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M. A.

*Undisclosed*

Tennley A. Vik

*University of Nevada, Reno*

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# Resisting and Persisting through Organizational Exit: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Disclosing Sexual Harassment in Collegiate Debate

M. A.<sup>1</sup>

Tennley Vik  
*University of Nevada, Reno*

Collegiate debate has documented extensive problems with sexual harassment. This manuscript uses the first author's layered account of sexual harassment experienced as a collegiate debater, her transition to a different university, and the management of private information with her family. Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory and a plethora of studies provide a theoretical lens of the first author's autoethnographic experience. We advance CPM theory by examining how young adult children manage their privacy through constructing more rigid privacy boundaries than their adolescent counterparts and provide the first look at how disclosure can both enable and constrain victims/survivors of sexual harassment, as well as interrogate the way in which survivors can own their experiences and perpetrators be held accountable within the debate community.

**Content Warning: This manuscript includes mention of suicide and sexual harassment.**

*Keywords:* Communication Privacy Management, mental health, health communication, sexual harassment, debate

While other children were dreaming about being astronauts, cowboys, or presidents, from childhood, my dream had always been to be a teacher. Because my mom was an elementary school music teacher and my dad a worship leader at our church, my parents placed a high priority on music in our family. As a result, in fifth grade, I joined the band and cultivated a love for music. From then on, I decided that I would become a band director. I was very comfortable being the "band nerd," and never had a desire to cross the boundary into any other activity in high school, and during the rest of my life. However, my freshman year of high school, my dad forced me to join debate and forensics. I hated it.

I am not sure if I could isolate a specific instance during my high school career where my hatred of debate turned into a love for it, but by the end of my junior year, I knew that I had to teach debate and forensics. Because I wanted to eventually coach debate, I knew that continuing as a debater was important in college in order to gain more experience and knowledge in the activity. The cost of the university, as well as the

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1. A version of this manuscript was presented at the 2018 Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender. Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Tennley Vik, Department of Communication Studies, University of Nevada, 1664 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 895577. Email: tvik@unr.edu.

attention I, as a freshman, would get from the coaching staff played significant roles in my decision of where I would attend college. I came to the conclusion that Midwestern College (MC)<sup>2</sup> was right in both cost and coaching. Midwestern College (MC) offered me a scholarship to debate, so I planned to begin my college career there.

Our lives are storied adventures (Fisher, 1984), as such, it is considered normal and healthy to share the positive and negative events that occur through our varied experiences (Frattaroli, 2006). For the most part, we are comfortable with letting different people into our lives, and thus our engagement with others can be characterized by reciprocal disclosure.

The means through which we disclose our stories varies based on setting or relationship. For example, we choose to share vulnerable details with those people in our lives we deem safe, while maintaining a rigid boundary with those we feel are less so (Morr Serewicz & Petronio, 2007). Even this piece is a space in which disclosure takes place, in particular, through the story of the first author. Autoethnography creates a space to be present to each other in a performative space of writing and reading (Holman Jones et al., 2013). More than just the recalling of a story, autoethnography challenges the authors and readers to take issues of justice personally and move from simply understanding the world to action (Berry & Patti, 2015; Cissna, 2000; Frey, 2000).

In an autoethnographic work, the researchers become the site of fieldwork as they recall and reconstruct events into narratives and bring awareness to their experiences and the experiences of other actors in their stories (Crawford, 1996). “Autoethnography is an interpretive research method through which scholars seek to evocatively narrate the selves’ experiences in diverse cultural settings” (Berry & Warren, 2009, p. 602). Specifically:

...autoethnography creates a space for a turn, a change, a reconsideration of how we think, how we do research and relationships, and how we live. These stories constitute a narrative of coming to an experience and a moment in time when excluding or obscuring the personal in research felt uncomfortable, even untenable (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 21).

In this piece, we have chosen the autoethnographic tactic of layered accounts, which use “data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature” along with the author’s experience illustrating research’s procedural nature (Charmaz, 1983, p. 110). According to Tracy (2004), layered accounts “...experiment with the format of our writing and experiment with ‘messy’ texts” (p. 511). In other words, engaging with experiences is an iterative and dynamic task that asks the subject to embrace their narratives while simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing their own narrative. This method simultaneously uses traditional data collection and analysis alongside tools of reflexivity or multiple voices (Charmaz, 1983; Ellis, 1991). Therefore, the writing style of layered accounts allows for discussion of affect and provides techniques for engaging with it (Tracy, 2004).

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2. We make frequent use of pseudonyms throughout the manuscript in order to protect the privacy of the people involved, including the first author.

In the following section, we present relevant literature, including literature on mental illness, sexual harassment (specifically within the collegiate debate circuit), communication privacy management (CPM) theory, and literature on the autoethnographic method (see Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). This literature works in combination with the autoethnographic telling of the first author's experiences through an analysis of the disclosure (or lack thereof) to her family.

### Dynamics

Upon arriving at MC, I quickly learned the team dynamic was significantly different than the culture of the team I was on during my high school debate career. This team was characterized by their crude humor and negative demeanor. However, more than just those qualities, there was a deep level of racism, homophobia, and sexism that manifested in sexual harassment demonstrated by the assistant director of debate, the coach with whom we most interacted.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these sexual harassment behaviors are often hard to discuss because of the insidious nature of these acts. Sexual harassment took place in jokes, comments, and the way the team presented itself. These dynamics were engrained within the system of the team, which fostered a constant culture of disrespect and harassment. I was acutely aware of the dynamics causing problems at MC, and the culture of the team made me uneasy although I suppressed those feelings due to the necessity of the scholarship to fund my education. I did not anticipate what was to unfold, but my intuition told me that something was not right.

When it comes to considerations of a person's personal and professional life, existing sexual harassment research does not account for the complex relationships within the debate community (Sulfaro, 2002). The dynamics between students/competitors and their professors/coaches in collegiate debate and forensics are unique, as those within the collegiate debate community are more likely to interact with each other in settings outside of debate tournaments in close friendships, apartment living, or in romantic relationships (Sulfaro, 2002). Debaters engage with others in their programs in both formal (i.e., during a debate round) and informal (i.e., at dinner, in hotel rooms) settings (Sulfaro, 2002). As a result of this more frequent and varied interaction, Stepp and Gardner (2001) argue that students on coed teams who compete off campus may be more prone to sexual harassment because of the travel requirements of undergraduates, graduate assistants, hired coaches and judges, and program directors who are a part of these activities.

There is little documentation of the debate community's attention to issues of sexual harassment within the activity until the nineties, and little statistical evidence has been collected over the past 20 years. However, Stepp and Gardner (2001) documented

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3. Note: we reference sexual harassment and avoid the term sexual assault. Although many times these two problematic behaviors are intertwined, we are making a distinction that behaviors that are reported in this manuscript do not involve sexual assault. Sometimes this distinction is hard to make (for example, if sexual harassment is occurring and touching is involved is that automatically sexual assault?). We argue that the behaviors discussed in this manuscript do involve sexual harassment but did not escalate to the point where author 1 contextualizes the behavior as sexual assault.

high levels of sexual harassment when they investigated the issue. CEDA responded to the data with a sexual harassment policy implemented in spring of 1994 (Stepp & Gardner, 2001), yet Stepp and Gardner's (2001) study seems to indicate "the implementation of the CEDA sexual harassment policy has had little overall effect on reducing sexual harassment in the CEDA intercollegiate debate community" (p. 30). Instead, little social support, lowered self-esteem, and sexual harassment may be continuing to drive women away from collegiate debate (Jones & Treadaway, 2000). During Szwapa's (1994) study of the NDT, over 80% of women NDT debaters reported experiencing gender harassment and seductive behavior, while over 30% of the female debaters reported being in a position where a coach or debater sexually imposed (making forceful attempts to touch, kiss, or grab) themselves upon the women. Over 46% of women reported being in situations where a coach or debater attempted to touch or fondle them (Stepp & Gardner, 2001). Furthermore, recent efforts have called attention to the nature of sexual violence within the forensics community, identifying these behaviors as more than just isolated offenses, woven into the very structures and processes of the activity (Tarin & Dykstra-DeVette, 2020).

Because of the sensitive and damaging nature of the experience, the effects of sexual harassment vary and include emotional, physical, and psychological consequences. Some of the negative physical effects can include unwanted pregnancies, alcohol and drug abuse, self-cutting, and suicide (Harris, 2011). Decreased self-esteem and uncertainty surrounding personal identity are two aspects of the psychological effects of sexual violence (Orbuch et al., 1994). Relationship struggles are also common in survivor of sexual violence including sexual struggles, such as sensitivity to sexual experiences or sexual dysfunction (Connop & Petrak, 2004). While communication can be redeeming for survivors and ease the trauma, communication can also be difficult as finding someone to confide in after a sexual harassment incident can be challenging (Pluretti & Chesebro, 2015). Additionally, sexual harassment, in academia in particular, can have adverse effects on a person's faith in academe, as harassment is "often embedded in organizational rituals that coincided with or exploited their vulnerability" (Taylor & Conrad, 1992, p. 413). Taylor and Conrad (1992) go on to state:

Sexually, the university is both desexualized and patriarchal. It is conditioned by popular images of its pastoral innocence, and of its highly cognitive and theoretical workers-seemingly "disembodied" intellectuals. Organizationally, authority in the university is diffused between loosely-coupled bureaucratic units and levels. Jurisdiction and accountability for sexual harassment are frequently confused and displaced. Its regulation through policies and procedures is slow, cumbersome and resistant to change. Within research-driven reward systems, students are commodified (e.g., as enrollment data) and devalued as transient, needy and 'difficult.' (p. 405)

In other words, the structure of academia, through its bureaucratic levels and commodification of students, creates a system that devalues students and sets the stage for those who possess power to prey on those who do not. Devaluation manifests itself in instances of Student Services, which becomes the support system for sexual harassment victims, as the services are often feminized and marginalized within the structural system (Taylor & Conrad, 1992).

As a result, men often serve as “gatekeepers” for women who wish to access academia, and men possess most of the power when it comes to progressing within the university or college. Faculty rely on a highly ambiguous role as they are tasked to “instruct and develop” students. Through advising and instructing responsibilities, professors are given a lot of freedom into the inquiry of students’ personal lives (Taylor & Conrad, 1992). Rutter (1989) cites men in power often having access to a woman’s future regarding her “physical, psychological, spiritual, economic and intellectual well-being” (p. 23), and are often highly trusted by women, especially in communication and theatre departments. According to Willis (1994):

Whether in the classroom, laboratory, news room, studio or performance hall, faculty, students and others work together closely, with emotional intensities that encourage vulnerability, with psychological thrusts that invite fragility, and with a purposeful process which often blurs the edge between dependence and independence. Those who work in these areas also usually bring with them a high degree of tolerance, an overriding drive for success and acceptance, and an intensity of work which demands intimacy—and all of these are special invitations to potential sexual trouble. (p. 60)

Therefore, the codependent nature of shared spaces and places impacts the nature of communication within a system. The added complexities of a debate practice and travel schedule blur the professional-personal line to an even greater extent, resulting in increased intimacy and potential unchecked power.

### **Escalation**

By the end of the first semester, all the other women on the team had quit debate altogether, or refused to travel with the assistant debate coach, which meant they ended up doing a different form of debate and rarely traveled. I continued to travel with this coach and compete in policy debate despite being uncomfortable on trips with him because I needed the financial support being on the team provided. His sexual harassment started online through Facebook comments or messages, and years later, I can still recall the jabs at my intellect, my uselessness as a woman, homophobic comments, and his thoughts about my body. As the season went on, he quickly moved to harassing me verbally and physically. His comments regarding my intelligence and work ethic in relation to my gender moved from online to in-person as he was emboldened, and I was harassed and embarrassed in front of my teammates. Although my debate partner was incredibly supportive, the complex power dynamics of the team and community made it difficult to do more than offer interpersonal support in private settings rather than directly confront our coach. I was invited to late-night planning meetings in my coach’s hotel room (without my partner) to which I refused to go, and instead of facing the potential physical and sexual abuse in those meetings, chose to face the verbal reprimands and verbal and physical microaggressions for disobeying his orders. When staying overnight in less desirable hotels, my coach told me he needed to stay in my room with me to protect me. Each night of our tournaments, I experienced fear and panic attacks, knowing he had a copy of my room key, and my privacy and safety were an illusion. My debate

partner and I left our adjoining doors to our rooms open during the night as a stop gap measure in case the worst was to happen.

To save face in the community, declining his physical touch was not an option.<sup>4</sup> I was met with hugs that were both an opportunity to feel up my breasts and a demonstration of his control over me while playing the supportive, caring coach. He regularly spoke about his sexual fantasies and desires with young women, describing women who physically looked like me and shared my body type and characteristics. Back and shoulder massages, which never seemed to be contained to those two parts of my body, and kisses in my hair, neck, and on my forehead were other experiences of unwanted physical touch and sexual attention. In the instances in which I did tell him no or tried to slip from his grasp, his physical strength and the threat of further aggressions and retaliation through loss of my funding were a reminder of the power dynamic that existed between the two of us.

One night during a week-long tournament over winter break, I decided I did not want to attend MC for my second year of college and wanted to leave as soon as possible. Cost, and my inability to afford college without being on scholarships, dramatically limited my options of places to transfer. That night, I decided on Emporia State University<sup>5</sup> because it comparatively was not expensive, and I was confident in my ability to receive both academic and talent-based scholarships. Although I had never toured the campus, did not know much about their degree programs, and had no real plan, Emporia State University offered a speech and theatre education major, and was cheap enough to be a viable option. I made plans to transfer to Emporia State University to begin my sophomore year of college under the guise of wanting to begin my specific degree program earlier. Shame, embarrassment, and fear of further retribution led me to keep the full story and real reason I wanted to transfer a secret. I assumed if I told my parents the real reason I wanted to transfer, they would not believe me, judge me, and there would be more questions than support. Regardless of whether they would support me because of what happened, I decided to not test their support, and instead came up with a different logical reason for transferring early. The messages from my debate coach were deep in my mind and highly influenced the decision to not tell my parents. As a result, I projected the lies of my debate coach, and my own shame and personal fears upon them. I really believed his words, I was “just a woman” and this was what life was to be. I feared if anyone else knew, they would also blame me for letting this happen and not doing something about it. I believed others would perceive my attempts to disclose to

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4. This is a point where the readers may indicate that behaviors are escalating from sexual harassment to sexual assault. It is important to note this distinction, and also, to validate the (re)storying of author 1. It is her perception on the distinction between sexual harassment and sexual assault that matters, and thus, we are continuing to embrace the title of sexual harassment, even though unwanted physical touch is occurring.

5. It is important to note that Emporia State University (ESU) was not involved in the accusations contained in this manuscript, but is where the faculty mentor (author 2) and student (author 1) met. ESU provided an escape from the system that was hurting author 1, and the author did not participate in debate during her time at ESU.

other coaches not enough and I should have done more.<sup>6</sup> Coming to the end of my rope, I felt the only option left was to leave, knowing at least I would not be in that situation any longer.

Numerous studies have been done to interrogate the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in academia and regarding undergraduate women over the past several decades (see Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Bravo & Cassedy, 1992; Hickson et al., 1991). More specifically, approximately 20-25% of female students in the United States have experienced sexual harassment (Henning et al., 2017), and evidence shows a continued increase in that statistic over time (Fnais et al., 2014). Additionally, with recent, highly publicized campus sexual assaults occurring across the United States, and the responses (or lack thereof) by the academic institutions at which these occurred, there has been an increased call for academic administrators and policymakers to enact institutional change. Even with the expansion of the Clery Act in 2013 and recent changes and refinements to Title IX, a systematic review of all U.S. state statutes relating to sexual assault found them to be poorly suited for responding to campus sexual assaults and holding perpetrators accountable (DeMatteo et al., 2015). Furthermore, few women who have experienced sexual harassment are willing to come forward as victims (Hickson et al., 1991). Statistical evidence is also flawed in that few men fully recognize the role or potential role they take as harasser, and as a result do not recognize or speak about their exploitation of women. Like many communicative processes, sexual harassment is a *process* rather than a simple event (Pryor & Day, 1998). As such, it is more difficult to operationalize, conceptualize and give voice to victims of sexual harassment. For this study we are primarily focused on sexual harassment that occurs within higher education institutions, and more specifically the collegiate debate circuit. Subsequently, our review of literature focuses on existent literature in these areas. Cooper (1985) identifies a six-step process for sexual harassment in higher education: (1) aesthetic appreciation; (2) active mental groping; (3) social touching; (4) foreplay harassment; (5) sexual abuse; and (6) ultimate threat.

The *aesthetic appreciation* stage includes the sender, or harasser, choosing a receiver, and complimenting that person. At this stage in the process, the compliments are not typically perceived as harassment, and are generally liked by the receiver. In the first author's experience, these compliments were simple comments about her outfit or the way she looked, and she did not take them to be harassing or hurtful in nature at all. In the *active mental groping* stage, the sender begins fantasizing harassment by playing through positive conversations in their mind or mentally undressing the victim. It is difficult to identify the *active mental groping* second stage taking place, because while the sender begins fantasizing harassment by playing through positive conversations in their mind or mentally undressing the victim, only the sender knows this is happening (Hickson et al., 1991). The nature of collegiate debate makes it easy for the sender to plan

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6. Upon further reflection of my positionally and experiences at MC, I do not think that any mechanism within the organization would have moved the lever enough to provide safety for others, or vindication for myself. I believed organizational exit to be my only viable option. My perception after exiting the organization is that tightly coupled organizations, wrought with power, engage in self-interested mechanisms that reinforce (rather than challenge) the organization.



times to meet outside of normal contexts and plan interactions. In my experience at MC, these interactions took place at meals, preparation, and research sessions in someone's hotel room, or on van or plane rides to tournaments.

In the third stage, *social touching*, “the passion for power over the receiver becomes somewhat of an obsession” (Hickson et al., 1991, p. 113). The sender looks for and is often successful at finding times for both parties to meet outside of their normal contexts, and meticulously plans the interactions between the two. Invitations of late-night planning meetings in his hotel room and “happening” to have seats together on plane rides, as well as the physical behaviors such as hug that were normalized as being a part of a supportive coach are instances for which social touching was able to occur. By the fourth stage *foreplay harassment*, some touching has already occurred, and the harasser has made attempts to become more involved with the victim and has made these interactions more private. The interaction moves from foreplay harassment to *sexual abuse* when the harasser touches the victim, uninvited, in an intimate part of the body. Back and shoulder massages that reached other parts of my body, unwanted hugs feeling up my breasts, and kisses in my hair, neck, and forehead are instances in which unwanted physical interaction happened. Because of the protection during the night from my debate partner and my refusal to join my coach in his hotel rooms and instead face the physical and verbal microaggressions and reprimands, the situation fortunately did not escalate beyond these physical interactions. The sixth stage, *ultimate threat*, occurs when the victim has no choice but to give in or escape knowing there could be consequences because of power differentials, as quid pro quo becomes the ultimate threat (Hickson et al., 1991). Because the assistant coach had most of the power in the program when it came to traveling or advancing in the program, he became the “gatekeeper” and controlled most of the power when it came to progressing within the college or the program (Wills, 1994). Although the other women on the team quit debate altogether or started doing alternate debate formats so they wouldn't have to travel with the assistant coach, I continued to travel with this coach and did policy debate since I still believed I wanted to debate after leaving MC and wanted the experience tournaments gave me. I continued debating the full year, and even contemplated returning to finish out my associate degree because of the financial break being on a debate scholarship was giving me. Contextualizing my experience within Cooper's (1985) framework for sexual harassment in higher education offers the chance to evaluate the process and escalation of actions, which both benefits me in understanding my experiences and offers individuals in higher education leadership the opportunity to examine the complex dynamics between victim and abuser and assess the risks in these relationships and interactions.

### Transfer

Upon transferring and beginning my second year of college at Emporia State, I was miserable. I believed transferring would solve all my problems, and it would be an incredibly positive and transformative experience. As a result, I never confronted those emotions or experiences, nor did I consider how they might have affected me personally and how they might have affected the way I engaged with other people. My experience at MC had left me feeling powerless, shameful, and afraid. In addition to those deep emotions, I did not make the connections or build the relationships at Emporia State

University I thought I would build. My roommates and I had a lot of conflict. I was not debating anymore and instead was on a music talent scholarship, and I had lost my sense of purpose and identity. Even after I changed my major from speech and theatre education to communication studies, I felt like I did not belong in the communication department and had no direction.

A combination of deep-seated emotions, as well as the lack of connection and direction, led to severe clinical depression. I felt isolated, and as a result, chose not to reach out to anyone while maintaining a high GPA and excelling in the music department as a means of concealing my feelings and experiences to others. Based upon my experience of advocating for myself and voicing how I was feeling at MC, I was afraid and ashamed of telling people how I was feeling. I felt I would not be believed regardless of what I shared with people. Although I faked as if I was completely fine, I sank deeper into depression, to a state of hopelessness. I could not seem to find a way out, and came to one conclusion: September 10, 2016 was the day I was going to kill myself.

For me, relief did not come in more traditional ways of talking with a therapist, being hospitalized for a period of time, or confiding in close friends. Once I had devised a plan, I took to writing a note to leave in my bedroom. As I was writing my note saying my goodbyes and my best attempt at an explanation, I found myself writing a prayer. My writing turned to crying which turned to sobbing. In that moment, coming back to my faith which I had long forgotten and left behind, I finally found a place, person, on whom the weight of my experiences and pain could rest. Not knowing what to do next, other than simply survive, I kept the suicide note and the plan I had devised to myself, opting to not share that information with anyone else. In addition to keeping my secret of what had happened at MC, I felt I now had to carry the secret of my mental health for fear of judgment and stigmatization. I also believed sharing the state of my mental health with my family would require further exploration, a process I was unwilling to go through, and disclosing those experiences with my current friends would invite additional questions into my past.

It took almost a year for me to get to a place where I was willing to confront those feelings. I had not planned on sharing those experiences with anyone else until resident assistant training when I broke down to one of our complex coordinators, Joseph, after having to go through a mock suicide training. My conversation with Joseph helped to validate my experiences and feelings and established the residential life department as a safe space to share. Throughout the fall semester of 2017, I disclosed my experience to my complex coordinators, some friends at Emporia State University, and several of my coworkers in residential life. I found sharing negative experiences with my new friends and bosses at Emporia State University to be easier than sharing it with those I had known for a longer period of time. My childhood friends and my family still had no idea what I had experienced in the past two years. Through these initial disclosures with my new campus community, I came to realize that it was easier to share my experiences of my mental health struggles and the sexual harassment experiences with people I had not known as long; I felt if the relationship did not endure because of those disclosures, I was not losing as much because the relationships were new and not well established. However, with my long-time friends and family members, if the disclosure created a burden or fundamentally changed my relationship with that person, I could not easily exit the relationship because of the deeper ties formed throughout the longer period of time.

Communication privacy management theory (CPM) helps to explain some of these disclosure dynamics. This theory is uniquely helpful because it is the only disclosure theory that situates privacy as an issue of (co-)ownership and highlights the vulnerability of the disclosure. This is especially important considering that we are examining sexual harassment, and the privacy needs of not only the victim, but of all parties involved in the dialectic of privacy and disclosure. For this particular manuscript, that distinction is important to understand, because the first author is disclosing her story of sexual harassment, including others in her story (for example, the second author, family, and friends) and now the reader of this piece as well. Through the lens of CPM, the choice (and burden) of disclosure is shifted to the victim, rather than to the predator (Petronio, 2002). As such, the victim faces a plethora of challenges when choosing when and whom to disclose, situating this dilemma as an ongoing process (Bute & Vik, 2010). Privacy boundaries are continually (re)negotiated with others, and the person disclosing information creates a metaphorical boundary around their private information and the other people are then co-owners of the private information (see Petronio, 2002).

CPM, a dialectical theory, argues that people feel a push and a pull for them to reveal and conceal information from others, such that privacy and disclosure coexist (Morr Serewicz & Petronio, 2007). To further understand how this rules-based theory functions, Morr Serewicz & Petronio (2007) offer five primary axioms of CPM:

- (a) private information is the content of disclosures, (b) there is a metaphorical boundary or border between public and private, (c) people desire control over private information because they own this information and sharing it makes them vulnerable, (d) people use a rule-based system to manage private information in interaction, (e) privacy-disclosure is a dialectical tension in relationships. (p. 258)

The third axiom is particularly relevant to this manuscript as it places emphasis on the vulnerability experienced by the discloser. Vulnerability is a salient theme when disclosing stigmatized or taboo topics (Petronio, 2002), and we argue that sexual harassment is a topic that is rarely discussed openly and thus taboo.

There are two reasons people seek to control their private information. First, they believe they have a right to own the information, and second, disclosure makes a person feel vulnerable (see Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Child, 2020). A connection between control and vulnerability is apparent as the need for ownership and anticipation of vulnerability both require control. Control and vulnerability thus determine the permeability of a person's boundaries depending on the nature of the information and the circumstances surrounding disclosure (Morr Serewicz & Petronio, 2007). Disclosing private information makes a person feel more vulnerable because it invites another individual to be a co-owner of the private information. The shift in boundaries creates a less clear picture of who now is the keeper of the secret, and if the boundary is then rigid or permeable. The more vulnerable a person feels, the more they may try to mitigate the resulting "boundary turbulence" (see Petronio, 2002). As such, when a person seeks to control private information, they formulate more "rigid" boundaries surrounding their private information (see Petronio, 2002).

Privacy and disclosure become particularly important – and complicated – in the context of adult familial relationships. Families formulate and maintain boundaries based

on the norms and privacy rules of the family. Parents are not privy to the private information of adult children in the same way they are of adolescent children, and to an even greater extent, young children (see Petronio, 2002 for extended discussion). Although much of this research has been attributed to parental privacy invasions (Petronio, 1994; Petronio, 2013), it is important to note that adult children do not have the same privacy invasions and privacy needs as adolescent counterparts. As we transition to adulthood, our privacy boundaries become more rigid and static, with less permeability for others in our lives, particularly other adults (see Petronio, 2002). Adult children maintain these privacy boundaries and do not as readily share information with other people in their lives, including their families. Subsequently, adult children must *invite* parents into a collective boundary by sharing private information with the parents (Kennedy-Lightsey & Frisby, 2016). There is a plethora of ways in which parents can co-own information with adult children (e.g., snooping, receiving information from a third party etc.), but because the adult child has more rigid privacy boundaries it is possible for the child to maintain private information from parents more readily, particularly given that they frequently do not share a living space.

Upon my decision to transfer to a new university, I knew I would need to offer my parents an explanation as to why I was transferring instead of finishing my associate degree at MC. Because I was uncomfortable with sharing my abusive experience of being on the debate team, I told my parents I wanted to transfer to a four-year college a year early so I could begin my degree program a year early. At this point in time, the family privacy boundaries were less rigid, and even though I sought out my parents' wisdom on the decision to transfer, ultimately, the decision was my decision to make. Even with less rigid privacy boundaries, our family still valued a high level of communication, which required me to offer some kind of explanation for the transfer, so I defaulted to a topic-based rigidity. I invited my parents into a collective boundary when I chose to share my information on the decision to transfer while still protecting the real reason for changing schools. However, I still maintained ownership over the information I deemed would make me more vulnerable.

### Aftermath

Through counseling, I have tried to address the reasons I am uncomfortable with disclosing this information with my family. Perhaps the most obvious reason I have not shared with my parents is because I am worried of their reaction. The first person I disclosed my experiences to validated them, as did the people in residential life I told about these experiences and feelings. However, I still fear my parents will not know how to respond to me sharing this information with them. I am worried they will deny my experiences and not believe me when I tell them about the sexual harassment or depression. I am afraid their reaction could confirm some of the lies I have told myself about my worth and ability to heal from these experiences.

As a result, studying privacy and disclosure in the context of sexual harassment and mental health—both topics incredibly personal to me—has created significant cognitive dissonance. On one hand, I know why I am hesitant to share my experiences with my family. However, I know there are important physical and psychological benefits to me disclosing the status of my mental health to my family (Frattaroli, 2006).

Hammonds (2015) found that rumination, stress, and well-being had an impact on an individual's choice of privacy or disclosure. However, the benefits of disclosure are not universal, and are determined by the response of the people to whom the individual discloses (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Frey et al., 2016; Lepore et al., 2000; Rodriguez & Kelly, 2006). According to Frattaroli (2006), "early explanations of the benefits of experimental disclosure draw from a Freudian explanation of the benefits of catharsis, suggesting that the inhibition of thoughts and feelings can reduce stress and improve a host of physical and psychological health outcomes" (p. 824). Some of these physical health outcomes include improvements in immune functioning, reduction in health center visits, reduced absenteeism rates from work, improved grade point average, and decreased self-reported upper respiratory problems (Frattaroli, 2006). In addition to physical health benefits, disclosure offers the potential for people to free their mind, make sense of the events, regular their emotions, and improve social connections, leading to a healthier person (Frattaroli, 2006). I have not received the catharsis I would have if I had felt comfortable disclosing to my parents; but I was also saved the labor of having to manage what I anticipated were negative reactions/emotions to the disclosure.

Additionally, disclosure concerning a person's mental health impacts a person's perception of themselves regarding self-stigma. As Corrigan et al. (2010) explain, "public stigma is the prejudice and discrimination that occurs when the population as a whole accepts and endorses a certain stereotype, while self-stigma occurs when individuals choose to internalize the stigma, resulting in decreased self-esteem and self-efficacy" (p. 260; see also Corrigan et al., 2006; Link, 1987; Link et al., 1987; Markowitz, 1998; Ritsher et al., 2003; Rosenfield, 1997; Rüscher et al., 2009a&b). People who have disclosed more about their mental illness are less likely to experience the impacts of self-stigma as the shame is removed through the sharing of their mental illnesses. Avoiding disclosure implies that the stigma associated with mental illness is valid and the diagnosis is something to be ashamed of and kept hidden (Corrigan et al., 2010). I know holding on to this secret has increased my anxiety levels, and I am aware of the information I am withholding from my family every time I interact with them. I also know sharing this experience fully with my parents will release me from the burden of concealment, help me make sense of the past few years, and improve my relationship overall with my parents (Frattaroli, 2006).

### **Reflections and Contributions**

Based on the preceding narratives and analysis, we forward two primary contributions of this work. The first is that written disclosure, while often difficult and emotionally triggering, can not only be reflective and cathartic (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker et al., 1990; Foa & Kozak, 1986), but can lead to further disclosure in other relationships. In the writing of this piece, the first author invited the second author into a collective boundary when deciding to collaborate on a piece together. This was an especially vulnerable position as the first author was currently enrolled in undergraduate courses that the second author was teaching. I (the first author) strategically chose to disclose my experiences and the status of my mental health to protect my privacy and shield myself from stigma. However, the need for support outweighed my need for privacy and I chose to disclose my mental health struggles to my community within the

residential life department and the second author. The social support I was met with from these parties made my boundaries less rigid and made me feel less vulnerable sharing the more intimate details of my experience (Petronio, 2002). This initial support, and the opportunity to write out a narrative, led to additional disclosure that ultimately was vital to the healing and sense making process of my experiences (Corrigan et al., 2013).

Second, the process of writing out and analyzing these narratives also illustrates how the weight of relationship maintenance, particularly in the area of self-disclosure, shifts from the parents to adult children when the adult child leaves the home. In my experience, while I was still closely connected to my parents and family, the responsibility to maintain the relationship passed on to me, and as a result the weight of choosing what to disclose and not to disclose fell on me. This shift brought more autonomy to me, but also less shared information as the privacy boundaries shift. Because of this change in autonomy, the adult child is now responsible for the sharing of information and subsequent relationship maintenance. It is our expectation that privacy boundaries shift giving more autonomy and privacy to the adult child, but these shifting boundaries also could create less shared information between parents and adult children (Petronio, 2002). Perhaps, adult children are then responsible for the sharing of information and subsequent relationship maintenance. As such, future research should explore how a greater share of the responsibility for relationship maintenance falls to the child, and subsequently how that shift, in addition to the change in shared spaces, impacts how privacy boundaries shift.

Although my selective disclosure to my parents allowed them to know particular aspects of my experience, the boundary was still highly guarded and privacy surrounding the true reasons for my transfer was ultimately maintained (Morr Serewicz & Petronio, 2007). We are aware of this dichotomy, the desire for disclosure while protecting privacy boundaries, even in this work. We have wrestled with the ethical dilemma of examining our work, of disclosing something harmful, asking (or not asking) for help (Ellis, 2007), and the protection of the first author along with the other players in her experience. In placing a pseudonym for the institution and using only initials for the first author, we are robustly aware of the fact that by shielding the identity of the first author, we are protecting a sexual predator. These implications hung heavily on both authors as we contemplated the decision to protect the identity of the coach that abused his power and sexually harassed the first author. As we contemplated, we thought deeply about the fact that the perpetrator has no voice in this issue, and thus, we (reluctantly) decided to protect his identity. In addition, we did not want fingers pointed at the other coaches on staff at that institution, or to inadvertently tarnish their reputation when the other coaches did not participate, reify, or enable the predator to continue his sexual advances. Instead, the other coaches were complicit in a system that places young women in vulnerable positions with a man in power over them. It is unlikely the other adults within this system had reason to suspect, report, or intervene in the behavior of the predator. As we continually contemplated the implications of these decisions, we encountered texts (e.g. Ellis, 2007) that helped us continue to wrestle with these ideologies. Ellis (2007) states, "I ask how we can protect their identities and our relationships with them, deal with privacy and consent, and decide when to take our work back to those who are implicated in our stories" (p. 6). Because private information is co-owned (Petronio, 2002), both regarding disclosure exchanges and between those for whom a particular experience was

shared, survivors of abuse co-own those experiences with their abusers. In the end, we decided to protect the identities of all the people in this manuscript, including the first author, so she may appropriately be able to highlight the negative aspects of her debate experience while also preserving the anonymity of the program for which she debated. Though we understand these stories cannot be erased or untold, we stand behind our decisions to protect the identities of people in this story, even the perpetrator. Further considerations must be made as to how these narratives of abuse will be given space to be shared so survivors can own their own experiences and perpetrators be held accountable within the debate community.

### Conclusion

Throughout the writing and revision process of this manuscript, we recognized the necessity of questioning the culture of collegiate debate that leaves abusers in positions of power while stripping agency, power, and control from victims. Therefore, we posit a lens of social justice is especially important in examining tightly coupled organizations like collegiate debate. This problematic structure creates a system rife with harmful practices. We urge readers of this journal to enact social justice, empower victims, and hold members of our organizations who engage in bullying, sexual harassment, and abusive behaviors accountable. We do not believe it is the responsibility of victims to challenge the status quo; instead, we posit that the organizational changes needed in debate must be made by agents with power at the head of organizations, such as CEDA and NFA. Until members within the organization wrestle with the systemic problems that are hurting collegiate debaters while enabling predators, this system will never change. We challenge readers of this article, and of this journal more generally, to engage in communicative behaviors that provide agency, voice, and power to victims of sexual harassment (see Livingston & Vik, 2021), while removing positions of power (both formal positions and informal positions) to people who victimize those with less power. Additionally, we invite mentors within the organization to be robustly reflexive in that their relationship with someone else in the organization does not negate the fact that that person may engage in predatory behaviors. After all, we understand that people who engage in problematic behaviors such as bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, P. & Tracy, S.J., 2012) and abuse are skilled at grooming both victims and supporters.

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