz, & Media Education Foundation, 2013). All too often, offenders were abused as children, growing

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up to continue a vicious cycle of brutality (Earp et al.). I echo Sir Thomas More in his famed work on Utopia, who asked whether we do not first “make thieves and then punish them?” (More, 1904). The young man who expressed his concern for the wrongly accused was attempting to give voice to a murky but pungent double standard. At that meeting, at least, he received minimal support. Where can young men express the unfairness of their situation, when, as Joey so aptly put it, survivors are our main concern?

Developing a Dialogue Session

As I developed my plan for *Locker Room Talk*, I followed a path more reminiscent of a rollercoaster than a superhighway. At first, I thought I might lead a Creative Inquiry class, a special course offering the university uses to incorporate students in research. Then, I considered a weekend intensive retreat, where students could dialogue about assault in a removed, insulated environment away from campus. Both of these ideas succumbed to the inexpediciencies of navigating campus agencies. In the end, I opted for a more traditional “focus group” format for my dialogue sessions, which I describe in the final chapter. Though the design may look familiar, the approach was purposefully different. As I have tried to demonstrate through my theoretical discussion, I wanted to approach the dialogue session from a perspective of understanding for all, with a tangible outcome for the students at the end. The creative solutions generated in our session were for the students—the insight I gained about our campus climate I keep for myself, and by extension, those who may choose to apply this knowledge in college

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campuses. The penultimate chapter will describe the dialogue session and the outcomes and insights generated by the students at that event.

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CHAPTER THREE

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I named the dialogue session with my student participants *Locker Room Talk: A Clemson Dialogue*. I hoped this would pique their interest. I held it in alignment with the beginning of Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April, so as to attract their attention and hopefully gain more participants. During the session, which I describe in detail in this chapter, the students mentioned their liking of the name and the pertinence to their lived experience. Indeed, for an institution whose affinity for competitive sport is renowned, coupled with the contemporary political connotations noted in a previous chapter, “locker room talk” seemed appropriate. As I developed my session, I made every attempt to maintain a harmony with each of the sources I took as a model, emphasizing the need for men and women together, dialogue, and supportive feminism. In this chapter I provide details the event, followed by some more nuanced explanations of the student’s participation in it. I then conclude the chapter with some insights gleaned from some student interviews I conducted following the event.

Developing a Dialogue Session

Locker Room Talk went through a few different phases. At first, developing a semester long Creative Inquiry class seemed the most valuable way to engage the students. Soon, however, this proved impractical. Then, I wanted to hold a weekend-long, intensive retreat, metaphorically removing the students from the discursive arena of campus for a critical birds-eye view. Both of these ideas, however, would require institutional funding and support from a university-sponsored program. As this is in

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direct opposition to many of the philosophical commitments outlined in my previous chapters, I opted for a more traditional focus-group model for the dialogue session. It differed from a usual focus group, however, as I shortly explain.

I recruited for this event using what I describe as an invitational model; it was akin to snowball sampling, as I collected participants where and when I could, but differed from snowball sampling in that I did not place a limit on how many participants I wanted. I set a goal for 10 to 15, and I prepared for 20. This left a certain amount of uncertainty in my preparation, as I had to be able to accommodate whoever arrived on the day of the event. After asking for the input of a handful of interested students, I set the date for Friday, March 31st, 2017, and commissioned an invitation from one of my colleagues. I deliberately designed it as an “invitation” rather than a “flyer,” as I wanted each student to feel personally invited and welcomed as a guest, rather than a stranger. I had a handful of these printed, which I gave to interested parties in the Clemson Women’s Leadership organization, the student ad hoc committee, and the Office of Access and Equity. I also provided this invitation to faculty members with whom I had a personal relationship and knew supported this effort, as I believed they would instinctively know, and be able to personally invite, the sorts of students who would be interested in this event. One of these faculty members asked me to attend a class to describe the purpose and details of the event. Others individually invited their students. I also contacted a few of my own former students and invited them to attend.

This resulted in twelve students: four men and eight women, from various backgrounds, experiences, and demographics. As they introduced themselves, I asked

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them to provide the group with a brief description of their interest in and previous engagement with the topic. Most said they had some prior knowledge and experience. A few said they did not know much about it, but were intrigued by the title and wanted to know more. Two of them took me aside at the beginning and explained that they needed to leave after two hours instead of three, but the rest stayed for the full time, and those who left early were engaged for their whole stay. The next section outlines our session and its outcomes, followed by some of the major takeaways from the students' comments. I never use the students' real names, except for those students whose express permission I gained through a one-on-one interview.

Goals and Activities

I should begin by saying that I never used terms like “rape-supportive” with the students. My session attempted to deconstruct campus culture in a way that “shows” rather than “tells,” letting the students draw their own conclusions. This event was purposely designed to build continuity, as I invited the students to tease out creative solutions for sustainable, ongoing positive change. Certainly, I wanted them to discuss sexual assault as a hard-to-solve problem, but I also wanted them to leave with tangible, practical ideas about how to affect positive change. These solutions will hopefully be long-term as they will be proactive communicative action, rather than reactive quick fixes. Because I wished the students to take ownership of this project, I chose not to pigeon-hole them into any particular intervention at the start, lest I render myself hypocritical. Thus, I began by inviting them to think and talk about sexual assault, and ended by asking them what they thought we should do about it. Vogt, Brown, and Isaacs'

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(2003) “The Art of Powerful Questions” assisted me in developing the plan for the session.

We held the session in a reserved classroom on the fourth floor of Daniel Hall. On the day of the session, I assembled all my materials and a donated meal from a local sandwich shop. I arrived in plenty of time, but as I was bustling in and out of the room setting up, several of the students arrived early. I appreciated their enthusiasm and their willingness to help me arrange the chairs and tables in a circle. As the other students arrived, I noticed a continued enthusiasm and intensity, which lasted throughout our time together. I asked the students to bring their own paper or laptop for notes, but was prepared to provide some if they did not. Everyone came prepared and eager to begin, instantly relieving most of my major apprehensions.

Although there was very little tension to begin with, I still began the session with an icebreaker activity designed to find common ground. While many icebreaker activities ask you to find someone with differences from you, I designed a “Bingo” card with tasks such as, “find someone from the same area as you,” “hug someone with the same hair color as you,” and “shake hands with a stranger.” I told them the signal of having completed a Bingo row would be to stand in a “power pose” (a firm stance of their choosing designed to create physical confidence and remove the social uncertainty so common to new surroundings). All of us participated, including myself. During this activity, everyone was engaged and frequently laughed. While there was certainly good rapport from the moment everyone entered the room, this helped to ease any remaining tension as we began the session.

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Using a large sheet of paper, I asked them to help me create guidelines for our time together. I briefly explained the need for supportive communication on such a topic as this, and asked them to break into groups of three to brainstorm the sorts of guidelines we might need. Thankfully, there were 12 students present and we broke easily into four groups. Each group proposed two or three criteria of good communication, and I wrote them on the sheet of paper to display in our room throughout the afternoon. To demonstrate their quick readiness with insightful contributions, I will list them all here:

Be respectful and don't say something you wouldn't want said to you

Figure out the middle ground between open conversation and going too far

Do not interrupt others when they are speaking

Keep an open mind

Use respectful judgment

Listen actively

Be a friend, not a parent

Be mindful of each individual's experience

I kept these posted at the front of the classroom throughout, just in case I needed to refer to them, but they remained unreferenced for the entire session.

I then asked the students to briefly define sexual assault, in effort to make sure everyone in the room was on the same page. The students identified sexual assault as a "lack of consent," and "anything that someone doesn't want done to them that is done or said." This matched perfectly with my personal definition of sexual assault, with no prompting from me. Had the students used a different definition, I would have taken that

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into account, as I maintained my goal of never dictating to the students how they ought to feel or believe.

After establishing our baseline definition of assault, I invited them to help themselves to refreshments while I queued up the videos I planned to show them. I showed them two clips from documentaries, which I previously cited in this manuscript: “Killing Us Softly” and “Tough Guise 2.” Each clip was less than 10 minutes long, and portrayed the objectification of women’s bodies and the hyper-masculinization of men in popular media and advertising. The students were attentive during the video, vocally reacting on occasion and taking notes. I first asked them what they thought of the clips, making sure to invite both affirmative and adverse sentiments. Most found the clips to be highly accurate and relevant, as I will discuss in the next section.

Once they had discussed the videos, I asked them to apply these concepts to our campus climate surrounding sexual assault. I showed them a list of the current campus efforts of awareness, education, and activism, inviting them to share their experiences and opinions. Their reactions were often expected, but occasionally surprising, as I will outline soon. I allowed this portion of the event to freely flow, facilitating the dialogue by calling on raised hands, asking probing questions, and regulating conversations as best I could without biasing them toward any of my own personal opinions.

One example of a probing question I used to help the students ‘push’ further regards the origin of discursive norms. After a male student asked whether media campaigns can be effective in de-stigmatizing beauty ideals, I waited for a pause in the conversation and asked whether the students thought our advertising drove societies

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beauty standards, or whether society dictated the standards of beauty advertising. There was a sudden hush. I compared this question to the proverbial “chicken and egg” question, and the students concluded that it must be a combination, though society got a higher portion of the blame after I asked this question.

After about three-quarters of an hour of open discussion, I felt the conversation drawing to a close, so I opted to move into the final segment of the dialogue session. I am glad I did, for this ended up taking longer than I expected and was delightfully fruitful. I told the students that while the sort of conversation we were having was necessary and valuable, I did not want them to leave the room without a tangible, real-life effort against sexual assault on campus. I asked them to break into their groups again and brainstorm some ideas that we, as a group, could begin doing today to change the ways we think and talk about assault on Clemson’s campus. I gave each group about fifteen minutes to come up with two or three examples, intending to have them vote on a preferred option to pursue as a group. Our discussion, however, quickly shifted from the ideas that developed in brainstorming and evolved into a final idea for action: a formal proposal for the university to hire two full-time staff members on campus to advocate for survivors of sexual assault.

I will explain the ideas developed in the initial brainstorming soon, but first I will explain the action we took and its outcomes. It, like my project as a whole, was a process: it did not take the straightforward path we had hoped. As we brainstormed, we kept returning to the need for fulltime staff advocates for assault survivors on campus. Since the experience of assault is so difficult to navigate, we emphasized the need for a

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dedicated staff member to assist survivors in the process of healthcare, reporting, and regaining their lives back after an assault. One of the students remembered that the student government website has a submission form called “We The Tigers,” where students may submit ideas for change on campus. To be considered, the idea must receive at least 150 “votes” on the site. We wrote up a description of the idea there in the classroom, and planned to use social media and hashtags to get the required number of votes later that week. I discuss the outcome of this effort in the next section.

At the end of the session, I invited students who wished to discuss the topic with me more to set up an interview with me for the following week. Three female students responded. The information from these three interviews is interwoven throughout this chapter and others, as it encapsulated many of the areas I cover. As the session wound down, I encouraged friendly chatting as everyone prepared to leave and several students volunteered to help me clear up. They expressed joy in our work that day and excitement for the ability to pursue positive change for the future of our campus community.

Takeaways

Now I share, in the students’ own words, some thematic takeaways from the dialogue session. I begin with their reactions to the video clips I showed them. One male student fervently avowed the accuracy of “Tough Guise 2,” as he frequently witnesses members of his all-male dormitory shaming each other based on their masculinity. A female student expressed surprise that men still use terms like “queer,” and “fag” in this age group, expecting it of younger generations but not university students. Another female student shared that it was “jarring” to see her male friends lose their natural

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sensitivity and learn to be aggressive as she grew up. She expressed sympathy in her ability to “run away to be a girl,” if she needed to express emotion, whereas her male friends were unable to do so.

In response to “Killing Us Softly,” and objectification of women in advertising, a male student expressed surprise. “It boggles my brain,” he said, that girls take so long to get ready, and that “women are trying to work toward something that doesn’t exist.” A female student noted that “it’s very easy to fight a foe that’s standing in front of you,” but we do not always realize that advertisements affect us.

Later, a student noted that “society rules all” of our interactions because “we uphold it in our everyday lives.” This emphasis on lived experiences is important, because the students are navigating a tenuous agency structure, one with consequences and challenges. Another student likened it to “going to a restaurant,” where we are handed only two options: that of going along with idealized norms or rejecting them and suffering the consequences. A male student argued that “people want to be told what to do, how to feel, how to dress.” Thus, “we forge the chains that bind us” by doing nothing to change our discursive norms.

One participant noted that “advertising normalizes things, and that can be positive or negative.” This aptly poised our group for our next task: how to change campus culture. An important theme of our time together was activism on campus, and whether or not it is effective. The students agreed that this topic was an important one to discuss and to attend events, but puzzled over the difficulties of attendance and participation.

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Several of the male students noted their surprise at seeing other men at this event, expecting to be the only male student there. A female student said she “was genuinely shocked to see so many guys in the room.” The other students agreed. Why is this? The students felt that perhaps it is “not masculine to care” about such an event, or that “guys feel that since they’re not the victim or potential victim, they don’t have a right to say anything.” Further, according to the students, men in general might feel that if they personally were not going to assault someone they have “done their part” and no longer need to go to events on campus. In addition, they may be reluctant to attend an event where they might be told they are wrong.

Although the students reported that there was a common perception on campus that all victims are women, they knew this was not the case. They related this to the tendency of female students to talk about it only with other females. According to the students, this is a “conversation we’re not having” with the wider community, noting that women tend to converse about it with other women, but rarely let it leave their immediate circle of friends. One female student even said that “we don’t want to talk about it in front of men” due to its sensitive nature.

These foundational discussions were designed to allow the students to draw their own conclusions about assault, as I wanted them to hold the responsibility for critiquing their own campus culture (over which I, from the hinterlands between student and staff, had only limited authority). However, thus far we have not traversed any new ground, other than to reify the expected beliefs of men and women on Clemson’s campus. The remainder of the session will hopefully provide insight into our specific campus culture,

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as it was focused in how the students felt activism worked on our campus and whether more was needed. The previous quotes, however, do solidify the types of disconnections heretofore established regarding the ways we talk about assault on campuses around the nation. At a later point in the session, I did share with the students my findings that Clemson is consistent with the national average, which reinforced our previous conclusions about our campus as active but ineffective.

This disconnection and how to mend it were a major focus of our session later on. The students discussed the “negative stigma” around going to counseling on campus, noting that many victims do not even realize they have been assaulted, due to the varying definitions and beliefs surrounding assault on campus. They were not sure how to change this stigma, noting the difficulties and nuances about reporting, educating, and connecting. They also noted that they are rarely aware that April is Awareness Month until immediately before it begins, which means they are less likely to attend any events surrounding this topic at other times of the year.

The students mainly focused on the marketing and advertising of campus awareness events during this portion. The students did share several experiences about seeing posters, hearing talks, taking courses where assault was addressed, or going to events, but they noted that these experiences were limited in their exposure. They discussed at some length the CU1000 course taken by freshmen and the questionable effectiveness of the unit surrounding this topic. One student noticed that he thought very little about what he learned in that class regarding assault at first, and then recalled it at a later time. They also discussed the Resident Assistants in their dormitories and their roles

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in this topic—again, they did some, but their efforts lacked breadth and depth. All of these point to an overall sense of there being access to education on campus, but these interventions might not be as moving or long-lasting as could be possible.

If these events are required, though, this presents another barrier. The students believed that requiring these sorts of talks were important, but may tap into the previously mentioned difficulty of feeling preached to or targeted. The current model of awareness events is also problematic, because campus entities often “sensationalize” assault awareness events in order to get participants to attend. One student said: “I’ve had friends talk to me more and more about this after seeing this kind of stuff [advertisements],” and “frequency has a lot to do with it.” This shows that the efforts of people like Taylor in the office of Access and Equity are somewhat effective, but difficult to enact. Taylor chimed in on this point, as did another participant who knew her and worked with her frequently in internship capacities. She noted that word of mouth is the best way to get students to participate, but that “marketing is really hard, because you have to use events that are ‘jarring’”—that is, are startling, intriguing, or have the word “sex” in the title. This presents a discursive problem that the students had no ready answer for. How can we normalize something by sensationalizing it?

The students mostly concluded that a dialogic model is most effective, particularly if it comes from trusted faculty or well-known figures on campus. Even Vice President Joe Biden, who came to campus last school year, was less effective, they said, than someone who was from campus and felt more accessible. Some students noted their lack of involvement in the most widespread activities on campus—athletics and Greek

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life—and thus felt under-exposed to many of these events and interventions. They further agreed that having a human connection to the event (as they did with this project if a teacher personally invited them) is more effective than seeing a poster in their dorm or a card in the dining hall.

It should be noted that the students agreed with one another quite a lot, something that I address in the next chapter. They seemed united in their confusion about the lack of connections between different campus agencies, and often got passionate about the need for change. One student exclaimed that “[campus authorities] talk about all these philanthropic events that they do, but they just sweep [sexual assault] under the rug”. There is, then, a clear disconnect between the “top” and the “bottom” of campus. I demonstrate this through the disparities in my interviews with faculty and students, but it also emerged naturally as a major theme of the dialogue session.

For the final segment of the dialogue, we broke back into smaller groups to generate ideas for daily, practical changes we could make on campus. I had each group brainstorm as many solutions as they could for a quarter of an hour, then we gathered again as a group to decide on one that we would pursue. Some of the ideas that the students came up with throughout our session (not just during the dedicated brainstorm) are in the following paragraphs. These are viable potential options, but were not chosen as the final idea for their lack of practicability with our resources and time.

At first, the students were very taken by the epithet “locker room talk” for our dialogue session. They argued that this concept, since it clearly can be a normalizing force, can also be used for good. At one point during our session, they wondered about

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holding a series of “locker room talk” dialogue sessions every semester. They also wondered aloud about ways that we could get parents of students involved in the discussion, perhaps through tour groups on campus, or videos spreading awareness. They noted that videos posted to YouTube about campus awareness should be Clemson-specific, as this would help to reach a wider audience. At this point I brought up the video I referenced in Chapter 1. Several of the students had not seen it, so we pulled it up on the projector to watch it together. The students who had seen it were surprised at the students who had not, pointing further to a lack of wide-spread awareness.

The idea of videos seemed popular, as one of the brainstorming groups suggested a video made by members of the Clemson football team. They noted that football players are both peers and authority, and could display a combination of sensitivity and masculinity. Another group suggested a “gender swap” day, which was rejected by other groups for its reinforcing of gender binaries and difficulties for transgendered persons on campus. Another group discussed the possibility of posting awareness information on Canvas, the university’s learning interface. This group also suggested that our group could write a newspaper article or begin a campaign to encourage attendance at the counseling center. A common thread among all of these was online participation, particularly through social media.

After discussing these ideas, we settled on using the Clemson Undergraduate Student Government website platform “We The Tigers” to propose the funding of two full-time staff advocates for campus, as discussed above. One of the students volunteered to type out the proposal, with the rest of the group offering suggestions and wordings.

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This part of the process was particularly full of energy; nearly everyone called out a constant litany of synthesized, harmonious suggestions for what to write, and we were pleased with what we finally settled on to submit. It would not be so easy, however. We waited several days for the proposal to receive approval before contacting the new student body president about our concern. Even now, as I conclude this manuscript to “complete” my thesis creative project, a few of the students and I are still in the process of pursuing this effort and hope to see it come to fruition soon. This further emphasizes the fragility of the academic process and the need for persistence and patience when seeking change.

These learning outcomes were valuable for both the students and me. As I noted above, the students came up with few “new” ideas as far as dialogue, activism, discourse, and sexual assault are concerned. That is, there were few new ideas for me. There is every likelihood that many of the students were exposed to new concepts and paradigms, and these may have lasting effects as they take them and use them in their daily experiences. The suggestions made by the students could be taken and used to formulate future campus interventions regarding assault, and the knowledge gained thereby may help us to better understand campus culture. Taylor mentioned on a few different occasions the usefulness of the information gained from the students, and how it would help the Office of Access and Equity. In the next section, I include my findings from the individual interviews I conducted, and conclude this portion of my project.

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Interviews with Students

As is clear from previous chapters, I made every attempt to research as widely as possible in the campus community. I interviewed faculty, staff, and students, both before and after my dialogue session, to get their perspectives on the campus climate and our interactions with it. Most of the information from faculty appears in other chapters, but I want to take a few pages to discuss my student interviews. I gave a general verbal invitation at the end of my dialogue session and three students responded to the call. They were all female, and two of them I previously had in my lab courses, so I knew them and their ability to engage deeply with topics. Though I had not spoken with either of them since they took my class, they enthusiastically responded to my invitation both to attend the event and to meet with me for an interview.

As I noted in my introduction, my position as both their former instructor and a fellow learner put me in a unique place of rapport with both my dialogue participants and my interviewees. I found very quickly that the stereotypical interview format (with a recorder, pen, and notepad) was less effective than informally chatting with the interviewee about my experiences and asking them open-ended questions. This topic, in particular, is a sensitive one, and I made much more headway with some friendly sharing of my own investments and a meandering discussion than with a formal interview protocol. In fact, during one interview I emphasized the act of switching off the recorder halfway through, and the mood noticeably eased. While I did have a list of questions (adapted from my protocol for faculty and staff interviews), I used them as a loose guide and we often found our conversations looping back and exploring side roads. I asked

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each student if they were comfortable with me using their real name before including it in this manuscript.

Lindsey and I strolled to some seats under the library bridge on a breezy, sunny day shortly after the dialogue session. She was eager to share her experiences and spoke enthusiastically about the need for change on campus. She talked mainly about the disconnection between our educational practices and our assault discourses, as she believes teachers could do much to mentor and educate students on this topic. In regard to her own experiences, she emphasized the difficulties of defining and explaining assault by those who experience it. She further talked about mentoring other girls who have had similar experiences as hers, noting the need for “a society where we are more open to talk about [assault].”

When I met with Iwi, we found an empty classroom for our interview. We began by sitting in some desks near the back, but we quickly moved to the front of the room to use the board. Her interest in assault activism began as a class project, in which she was required to attend a speaking event on campus. Her chosen event was about assault, and she then went on to give a persuasive speech about the topic later in her course. For most of our interview, she outlined the concepts she went over in her speech to me, giving her own beliefs and opinions as she went. Iwi has firm, steady eyes and a slow way of speaking that matches her fluid handwriting, which soon filled the board. She wrote with a long piece of white chalk on the blackboard, and her ideas spread quickly to all parts of the wall. I stood nearby, both a learner and a contributor. At the end, we left the words on

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the chalkboard. We wanted them to pique the interest of the students who began entering the classroom as we left.

Bonnie and I met more formally, in a small room in the Department of Communication tutoring lab. Bonnie is articulate, driven, and professional. She crafted her sentences carefully before speaking and is committed to social justice on campus. She spoke to me about her future plans to become a counselor and help others to help themselves. The main focus that emerged in my conversation with Bonnie was the effectiveness of a dialogic model in efforts against assault on campus.

The interviews, like the dialogue session, emphasized disconnection. My interviewees described this disconnect in different ways, however, and in different contexts. My interviewees also talked at length about the importance of changing communicative norms (though they never used this term) and the need for change on campus. They also were largely positive about our dialogue session and had insightful ideas about how best to carry out future sexual assault interventions on campus.

The first way the interviewees characterized disconnection was in terms of the different spaces that students receive support and instruction about sexual assault on campus. Lindsey talked at length about the role teachers have in offering support and instruction on difficult topics. Bonnie emphasized the difficulties in getting consistent support from students at activism events. All the interviewees expressed frustration at the unwillingness of their fellow students to participate in activism, make behavioral changes, and speak up about assault.

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Another way the interviewees characterized disconnect was through the language we use to define assault. Iwi, in particular, emphasized the need to affect change via talk. She deplored “sexual assault” as a term, preferring to use the term “rape” for all forms of unwanted sexual attention. Iwi believes that rape ought to be punished the same way murder is punished, due to the way we excuse rapists and place the responsibility of assault on the victims. Lindsey also worried about “all the nuances that people don’t understand,” as victims may “blame themselves,” instead of their attackers.

Each of the interviewees was complimentary of the *Locker Room Talk* session, even though I made sure to frame the question as an open invitation for critique. Lindsey felt “safe” during the session and liked having an “arena for discussion,” and Bonnie liked that our session helped to apply abstract concepts to real life situations. She argued that the “think tank” model is a potential solution to the issues that arise when students are required to attend trainings and begin the session with an attitude of skepticism. She also emphasized the importance of a presenter who the students perceived as passionate on the topic.

Lindsey wished there had been more space for disagreement in the dialogue session, and Bonnie agreed, but all three were optimistic about the dialogic model for sexual assault education and awareness. Bonnie and I discussed the nature of democracy, and whether our session constituted as such, since there was very little discussion. She noted, however, that “if the goal of the dialogue was to make actual, real steps towards the direction of doing something about this, then perhaps it is not necessary to have a

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form of disagreement.” For this issue, she argued, it is more important to collaborate on developing tangible solutions.

Two of my interviewees mentioned the importance of online talk regarding assault, noting that online activism is an important part of awareness and normalization. They both acknowledged the limitations of social media activism, but emphasized its role. All three of my interviewees were adamantly supportive of awareness events in general, noting the need for communicative changes nationwide and on our campus. These activism events trouble established power structures, and “when that power structure is questioned, it forces us to question our identities,” Lindsey argued.

Bonnie talked at length about the need for students to be given specific strategies at events, as required events do not necessarily “click” with everyone. Students who are required to go to events “develop a bitterness” about the topic at hand, unless they are given specific strategies about what to do in potential assault situations. We discussed how assault awareness events on campus did provide some of these strategies, but could provide more. When I mentioned the Title IX training that freshmen receive upon arrival to campus, Bonnie physically reacted. She vehemently opposed its usefulness and worried about the effectiveness of information given by the administration, versus information given by peers. She gave examples of conversations with her fellow students to back up this claim. This is ultimately why she favored formats similar to *Locker Room Talk* for education and awareness.

Each of these young women believed firmly in the need to speak out about assault on Clemson’s campus—so much so that they donated three hours of time to the Locker

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Room Talk and committed to an additional interview. Certainly, their positions as deeply invested in assault activism may disqualify them as “representative” members of our campus, but they do hold the unique position of intelligently viewing campus culture from both an outsider and insider perspective. They are members of campus, and yet they are taking time to reflect on perceptions and realities and make informed judgments about their experiences. I hold this position as well, as I am caught in the intermediate position of graduate student. As both a “student” and a “professor” I am neither one nor the other, and this gives me a unique vantage point. My own perspectives and reflections comprise Chapter 4.

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CHAPTER FOUR

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I provide personal reflections and suggestions based on my experiences. As I wrote in the introduction, this project was intended to function as an exploratory look at a particular campus at a particular time, and cannot be generalized to a wider context. However, many of the outcomes and observations I make might bear similarities to other places and contexts, and may freely be applied as seems best to interested readers. First, I discuss our dialogue session related to public deliberation, as this may give the project wider relevance than just sexual assault. Next, I discuss efforts against assault on campus, as this may provide insight to current faculty and staff about our campus climate for refinement of current practices. Then, I share my personal reflections in regards to the process. Finally, I conclude with an overall look at the outcomes of the project as a whole.

The Dialogic Process

Locker Room Talk was an example of the “civil disagreement” so crucial to public deliberation (Black & Weiderhold, 2014). While our session sailed smoothly, with few divergences in opinion, where there were disparities they were handled with tact, respect, and support. The process resulted in an endeavor that was manageable, communicative, and will hopefully prove itself to be influential over time. Perhaps, as has been noted above, as generations of students flow through the halls of Clemson University, few may remember an isolated, brief event on its campus. However, it may have been one crucial drop in the bucket of communicative norming in the Clemson community.

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Had my participants disagreed more, it is perhaps less likely that our solution would have materialized as efficiently as it did. On the other hand, there might have been more meaningful discussion about the nuances of sexual assault on our campus. Because my participants agreed with one another on the overall goal—mitigating sexual assault—disagreements on the finer points were communicative traction with which to turn new ground.

Still, my interview participants wished there had been more diversity of opinion in the room during the session. While there was certainly diversity of perspective (with various backgrounds, races, majors and ages represented), the students' perspectives mostly aligned. Had there been more verbally expressed variances in beliefs, we may have reached even more meaningful dialogue in the time allotted. This was difficult, as our time was limited. Had I been able to do a lengthier endeavor (with either the weekend retreat or Creative Inquiry class), perhaps more nuances could have been teased out of the session that could have found even more specific actions to take on our campus.

As it was, the session overall was a moving demonstration of how multiple minds working together in one room can make a communicative difference. The students engaged in a creative dance, a performance of give and take. We all shared a moment of triumph when, as a group, we wrote the final lines of the description for our submission to the CUSG website. In the sentence, “we are a top 20 university, we need top 20 kind of support,” the students found mutual joy in the creative process of building something new. While our proposal was not “art” in the traditional sense, it was artful in its ability to inspire, catalyze, and fulfill.

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While we cleaned up the leftover food, Bonnie (whom you will remember from my interviews) celebrated the success of the event, extolling that it “did what it intended to do.” That is, the event accomplished the double-goal of critically thinking about communicative norms through the act of dialogue and reaching a tangible outcome. This statement more than any other confirms to me that our collective goals were achieved.

Collaboration on Campus

Throughout my meetings with student groups, faculty and staff interviews, *Locker Room Talk*, and interviews with students, a major theme that emerged was a need for connectivity. This, perhaps, goes without saying, and as Jennifer Goree so aptly said, “it’s not like we’re missing anything, we could just do more [about sexual assault].” Since “communication” is a nuanced, undefined concept, naturally it is too simplistic to say that Clemson University needs more of it. Indeed, few of the disconnections I could point out will come as a surprise to anyone. However, there are a few aspects of this disconnect that I think are worth mentioning.

It is worth noting that none of the students from the student ad hoc committee came to the dialogue event. Although they had been my primary contacts all along, they were either unwilling or unable to attend that day. This speaks to the difficulties of organizing on college campuses, as well as the separateness between various campus factions, which I have discussed at length. This also emphasizes the fluid nature of my project, as I received an entirely different set of students than I expected. If even those students who are affirmed activists on campus vary from event to event, how can a wider campus community expect to be united? On the other hand, this shows a wide variety of

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interest and engagement in the same topic. These students, as active members of Greek Life on campus and many of them involved in student government, represented a wide variety of interests, majors and spheres of influence.

At least two of my interview participants mentioned the problematic nature of Greek Life on campus. This provides a contrast to Joey's group, who are actively seeking to change the communicative norms surrounding Greek organizations on campus. It is likely that both perspectives are partially correct. Certainly, Greek Life is home to many destructive paradigms and practices; certainly, these issues exist just as commonly everywhere else and Greek Life may in fact be able to mitigate them through their concerted efforts. Still, this experience is just another demonstration of the difficulties faced by a large organization in building unity and open communication, especially around such a silenced topic.

Perhaps this student from the dialogue session said it most poignantly: "I like that [hiring staff advocates] provides a connection between the university because I don't feel like the university cares. They care about football but I don't know how much they care about survivors because we don't have an advocate." This unprompted reference to the importance of football on Clemson's campus is especially appropriate, given the previous discussion of the "locker room" as a metaphor for our discursive community. This seeming lack of "caring" by the university is by no means surprising or uncommon; indeed, the administration might argue that they care deeply and as well as is possible. The student placed the blame on the lack of advocacy for survivors on campus, but I suggest that it may have more to do with the general discursive climate fostered by mass-

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campaign advocacy, top-down awareness models and what the students might call “dictatorial” assault education tactics. Of course, the act of assault ought not to be treated with leniency. Perpetrators are squarely in the wrong. However, campus officials risk alienating and creating potential perpetrators by not using an educational model that is dialogic, anti-silence, and communicative in nature.

As I mentioned in the first chapter, Marianne Glaser remarked on the difficulties of keeping consistency with student efforts on campus. The disconnect points to the transiency of college campuses and the difficulties of maintaining and building communicative efforts. Like the rollercoaster that was my project, students, faculty and staff might be said to be caught in a metaphorical rollercoaster ride, rising enthusiastically and then ‘falling’ as semesters, years, and degrees come to an end. There is an interesting contradiction here in the way that organizers are always hoping for more and different students to attend such events, and at the same time needing consistency, proficiency, and passion. This is an issue that is not easy to solve, and I have no ready answer. I hope that at least some of the insights I took from my participants may help someone, somewhere, to make communicative strides on this and other campuses nationwide.

In both my meetings with the student ad hoc committee and in *Locker Room Talk*, male students tentatively voiced a desire to de-criminalize innocent men on campuses and stop the alienation that comes from being presumed guilty until proven innocent.

“Blame” for perceived lack of campus progress tended to come from either “students” or “the establishment,” depending on which side of this divide the speaker represented. I do

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not know how to “solve” either of these communicative issues. Assault is a human problem existent beyond memory, and will not soon disappear. I will suggest, however, that there is a need for a more supportive coming-together by all factions of campus culture. I acknowledge that a difficult issue like sexual assault cannot be “solved” merely through caring; but I urge a reflexive look at personal attitudes and a broadening of perspective may do much to alleviate mutual misunderstandings.

Future Campus Initiatives

During our session, we discussed that many of the campus efforts have gained attention through “sensational” names and concepts, hoping to attract interest. Iwi noted that trying to normalize something by making it sensational is hard. She argued that we ought to “give it to people in small doses,” as “word of mouth is best.” She coined the term “micro-instances” to denote the ways we could make small, daily changes in the ways we advocate for survivors on campus.

I wholeheartedly agree with her. Future sessions such as this one could delve more deeply into the critical issues surrounding assault; and yet, part of this one’s goal was to allow the students to develop the thought processes on their own, rather than handing them beliefs at the beginning. A similar dialogue session could function as a series, allowing the participants to complete similar analysis as this one the first time, then delve more deeply in subsequent sessions. While this session was “one and done,” it built its own continuity through the proposal we created and submitted to student government. Like the proverbial butterfly that beat its wings and sparked a hurricane on the opposite side of the world, the future ramifications of a small event like this one are

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impossible to predict. While these events do frequently occur on college campuses nationwide, this one is another example of an effective, meaningful dialogue session that may have had a small but lasting impact on a college campus' cultural norms.

One student noted that dialogue formats for these discussions are more effective than more traditional teaching models, as “you don't want to be lectured to” on this topic. This harkens back to the male-shaming concerns mentioned above and in previous chapters, as the traditional teacher-student format for educating about sexual assault closely aligns with wider cultural silencing practices. Certainly, education about assault is crucial. Inclusive, dialogic models for doing so might be among the most viable way. At one point while the students were brainstorming, I chatted with Taylor (graduate assistant in the Office of Access and Equity) about how things were going. She mentioned the usefulness of the dialogue session to her own efforts, as advertising for events can be very difficult, and word of mouth is often her best resource. Dialogic models facilitate this, as students meet with other students, then tell their friends about them, and the ripples continue outward.

As is clear from these students' ready definition of sexual assault as “any unwanted behavior without consent,” at least some students on Clemson's campus know what assault means. Certainly, many of the students in our dialogue session had some previous experience in sexual assault activism; however, some were self-described newcomers. As is clear, Clemson University has many programs in place to provide assault awareness, education, and prevention. My session seemed to indicate that while

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students are aware of what assault is, they are less aware of the history and extent of campus efforts.

One student in particular had not even heard of the counseling center on campus, and another student said they had heard similar accounts from friends. Is there a general lack of inter-departmental communication on Clemson's campus? I cannot say that for sure; certainly all large organizations struggle with promoting unity across so many disparate factions. Future studies on campus, however, might explore the ways different agencies work together for a more cohesive, efficient apparatus. If each campus department, office, committee, organization, and club worked to build a more integrated unit, perhaps many wider communicative issues would naturally resolve. This might also be useful in other areas, such as issues with mental health, interpersonal violence, sustainability, and as many others as the imagination cares to introduce.

Of course, I have never claimed in this manuscript that my project would provide a generalizable explanation of our campus climate. I realize that mine was an isolated, grassroots event that took place in one brief timespan and with an uncertain lasting impact. As I noted in Chapter 2, "one and done" events struggle to achieve lasting influence, which speaks to my original desires to build a lengthier project, had I been able. The students confirmed through their repeated suggestion of regular "locker room talks" the need for recurring, dialogic events that provide space to critically examine the daily communicative practices surrounding assault on their campus. I also realize that my students may not have had an "overall" picture of what it means to be a Clemson student, and many campus perspectives were inadvertently left out. However, I did the best I

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could to invite members from various members of our culture and encouraged them to share a wide variety of experiences. Perhaps future research might try a more comprehensive look.

As we discussed the difficulties of spreading awareness about events on campus, Taylor expressed the struggle she experiences in her work every day with student participation in assault awareness. She noted that “word of mouth has been the biggest way” to make a difference on campus, and that “it’s a long slow process” to provide the increase in programming that has occurred in the past few years. So, in some ways, what I learned at my session might seem like nothing new at the surface. However, Taylor also expressed the usefulness of some of the information we gained, which she hoped to take back to others in her department. If members of the campus community were to explore programming advertisement on campus, they could perhaps learn how to bridge disconnects between various campus entities.

Further, the students’ point about normalizing a difficult topic by sensationalizing it seems worth another moment of time. Iwi noted in particular the need to normalize “sex” rather than “sexual assault.” While the focus, perhaps, ought to be more on de-silencing assault stories and de-normalizing rape-supportive culture, she has a point. “Normalizing” sexual assault will do little to promote a supportive, rape-averse culture, and indeed may do more harm than good.

Certainly, awareness is important, and a great deal of awareness can be gained through eye-catching events. However, this may be an intermediate step. Could we move past sensational forms of awareness to a truly supportive form of education, perhaps we

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could more effectively move past some aspects of rape-supportive culture. This might be done partially through dialogue and classroom interventions, rather than the broader-based forms of awareness events that occur during special bracketed times of the year. And yet, broader-based awareness events arguably reach a much wider population. I suggest, then, that a more balanced combination of dialogue, a focus on daily-lived practices, and regularity throughout the school year, may have more of an effect than current models.

Personal Insights

Though I ‘piggy-backed’ on Sexual Assault Awareness Month to try to provide an extra catalyst for participants, this goes against some of my philosophical commitments. In an ideal world, every month would be Sexual Assault Awareness Month—or, rather, there would be no need for an awareness month at all. The ideal campus climate would be one like my dialogue session: everyone would respect others and think of them as colleagues and friends. This, obviously, is not an option. While I appreciate the impossibility of this vision, I am optimistic about the outcomes of my work.

The effort we completed at the end is a valuable one. While the students have minimal control over its outcome, its ability to be finished rapidly has merit in its empowerment for positive change. Unlike awareness events, participating in the democratic process via a proposal and petition-like social media movement, these students have done more than wear a certain color or show their face at an event. The act of proposing full-time staff advocates strikes at the heart of deliberative democracy, because they created a multi-media message that has the potential to enact change in their

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community. While it does have some resemblance to ‘typical’ campaigning and activism, as it involves hashtags and social media sharing, it goes beyond the superficiality of typical awareness. Whether or not that effort is successful, participation in it gave the students a concrete, legislative chance to affect the campus climate.

One of the things that I emphasize in my regular teaching duties is the utility of course material. I try to make it apparent in every lesson how the concepts being taught will directly assist the students in their assignments and daily life. Halfway through the session, I noticed that we were moving along quicker than I expected, and made the conscious decision to let them go early, rather than use my “back pocket” ideas and risk losing the impact of the session. However, as we began brainstorming our real-life solution, ideas began to flow and develop freely, taking longer than I had originally allotted for this portion. I chose to let them continue, only nudging for the finish when I saw the pre-arranged ending time drawing near. I made sure to end precisely at 6:00 p.m., as promised, but encouraged chatting afterwards with those who chose to stay and socialize. This loose structure emphasizes the fluidity of my project, as I wanted to allow the session to flourish on its own, with minimal interference.

The students seemed to take ownership of the project in a way that, perhaps, is different from widespread, top-down formatted projects. The students were enthusiastic and engaged. When I asked them questions, there was always a moment of quiet reflection, after which a few hands would rise. I facilitated the discussion by calling on people and making sure everyone’s voices were heard, but more often the discussion flowed in a natural way. Occasionally, I needed to re-phrase my question in order to elicit

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a response, but most of the time answers readily and thoughtfully poured. Further, because responsibility and agency did not rest on the indefinite shoulders of “everybody,” perhaps the students will take the mantel on themselves in a way that is personal and operative.

While the students certainly had great insight about sexual assault on Clemson’s campus, they also had a great deal of valuable contributions to dialogue as a concept. Even the guidelines we set at the beginning of the session were well-worded and indicative of sound judgment. I wish to take a moment of reflection on their advice to “be a friend, not a parent” in situations such as these. This is particularly relevant to the apparent need to meet students ‘on their level.’ While students are certainly just that—students—they could perhaps be trusted with more agency than they are usually given. I believe it likely that if students were treated as adults, rather than children, they may feel a stronger moral agency to protect other members of the Clemson family, should they be given the chance.

As noted above, several students commented in the dialogue session and in interviews about the value of online activism. This establishes social media, as an “every day” communicative space, as potentially effective. Lindsey noted in her interview the importance of technological communication regarding assault, and online technologies were a key part of our creative solution. Indeed, the internet has been often studied as an aspect of public deliberation and the dialogic process (Dahlberg, 2001; Dean, 2005; Ferber et al, 2007; Hindman, 2008; Hwang et al, 2014; Kaiser, 2014; Kang et al, 2013; McGowan & Rasmussen, 2009; Witschge, 2004). During a small group brainstorming

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session during *Locker Room Talk*, I overheard one student say that she knew about sexual assault awareness and education events from following Joey on social media, but she might not know about any of the events at all if she did not. So, where there is disconnect, there can be connection if efforts are made online. Internet-as-dialogue, however, was too vast a topic for the scope of this project. Suffice it to say that Clemson students found the internet to be a viable source of discursive information and valuable contribution to public dialogue. Future interventions might benefit from keeping this in mind.

Activism, however, may not be enough. Each student noted the need for real, concrete changes on campus, particularly in the way education and awareness are communicated to students. As I noted in previous chapters, true communicative change may be undermined on college campuses by top down, provisional models of awareness and activism, as students find these to preclude the connective discursive changes they seek. If nothing else, this project underscores the need for open dialogue between campus entities on difficult issues, such as sexual assault.

Conclusion

Because this project took such a circuitous route, it both simplified and complicated the process. At times it was challenging; at others, exhilarating. Though a delicate topic, I never required participants to give me deeply personal information. At times, however, they volunteered it on their own. I built connections with them that are rarely built in weeks of acquaintanceship—the format of the project allowed me to bypass the barriers of social convention and immediately dig into a meaningful topic with

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the shared zest of mutual enthusiasm. They also taught me and shaped my project in ways that surprised me: building, molding, and creating my project even more so than I did.

Like many families, the Clemson family is warm, open, and not without its closet skeletons. I encountered the gamut of reactions: helpfulness, distrust, friendliness, uncertainty, apathy, enthusiasm, confusion, and trust, just to name a few. My experiences with the student ad hoc committee, faculty and staff, and the students in my dialogue session and interviews provided a meaningful window into campus assault activism, but also a wider campus culture. I can only hope that their experiences with the project were as meaningful as it was to me.

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