

Themes Included in Victim Impact Statements: The Nassar Study



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BACKGROUND

- The Canada Criminal Code defines child sexual exploitation as when a person of trust or authority, for a sexual purpose, touches, directly or indirectly, any part of a child’s body.
- Witnesses in cases of child sexual abuse are uniquely important to criminal proceedings as physical evidence supporting the charges is often lacking.
- In some trials, victims are given an opportunity to provide a victim impact statement.
- Larry Nassar’s, the former doctor for USA Gymnastics, trial allows us to examine victim impact statements as Nassar’s victims’ statements are publicly available.

AIMS & RELEVANCE

Child sexual abuse in North America

- In 2019, there were 10,038 reported sexual violations against children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019).
- In the United States, of all the cases brought to prosecutors, only 1% go to trial (Stroud et al., 2000).

Child sexual abuse in sports

- The disclosure process in organized sports is a unique area of interest (i.e., increased attention in media, more awareness as an issue).
- Figures of authority in sports exploit athletes by using their power for their own sexual purposes and outcomes (Brackenridge, 2001).
- Increased potential within organizations for disclosures of children to remain unreported.
- Nassar’s victims’ impact statements provide us with the opportunity to examine the disclosure process within an organization.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Research Gaps

- Despite the growing need for further research, access to witnesses and criminal proceedings are often costly and difficult to ascertain given the protected status of child witnesses.
- Existing research has examined the impact of the amount of harm expressed in impact statements (Hanslmaier & Baier, 2015) and victim attributes (Kleinstuber et al., 2019) on opinions of the victim.
- There remains a paucity of research within the field, particularly regarding the disclosure processes of child witnesses and their experiences with the criminal justice system.
- Specifically, in the environment of organized sports, the disclosure process of abuse in sports has not received enough attention.

The Present Study

- Overall, this research aims to examine the victim impact statements of young adults, who experienced child sexual abuse by the same perpetrator, for specific themes.
- Thematic content is exploratory with the aim of highlighting some of the experiences of survivors during their disclosure of abuse.

METHODOLOGY

PROCEDURE

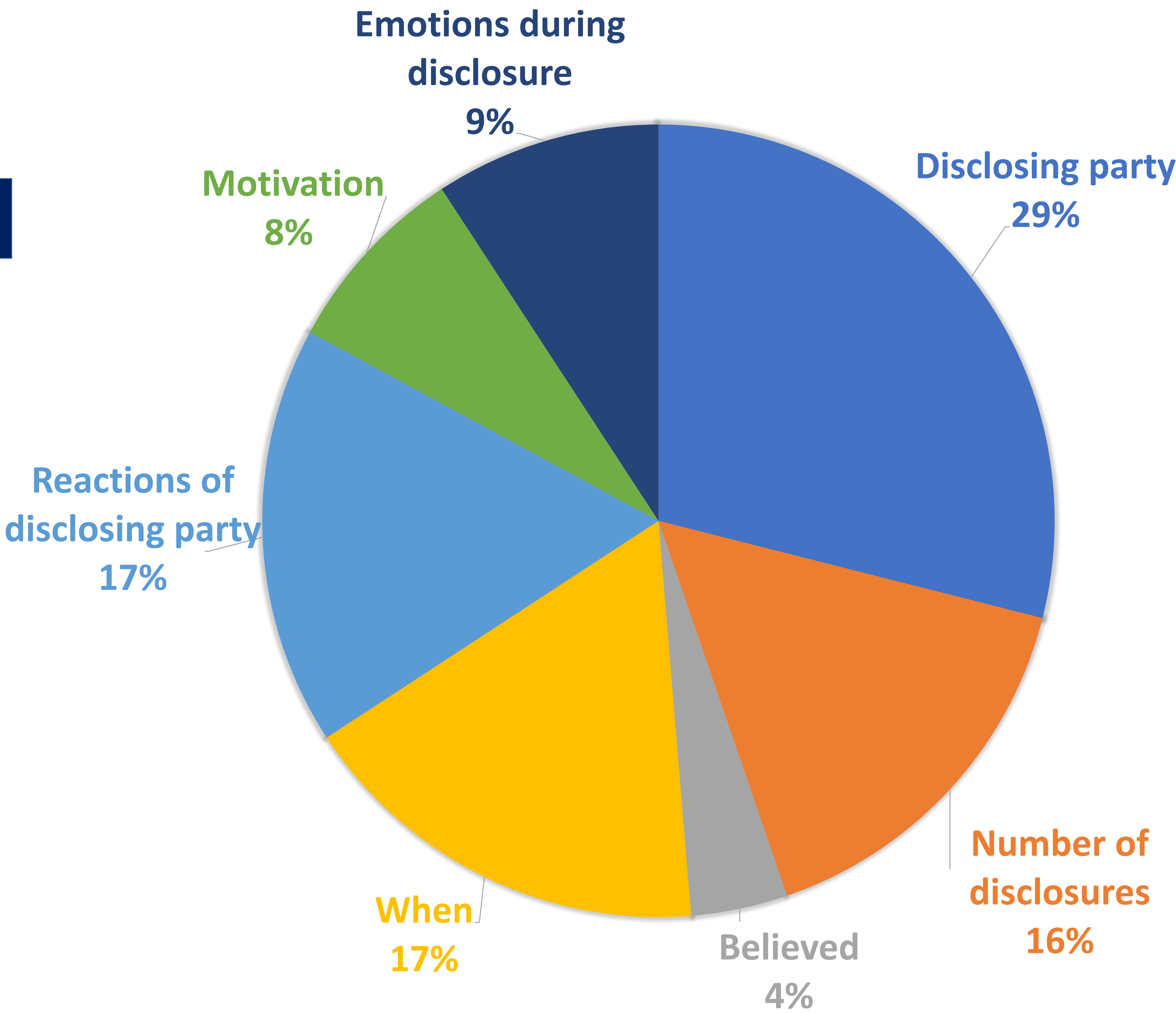
- A qualitative analysis of the thematic content of victim impact statements (n = 35) was conducted by blindly double-coding the transcriptions.
- The victim impact statements were chosen at random and independently coded for themes.
- The percent agreement between the two coders was 80%.
- The primary coder’s data was used to find the frequency of themes included in the victim impact statements.



RESULTS

- Three main categories of themes were present: 1) disclosure of abuse (Abuse), 2) disclosure of the impacts of the abuse on the victims’ present day lives (Aftermath) and 3) process of disclosing.
- Subthemes included: emotions, physical/mechanics, relationships, denial/disbelief, psychological, guilt/shame, sport, religion/faith, advocacy, and identity.
- The most common themes described under ‘Process of Disclosing’ were: ‘Disclosing party’ and ‘Reactions of disclosing party’.

DISCLOSURE THEMES



RESULTS

Theme	Freq.	Excerpt
Disclosing party	22	“After finally finding the courage to make the call, I contacted a doctor I knew worked with Larry Nassar, and told him my story.”
Reactions of disclosing party	13	“I remember the heartbreak on his face when I told him that I had had the procedure done a couple times.”
When	13	“When I came forward in August 2016, I was attacked on social media.”
Number of disclosures	12	“I, again, relayed my story to her and a police officer, and I thought maybe this time I would be taken seriously.”
Emotions during disclosure	7	“It was uncomfortable and embarrassing, and I felt like throwing up the entire time.”

Table 1. Frequencies and Excerpts of subthemes of “Process of disclosing”

DISCUSSION

Summary

- The results of this research provides information on the victim impact statements of survivors of child sexual abuse.
- The findings also give insight into the disclosure processes of victims of child sexual abuse.

Limitations

- The study’s generalizability is a limitation as the victims were all athletes, and were all abused by the same perpetrator.
- The victims knew they were being recorded and broadcasted which may have impacted what they chose to include in their statements.

Future Directions

- Results of the research will be used to further examine how survivors of child sexual abuse characterize their abuse in court.
- Furthermore, aspects of abuse specific to the context of organized sports will be explored.
- A jury study will be conducted to test efficacy of the victim impact statements from a jury perspective on sentencing.
- Lastly, we will use these findings to help answer the following questions:
 - **What part of the victim impact statement is helping the victim?**
 - **What part is influencing the sentencing?**