Paving the Way:

Critical Analysis of Rachael Denhollander’s Victim Impact Speech

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**Introduction**

In 2016, Rachael Denhollander became the first victim to step forward and publically accuse Larry Nassar of sexual abuse that occurred when she was fifteen. Releasing a video of the detailed abuse on the news source, Indy Star, Rachael opened a gate for all survivors of Nasar’s abuse to come forward. During the trial, Denhollander was the last victim to give the impact statement during the hearing of Nassar’s sentencing.

Through Rowland’s narrative perspective, this essay will analyze Rachael Denhollander’s victim impact statement. Denhollander’s use of narrative form, function, and my evaluation as a critic will determine the success of Rachael’s speech and it’s influence on the audience. At the end of Larry Nassar’s trial, he was given the maximum sentencing for each crime he was charged with by the state of Michigan. Rachael and the judge presiding over the case are given recognition for changing the stigma around sexual assault victims and the outcomes of sexual assault cases in the American judicial system.

**Background- The Fall of Nassar**

Larry Nassar was named the national medical coordinator for the United States Gymnastics Team (USAG) in 1996 shortly after receiving his medical degree from Michigan State University in 1993. With his well-established work experience, he then became a professor and the gymnastic’s team physician at Michigan State University. Rachael Denhollander, 15 at the time, becomes a patient of his during the early 2000s for her lower back pain caused by gymnastics training. Denhollander, whose mother was in the room during the sexual assault, states to CBS that “Nassar was so ‘skilled’ at abuse that her mother didn’t even notice” (CBS 2019). Denhollander reports her abuse to the Michigan State University police on August 29th, 2016, which Nassar reassigned a few days later from all clinical duties on campus. On September 12, 2016, Rachael Denhollander and an unnamed Olympic gymnast spoke about sexual abuse that occurred during their time getting medical treatment for gymnastics at Michigan State University to a journalist site, IndyStar. These two women were the first athletes to publicly bring accusations against Larry Nassar. IndyStar reports that the unnamed victim was molested in 1994 and was continued for several years (Evans & Alesia, 2018). The United States Gymnastics team released a statement in response to their allegations indicating that Nassar was relieved of his position in 2015 and no longer is associated with the group.

Larry Nassar is officially charged with three counts of first-degree criminal sexual abuse in November of 2016. An additional fifty complaints were given to the Attorney General of Michigan, Billy Schuette. One of those complaints was an unnamed victim who reported to her parents of the abuse in 2004, but instead of going to the police, they took their daughter to counsel. During the sessions, Nassar was asked about the accusations against him which he denied causing her parents not to believe her either. In 2013, she reported the abuse to the police, but nothing happened after her initial report (Haxel 2016).

**Who She was and Who She Became**

Being continuously abused for a year at a young age, Rachael grew through her teenage years in isolation. She felt that if she came forward that she wouldn’t be believed, and that other women must have also come forward so she wouldn’t have too. What she had gone through inspired her to help others who didn’t have a voice. After graduating high school, Rachael attended Oak Brook College of Law and Government Policy, where she attained her law degree. In 2006, Rachael Denhollander met her husband and currently has four children with him. With her success as a lawyer, Denhollander went back to school to attain her doctorate from the American University of Paris. Leading up to her victim impact speech, Rachael Denhollander was accused by numerous affiliates of Michigan State Unversity for only coming forward about her abuse for the fame and money that would follow. She had spoken to many new sources that the only thing that has come from her speaking out about being abused with isolation, a loss of friends, and loss of privacy. Her victim impact speech details the trauma that had happened to her, the outrage towards Michigan State University, and statements on why Larry Nassar should receive the full sentencing for each crime he committed against women.

Currently, Rachael Denhollander is a member of the California Barr Association educating other lawyers on how to further help victims of sexual assault or abuse. For most victims involved in Nassar’s criminal case, Rachael Denhollander was the strength for many of the two hundred fifty women to step forward and speak the truth of what Nassar did to them. Her work in advocating for sexual assault victims awarded her a spot on *Time Magazine’s* “100 Most Influential People in the World” and one of *Glamour Magazine’s* “Women of the Year” in 2018. Additionally, Rachael has received accolades from *Sports Illustrated, ESPN,* and numerous other national and global recognitions.

**Covering up**

Unfortunately, many cases of sexual abuse are either covered up through the organizations that represent the abuser or not enough evidence is produced for a police investigation to continue to pursue the perpetrator. The victims of Nassar ultimately were believed once Rachael Denhollander came forward publicly about her abuse. Amanda Thomashow, a grad student at the University of Michigan, sought out treatment from Nassar for injuries sustained in high school. She reported abuse to the director of sports medicine clinic who then filed a Title IX complaint (Kozlowski 2018). Nassar is allowed to continue treating patients for sixteen months during the ongoing investigation in 2014. It wasn’t until a year later that the state prosecutors would know about the said investigation and a few months after Nassar would not be charged with any crimes (Blizter 2017).

After Nassar pleaded guilty to all charges on federal and state levels, Congress found the FBI, USA Gymnastics, and the U.S. Olympic Committee guilty of failing to protect gymnasts from Larry Nassar. Senator Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., stated that the actions, or lack of, by all organizations involved were trying to “cover-up” abuse done by Nassar (Macur 2018). The reports from Congress declare that the Olympic organizations “knowingly concealed abuse by Nassar, leading to the abuse of dozens of additional amateur athletes” (Axon 2019). The proposed legislation has been made to provide more oversight over organizations like the US Olympics and prevent future abuse from happening. The US Gymnastics team reports that they have already implemented new oversights for sexual abuse limiting contact between staff and athletes but said the organizations will include the new legislation proposed into their rule of conduct.

**Literature Review**

No rhetorical analysis exists within scholarly academia on Rachael Denhollander’s victim impact statement, so looking at the circumstances, organizations, and analyses of the significance of victim impact statements in court rulings are substantive for this rhetorical analysis of Rachel’s statement. The overall theme for these studies shows the significance of the structure for Denhollander’s speech and the overall argument she is making.

Victim impact statements are used frequently in sentencing for criminal cases in the United States judicial system. Wood understands the importance for victims to be heard in cases, but analyses how victim impact statements are used to provide a balance between the defendant’s rights and the victim’s (Wood 2005). Though the victim impact statements Wood examines are from death penalty cases, the persuasive impact that they have on sentencing favors the victim more than the defendant. Thus it is significant for analysis on victim impact speeches in the United States.

Once Rachael Denhollander spoke publicly about the sexual abuse she went through, every type of media had a headline about Dr. Larry Nassar. In Rachael’s victim impact statement, she addresses Michigan State University’s lack of action when victims came forward about abuse. Organizations affiliated with Nassar had to repair their image that was stained with new women coming forward every day. Michigan State University released statements after the initial report but could not prepare itself for the mass publicity the scandal received. Frederick, Pegoraro, and Smith examined the comments on social media following Michigan States image repair strategies using Benoit’s Image Repair Theory. Charting each response released, the scholars categorized statements into bolstering, rallying, and corrective action. Out of the twelve Facebook posts, six of them were categorized into corrective action. Having the most comments, shares, and likes, corrective action posts were best for repairing Michigan State’s tarnished name. The two statements that fell under the bolstering showed the least amount of responses deeming it the least effective way for image repair (Frederick, Pegoraro, & Smith 2019). The conclusion of the study found that Facebook users blamed Michigan State University for mishandling the situation.

The judge who presided on Nassar’s criminal case became an important figurehead at the end of the trial. She was someone who Rachael directly spoke to throughout her victim impact statement. Meadows and Meadows analyzed Twitter users’ responses to Nassar’s case. Pulling a sample of 3,088 tweets, Meadows and Meadows applied key concepts from the Integrated Crisis Mapping Model to each tweet. First, tweets were put into three main categories: emotions, coping strategies, and attribution of responsibility. Then those tweets were put into subcategories of emotions expressed: sad, anger, anxiety, disgust, fright, and other emotions. Coding discovered that 31.6% of tweets discussed anger followed by disgust. Both emotions were in reference to Nassar as a person and his actions towards women. Tweets that were categorized under joy were in reference to the maximum sentencing that Nassar received. Of the 860 tweets categorized as joyful, 441 were directed at the judge who gave out Nassar’s sentencing (Meadows & Meadows 2019). The emotional responses and coping mechanisms through the tweets broadened what the model could capture from different situations of crisis.

Though no critical analysis of Rachael Denhollander’s victim impact speech has been written to aid my rhetorical analysis, the speech itself provides hope in future cases of sexual assault survivors. Every person who came before her was not believed and turned away from either their parents or the police department, Denhollander created a space which allowed more victims to come forward. Her speech showed the world, and specifically America, that justice can be served for sexual assault victims and that burying the abuse inside will only cause more pain for survivors.

**Method**

Storytelling is the most basic and meaningful form of communication which is why Walter Fisher developed the Narrative Paradigm Theory. Using your own experience, whether verbal or nonverbal, aids in the art of persuasion and analysis of human communication. Instead of solely looking at the artifact, the narrative paradigm theory focuses on how the story changes the beliefs and behaviors of those who adopt the stories into their lives (Fisher, 1985). Rowland expands upon Fisher’s theory by adding narrative form and narrative function. These adaptations allow a more in-depth analysis of the artifact. First, I will explain what Rowland’s two principles are for his narrative criticism. Next, I will look at how others used his theory. Finally, I will explain how his theory fits well with Rachael Denhollander’s victim impact statement.

Characters, setting, plot, and theme are the four components that make up the narrative form. Each plays a critical role in a full analysis of an artifact. The character component critiques the main individuals, as well as, bystanders within narratives. Typically stories consist of at least one protagonist and antagonist. Rowland explains that the protagonist can follow one of two paths: a common person overcoming a struggle or a hero type individual. Antagonists play the stereotypical role of the villain causing the problems that the protagonist faces. Settings for narratives can be anywhere and at any time. Rowland explains that the rhetorical importance for the setting is to transport the listener to the place of the narrative (Kuyper 2016). By doing so, the audience will feel immersed in the story making them see and feel what the speaker did. The third component of Rowland’s narrative form is the plot. The plot consists of keeping the audience attentive and reinforce the theme within the story. If the theme is lost or the audience loses attention the story is no longer persuasive and carries meaning for the audience. Finally, the last factor for the narrative form is the theme. For rhetorical criticism, Rowland states that the theme needs to be either clearly implied or explicit for the narrative so that the audience does not miss the point of the theme. All of these components are needed to complete the point of the narrative.

Additionally, Rowland establishes the narrative function for narrative criticism. The four narrative functions that Rowland describes are: keep the audience attentive, create a sense of identification, break down barriers, and looking into values and needs (Kuypers 2016). As discussed before, keeping the audience’s attention allows those to keep up with the message the speaker is trying to communicate. Creating a sense of identification between the audience and the narrator connects the audience to the narrative. The audience will be able to feel how the narrator is just like them, humans who experience life. Another effective way to persuade an audience by storytelling is through breaking down barriers. Barriers between the audience and narrator could be a cultural difference that one audience perspective doesn’t understand. Breaking these down will allow a deeper understanding of the narration. Finally, the narration must explain the values that it is trying to persuade. All of these components together gives the narration more persuasive elements to convey its message.

Rowland uses Fisher’s probability and fidelity as a final part of his narrative criticism. Recognizing “the standards of narrative probability and fidelity get at two aspects of narrative credibility. Humans tend to believe stories that are coherent and stories that are consistent with personal experience” the audience can use narrative form and function to determine the success or failure of the narrative at hand (Kuypers 2018). If all four elements of the narrative form can be identified and used correctly with significance than the audience can conclude success. Establishing exactly who the protagonist and antagonist are creates the structure for the plot and ultimately the theme of the narrative as well. The relevance of the setting also brings importance to the plot of the narrative. Without the audience establishing the plot, keeping their attention can become a struggle for the narrator and his/her message. Rowland states that “the critic should list main events in the story and consider what those events reveal about the message of the story” (Kuypers 2018). Finally, with all components of the narrative organized, the critic reveals the theme and its essence to the narrative.

The next step for the narrative evaluation is whether the narrative is compelling for the audience. If the narrative function of the story was fulfilled, then the audience’s captivation should be met with significant value. The four steps for the narrative evaluation of the narrative function include: Finding identification between the audience and the narrator, Establishing who the narrator wants the audience to like, does the author successfully place the audience in the setting of the narration, and whether or not the use of basic values or needs produce an emotional reaction to the audience.

The final component in the narrative evaluation for Rowland’s narrative perspective is the argument about the functioning of the narrative. If both the narrative form evaluation and narrative function evaluation are met with success the critic can make an argument that the story itself is a success. If both elements fail, then the critic can conclude that the narrative also failed. The critic must determine what section of the evaluation is more important if only one element is met successfully and the other fails. The author’s credibility relies on the audience’s perspective on whether or not their story was persuasive and compelling.

Narrative criticism has been applied to numerous types of artifacts in the communication discipline. Stutts and Barker look at imaging advertising from the oil company, Exxon, and how it affected participants in illuminating the conflict that contradicts what the message was trying to achieve (Stutts & Baker, 1999). Another study looked at how professors who work in a college’s business school could improve education among college students by sharing their own experiences while teaching (Barker & Gower 2009). Lastly, Lareau and Miczo claim that the use of the narrative theory correlates online health information seeking motivations and patient narratives for orthopedic practice websites (Lareau & Miczo, 2017).

The narrative criticism works well because it can be applied across centuries of spoken word, text, and speeches. Human beings have used stories to educate and influence since the beginning of time, allowing for different types of communication to be analyzed. Not all theories within the communication discipline can be applied to different eras of time which gives the narrative criticism theory greater effectiveness than other theories. Rachael Denhollander’s speech tells her own story about the abuse she suffered from Larry Nassar as well as other women affected by Nassar. Since her speech relies solely on these accounts, Rowland’s narrative criticism coincides well with what Denhollander is trying to accomplish.

In this analysis, I will use both principles in Rowland’s narrative criticism perspective and apply them to Denhollander’s statement as well as use the judge’s sentencing to aid in Rachael’s credibility and persuasiveness as a speaker. Detailing the first appointment she had with the doctor and the year-long abuse to follow seeking treatment for back pain, Rachael begins her narrative at a strong point of her own experience. Furthermore, Denhollander uses stories of other women who were subject to sexual abuse from Larry Nassar. Each story she recites to the judge shows how her victim impact statement uses both principles of Rowland’s narrative criticism. Using this theory, the audience will understand Denhollander’s impact statement better by looking closer to how she persuades her audience through using factual stories that make those feel every emotion that she and other victims are going through. Additionally, I can use this theory to analyze the effectiveness of the speech to the sentencing the Nassar received after the judge listened to Denhollander’s statement.

**Analysis**

Using Rowland’s narrative form, Rachael creates characters based on the protagonist and antagonist narrative. Denhollander and other victims are portrayed in the light of a protagonist who “serve the rhetorical function of creating a sense of commonality with the audience” (Kuypers pg 126). By identifying as such, Denhollander is able to show the audience what it was like to go through the experiences of being violated by Nassar. She builds on her own character, telling how she became a mother of three children but for each delivery, the “medical setting cast a horrific shadow over what should have been an occasion of pure joy” due to Dr. Nassar’s abuse (Denhollander, 2018). In addition, Rowland states that stories rarely have just the protagonist and antagonist who are also important to the story. For Rachael’s narrative, the United States Women's Gymnastics team and Michigan State University play an important role in the absence of responsibility in their part of perpetuating Nassar’s abuse. As stated beforehand, both of these organizations serve as obstacles for not only Rachael but other survivors of Nassar’s sexual abuse.

For each section of Rachael’s impact speech, she addresses different people, organizations, and overall topics about Larry Nassar’s abuse towards women. The setting jumps from place to place dependent on each story she discloses. The most compelling setting for this artifact is Rachael’s own abuse with Nassar. Laying on the table with her mother in the room, Rachael details how Nassar positioned her body perfectly so that even her own mother would never notice his abuse. Any person who has ever received a medical exam, especially when they were young, can remember those moments of trust towards not only their parents but for the doctor who is supposed to help them. Without this ability to relate to a board range of people, the setting wouldn’t break down as many barriers that would aid those in understanding her story.

Rowland’s third component for the narrative form is the plot of the narrative. As stated beforehand, the plot most does two things: it must reinforce the message it is trying to convey and keep the audience’s attention. In her 30 minutes long speech, Rachael continuously goes back to her main question that she asks at the beginning of her statement, how much is a little girl worth? Bringing this question forward after speaking on abuse and the lack of measures to protect women among the organizations involved reinforces the pressure Rachael put on the sentencing judge to give Nassar the maximum sentencing. Furthermore, Denhollander pulls Michigan State University into question as she details how those who knew about the many reported incidents on Nassar’s abuse towards women did nothing but protects Nassar and their own reputation as a state university. Asking “Was that the right way or the wrong way to investigate a claim of sexual assault on MSU's campus?” after each report that she verbally cites, Rachael reinforces her message of organizations lacking responsibility for their part in the years of ongoing abuse (Denhollander 2018). For the second component that the plot must entail, is how Rachael keeps the audience’s attention. By addressing different figures, the audience is constantly presented with new information once one narrative is complete. By doing this, the audience is captivated and cannot be flooded with old, repeated information.

To complete Rowland’s narrative form, the story must have an overall theme.

Denhollander looks to the judge and asks for her to “hand down a sentence that tells us that what was done to us matters, that we are known, we are worth everything, worth the greatest protection the law can offer, the greatest measure of justice available” (Denhollander 2018). The thirty minutes Rachael uses explicitly states this theme over and over again. Since Rowland’s narrative form relies on themes either being clearly implied or explicitly said, Denhollander’s victim impact statement fits well into the rhetorical criticism genre. Her reliance on the theme of her speech is what makes it influential to those listening.   
 Keeping the audience’s attention is an important role that Rachael must continuously recognize since her speech is over thirty minutes long. She accomplishes such by the structure and organization of her speech. In the beginning, Rachael directly addresses the judge presiding over Nassar’s case. Calling attention to whom she is speaking to forces her audience to be directly engaged. Then, Rachael proposes a question that everyone present must think about: “How much is a little girl worth? How much is a young woman worth?” (Denhollander 2018). Since she is asking these two questions for the whole speech, she reminds the audience to constantly think about what she is saying and how it affects the outcome of people’s answers. After proposing the question the first time, Rachael moves on to her experience with Nassar. Doing so gives Denhollander credibility on why she is even speaking at Nassar’s sentence hearing. Furthermore, by stating

First, it was clear to me this was something Larry did regularly. Second, because this was something Larry did regularly, it was impossible that at least some women and girls had not described what was going on to officials at MSU and USAG. I was confident of this. And third, I was confident that because people at MSU and USAG had to be aware of what Larry was doing and had not stopped him, there could surely be no question about the legitimacy of his treatment. (Denhollander 2018)

Denhollander shapes her next three points she will make in her speech allowing the audience preparation for what is to come. She then begins her argument against the actions that Michigan State University did not take. The last fourth of her speech gives condemnations towards Nassar and who he is as a person. Ending her speech on Nassar’s character circles back to her main questions she asks the judge, “what is a little girl worth?” Closing with these two main questions, Denhollander again compels the judge to take everything she said into consideration hoping to persuade her into giving Nassar the full sentencing for his crimes.

Tabloids make a majority of their money from reporting scandals. People are naturally drawn to drama so Denhollander uses the scandal against Michigan State University as a major component to maintaining the audience’s attention. Sourcing exactly everything that Michigan State University did or did not do contributed credibility to Rachael’s case. Explaining how many women came forward before Rachael in 2016 and were not believed by Michigan State showed “everyone has doubled down on the claim that nothing was done wrong and the only conclusion that can be reached is that no one truly sees anything wrong with any of this. And that is terrifying” (Denhollander 2018). Including these allegations against Michigan State University (MSU) provided the judge reasons for giving Nassar full sentencing since MSU neglected to punish him then. Additionally, Rachael introduces new questions in her speech surrounding Michigan State’s scandal. Directly addressing officials that were involved with the mishandling of sexual assault cases, she asks them “was it the right way or the wrong way to handle a report of sexual assault on MSU's campus?” (Denhollander 2018). Although people she addresses are not being prosecuted or involved with Nassar’s sentencing, it adds reasoning to her theme encompassing her speech.

Instances of identification with the audience are explicitly given within Denhollander’s victim impact statement. Most women look forward to having children and experiencing the miracles of childbirth. Unfortunately, Rachael Denhollander only dreaded the experience of childbirth, expressing “I became a mother three times over, and the fear that hung over each birth knowing I would be vulnerable in a medical setting cast a horrific shadow over what should have been an occasion of pure joy” (Denhollander 2018). Those who are moms can convey empathy towards Rachael by relating to their own memories of childbirth, and for most the joy waiting to meet the child they created. Moreover, Rachael professes her love for children and how “You [Nassar] knew how much I loved children and you used your own daughter to manipulate” when Larry Nassar would bring his daughter into his office during Rachael’s appointments. When Denhollander held her child, she “prayed to God you would leave your abuse in the exam room and not take it home to the little girl born with black hair just like her daddy” referring to Carolyn, Nassar’s daughter. This relation of the mother-daughter bond drives identification to all parents listening for the protection of their children.

Rachael also explains how she lost friends, her church organization, her privacy, and credibility as being a lawyer because of coming forward. “ I couldn't even do what I loved best, which was to reach out to others” shows her continuous struggle to feel a part of her community, which is arguably something that every person in their life feels at one point. Though not every person becomes a victim of sexual abuse or assault, it was important for Rachael to put her perspective of losing people and things she loved into the minds of the audience listening.

The final part of Rowland’s narrative function is the appeal to the values and needs of the audience in order to create a strong emotional appeal for persuasion. Throughout the entire speech, Rachael references her emotions at different stages of life. One emotion that Rachael continuously depicts is the feeling of isolation. This feeling of isolation gravitates empathy from her audience, compelling a perspective of her life that may have not been understood without sharing her story. Though she feels that she lost everything, she turns to Nassar, saying

I want you to understand why I made this choice knowing full well what it was going to cost to get here and with very little hope of ever succeeding. I did it because it was right. No matter the cost, it was right. And the farthest I can run from what you have become is to daily choose what is right instead of what I want. (Denhollander 2018).

This gut-wrenching statement shows the power that Denhollander can finally feel once Nassar is put away from every ounce of pain he has caused her and other women he abused. Additionally, Rachael continues to speak about her emotions towards Nassar and the value God has her in life. She addresses humans’ needs for forgiveness, and states “I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me -- though I extend that to you as well” (Denhollander 2018). It is important to note her own forgiveness she gives Nassar. Rachael is showing the audience that she has matured since the age of fifteen, and is not acting out of cruelty towards Nassar, but for those around her who continue to suffer.

Indicating each component of the narrative form, and demonstrating exactly how Rachael Denhollander used the narrative function, an overall evaluation of her victim impact statement can be made. The persistent theme argued throughout her whole speech explicitly advocates for the maximum sentencing against Nassar. Rachael uses her message to create an identity between her and the audience that fulfills the effective use of narrative functionality and form. Furthermore, Rachael speaks about the struggles that it took for her to come forward and the isolation she felt after releasing her initial statement denotes her credibility as a speaker. Additionally, Rachael asserts her knowledge about the judicial system through her first two claims of the statement. For the establishment of her argument, she states

There are two major purposes in our criminal justice system, your Honor: the pursuit of justice and the protection of the innocent. Neither of these purposes can be met if anything less than the maximum available sentence under the plea agreement is imposed upon Larry for his crimes. (Denhollander 2018)

She then details later in her speech about the complications this has caused her career as being a lawyer. With all steps the narrative evaluation being a success, Rachael Denhollander’s victim impact statement overall was a true success.

**Conclusion**

Rachael Denhollander’s organization, structure, and story of her victim impact statement showed her credibility and persuasiveness. Explicitly stating all elements of the narrative form from Rowland’s narrative perspective demonstrated strength in her story in which her component for narrative evaluation succeeded. Furthermore, Rachael’s ability to meet all requirements for narrative function evaluation proved that the overall evaluation of her narrative was a success.

The influence victim impact statements have is undoubtedly significant for a criminal sentencing hearing. Rachael Denhollander not only made an impact on the judge presiding Nassar’s state hearing but transformed victims of sexual assault throughout the United States. Her use of telling her story in front of those at court and those watching online showed survivors that justice can be served and that their abuse does not define who they are, but the strength they’ve had stored inside all along. Denhollander’s platform changed the tide for women, causing a significant change in 2016 during the #MeToo movement and women empowerment.

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