

Women Who Stay: A Morality Work Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Women who choose to stay in abusive relationships occupy a morally ambiguous identity category. They are at once pitied for their victimhood and shamed for their participation in it. We examine debates over women who stay using the highly publicized case of Janay Rice, who actively defended her professional football player husband, Ray Rice, following the release of a video in which he knocked her unconscious. Specifically, we engage in sentiment analysis and qualitative coding of discourse on Twitter following key points in the case ($N = 3,761$). We show that negative sentiment towards Ray Rice, the media, and the National Football League act as clear mechanisms of boundary reinforcement through which abusers, exploiters, and enablers of abuse are morally censured. In contrast, Janay Rice becomes the site of a boundary war. Moral detractors accuse Janay of greed, mental incapacity, and jeopardizing women's safety and empowerment. Moral defenders neutralize Janay through allusions to pure victimhood and medical disorder, and valorize Janay as courageous, empowered, and devoted to her family. These moral debates, though centering on a single incident, represent the collective negotiation of meanings around women who stay.

KEYWORDS: morality work; boundary work; symbolic boundaries; intimate partner violence; gender; social media.

Kai T. Erikson (1962) famously argued that moral boundaries are formed, debated, and reinforced at the public scaffold (p. 310). Through the spectacle of punishment, society stakes collective claim on acceptable and unacceptable behavior, defining a social image against those who break established norms and threaten established values. Today, the public scaffold is not a physical structure, but an ecology of digital and electronic platforms. Both professional journalists and everyday citizens utilize these platforms to respond to, and frame stories about, the public affairs of everyday life. In what follows, we use one such platform—Twitter—to analyze public sentiment toward a particular public affair—the recorded beating of Janay Rice at the hands of her professional football player husband (then fiancé), Ray Rice. In doing so, we interrogate the debate surrounding *women who stay* as a moral identity category.

Using both sentiment analysis and qualitative coding, we show that although clear moral boundaries censure abusive men and exonerate abused women, the lines blur when the abused elects to maintain a connection with her partner. No longer pure victims, yet injured parties nonetheless, the moral position of women who stay is a subject of public debate. While the extensive moral derision of Ray acted as a means of boundary reinforcement, Janay became the object of a boundary war.

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Janay's outspoken support of her husband—through a press conference and widely circulated Instagram post—amplified her moral precariousness. By publicly supporting her abuser, Janay was not just a woman who stayed, but a woman who actively stayed. As such, Janay, and her case more generally, acted as a particularly potent exemplar for those who espouse victim blame but also an instance of strong womanhood that moral defenders could stand behind.

The stakes of this boundary war are significant. Feminist scholars, activists, and advocates have pushed forward nuanced and multifaceted understandings of women and violence, coupled with diverse treatment protocols that respect diverse experiences. However, in their everyday lives, women who stay may find any combination of acceptance, support, disparagement, and/or rejection among general publics and those who make up their interpersonal social networks. That is, social support may or may not be available as women leave spaces of institutional support.

We frame the boundary war around women who stay using a *morality work* perspective (Davis 2014). Part of the accounts studies literature (Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957), morality work refers to narratives of remoralization in the face of moral stigma. In short, morality work is how people combat moral devaluation. While existing studies have focused on individual narratives of moral stigma resistance, our project examines the collective negotiation of a morally fraught identity category and how this collective negotiation shapes symbolic boundaries, with tangible implications for women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV).

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

On February 15, 2014, Ray Rice, who played professional football for the Baltimore Ravens, and his then fiancé Janay Palmer, were both arrested and both charged with simple assault. Their arrest was the result of what Atlantic City Police called an early-morning fight on an elevator at the Revel Casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Ray's attorney described the incident as a "very minor physical altercation" (Fenton 2014).

On February 19, 2014, celebrity news outlet TMZ released a video of the incident. Recorded by one of the hotel's security cameras, the disturbing video showed Ray dragging an unconscious Janay out of the elevator in which the altercation occurred. This video clip did not show the inside of the elevator, so details were speculative at this time.

On March 27, 2014, Ray was indicted by a grand jury in Atlantic County, New Jersey, on a charge of third degree aggravated assault, not simple assault as originally charged. The simple assault charges against Janay were dropped. Janay did not wish to continue with prosecution, but the state decided to pursue the charges. The day after Ray's indictment, March 28, Ray and Janay were married.

On May 1, 2014, Ray pleaded not guilty and requested enrollment in a pretrial diversion program for first time offenders that would result in a clearing of charges in as little as six months. Under the diversion program, Rice would have to maintain a clean criminal record and attend regular counseling sessions. Rice was accepted into the pretrial intervention program on May 21, 2014, to last a duration of 12 months. Rice completed his obligations to the program on May 21, 2015. As such, the assault will not appear on his permanent record (though record of the incident remains and can be called up if a second incident occurs). This intervention program was awarded for less than 1 percent of all domestic violence cases in New Jersey between 2010 and 2013 (Associated Press 2014).

On May 23, 2014, Ray and Janay held a joint press conference in which they both apologized for the incident. During this press conference, held by the Baltimore Ravens at their facilities, Ray apologized to the Ravens organization, his fans, and to "everyone who was affected by the situation that me and my wife were in." Janay thanked her supporters and stated:

I deeply regret the role that I played in the incident that night, but I can say that I am happy, that we continue to work through it together, and we are continuing to strengthen our

relationship and our marriage and do what we have to do for not only ourselves collectively but individually. And working on being better parents for Rayven [the couple's daughter] and continue to be better role models for the community like we were doing before this. I love Ray, and I know he will continue to prove himself to not only you all, but to the community, and I know he will gain your respect back in due time.

The Ravens' official Twitter account live-tweeted the event and included a controversial tweet that was eventually deleted. It read, "Janay Rice says she deeply regrets the role that she played the night of the incident."

On July 24, 2014, the NFL suspended Ray for two games in the upcoming 2014 season. Ravens general manager Ozzie Newsome called the punishment "significant" and "fair." Shortly thereafter, on July 28, Ray received a standing ovation from fans at a Ravens practice.

At 1 a.m. on September 8, 2014, TMZ released the full video of the altercation between Ray and Janay. The two appeared to be bickering outside of the elevator and entered the elevator together. The video showed 206-pound Ray deliver a left-handed punch to the right side of Janay's face, sending Janay into the back elevator wall before she fell to the floor, slamming her head on the hand rail on the way down. She was fully unconscious. The remaining portion of the video is the part that was initially released to the public. Ray is seen dragging Janay's lifeless body out of the elevator. The day of the full video release, the Ravens terminated Rice's contract with the team, essentially firing him. Additionally, the NFL suspended Rice indefinitely. As of this writing, Rice is still not employed by any NFL team.

The following day, September 9, 2014, Janay released a statement via her Instagram account. It has since been deleted, but it read:

I woke up this morning feeling like I had a horrible nightmare, feeling like I'm mourning the death of my closest friend. But to have to accept the fact that it's reality is a nightmare in itself. No one knows the pain that the media and unwanted options [sic] from the public has caused my family. To make us relive a moment in our lives that we regret everyday is a horrible thing. To take something away from the man I love that he has worked his ass off for all his life just to gain ratings is a[sic] horrific. THIS IS OUR LIFE! What don't you all get[?] If your intentions were to hurt us, embarrass us, make us feel alone, take all happiness away, you've succeeded on so many levels. Just know we will continue to grow and show the world what real love is! Ravensnation we love you!

Throughout the ordeal, the Twitterverse was active. It is this activity that we analyze to understand public debates around women who stay.

The specifics of the Ray and Janay Rice case are entangled in a complex web of sport, race, and celebrity. At the time of the Rice incident, the NFL was already under scrutiny for the violent personal lives of their players (Peters 2014). This scrutiny reflects a public pushback against hypermasculinity in sport and its troubling carryover into everyday life. At the same time, the critique of violence among athletes reflects and reinforces racist narratives about black men—a group who disproportionately make money for NFL owners and corporate elites—as violent subjects that elicit fear and require extrinsic constraints, and of black women who incite and/or perpetuate violence against themselves (Richie 2012).

While Janay and Ray are unique in their celebrity status, the experience of IPV is one with which many are intimately familiar, as are the raced, classed, and gendered politics that the case represents. Indeed, it is Janay's (newly found) celebrity status that makes her experience of IPV accessible for comment, while the perceived abstractness of celebrity figures makes her a safe target for victim shaming and/or a foil for the expression of widely disputed progressive views. That is, her celebrity status reveals an experience that usually takes place in private, giving the public access to a deeply

personal and often hidden story. At the same time, her celebrity status constructs a feeling of distance, granting the public license to comment and opine with vigor. Although for Janay, her response to the abuse and its public release most certainly reflects personal decisions about the trajectory of her family life, her reaction to an abusive partner—a black professional athlete—became a news event through which symbolic boundaries were fought. We turn now to the IPV and moral stigma literatures to situate the substance of the Janay Rice boundary war.

LITERATURE

In Erving Goffman's (1963) canonical work on stigma, he demarks as *moral* those stigmatizing attributes over which the stigmatized subject has control. These are attributes that the subject could have presumably prevented, and attributes of which the subject could presumably rid the self. Although all forms of stigma have deleterious consequences, moral stigma is particularly detrimental for both life-chance outcomes, and mental and emotional well-being (Corrigan 2000; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Goffman 1963; Jones et al. 1984; Thoits 2011).

In constructing moral boundaries, culpability is a central criterion. For women who have experienced intimate partner violence, their moral position is far from clear, and varies with the circumstances of the event(s) and the relationship. This ambiguity is at the heart of early debates over the language of "victim" versus "survivor" as activists and advocates grappled with the uneasy relationship between a disempowering social structure and women's agency and autonomy (Dunn 2005). Ideal-type versions of victimhood absolve the victim from all blame (Loseke and Cahill 1984), and explain the decision to stay with a partner following abuse as a product of ingrained fear (Martin 1976), learned helplessness, and even medical illness (e.g., battered woman syndrome [Walker 1979, 1984]). In contrast, the language of survival identifies structural barriers to leaving (Dobash and Dobash 1979) and depicts the decision to stay as, instead, an active strategy of self-preservation (Gondolf and Fisher 1988; Kelly 1988; Konradi 1996; Okun 1986).

Recent years have seen a move away from either-or debates about victimhood and survivorship. Instead, critical feminist scholars and advocates work to account for the varied "truths" of women who experience abuse, respecting women's lived experiences while recognizing experience and behavior as always structurally and biographically situated. This is a distinctly woman-centered approach that defies hard ideological lines and instead embraces ambiguity (Lamb 1999).

While the pure victim—a woman who does not incite abuse, but does seek to get out of an abusive relationship—is largely morally protected, alternate versions of "victimhood" occupy a morally precarious social position. For example, those who fail to embody ideal-type victimhood by engaging in violence themselves, rejecting definitions of abuse or assault, or expressing affection for their abusers, complicate clear attributions of morality and blame (Gavey 1999; Lamb 1999; Renzetti 1999; Stanko 2001). Women who remain romantically involved with and enthusiastically supportive of those who administer abuses exemplify a social position that resists clean ideological or treatment-based responses. In short, women who stay are morally fraught, all the more so when, like Janay Rice, they actively stand by their abusers.

In this vein, research on the social construction of social problems has highlighted intimate partner violence as a topic of public concern, identifying women who stay as a deviant identity category within the public imagination (Dunn 2005). Indeed, a "battered woman" label entails both continued and persistent victimization, and also the agentic practice of staying in, or returning to, an abusive situation. That is, women who stay are both trapped in, and also ostensibly complicit in, their own abuse, and may strongly resist labels of both victim and survivor.

Although "clean" definitions of victimhood help construct narratives easily digestible in the justice system and court of public opinion, these definitions often fail to capture the experiences of those living with IPV (Lamb 1999). Cultural scripts, which exclude any violent act on the part of the abused, also largely preclude women who stay as true and worthy recipients of both respect and empathy

(Stark 2007). Critical feminist scholars and advocates have come to grapple with this tension between autonomy, empowerment, and structural constraints within the IPV experience, and the treatment of women who stay, in particular. However, the degree to which public sentiment has followed suit remains unclear. This matters because women who stay are ensconced within social networks that extend beyond the ostensibly empathetic and knowledgeable advocates who work in the field. Women who experience IPV must leave their social worker, or the crisis center, or therapist's office and reengage with friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors. As morally precarious subjects, women who stay risk losing support structures in a time when they may need support the most. As we analyze reactions to the Ray and Janay Rice case, and to Janay in particular, the stakes are not just definitions of "women who stay," "victims" or "survivors," but the realities faced by those who occupy these labels and the options available to them.

In constructing our analysis, we rely on a morality work (Davis 2014) framework. Rooted in deviant accounts studies (Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957), morality work is the process of discursive remoralization in the face of pervasive moral stigma. This framework assumes that moral meanings associated with actors and identities are located upon a moral-immoral continuum (Stets 2012), and that location upon this continuum is mutable. That is, moral meanings can change. Engaging in morality work, the morally accused pit themselves against moral accusers, contesting their own culpability, challenging negative evaluations of stigmatized behavior, and at times, relocating the moral deficiency in those who express moral censure.

Research on morality work and deviant accounts have thus far focused on the stories that the morally accused tell about themselves and about the groups of which they are members. These works show that in general, the morally accused employ a variety of techniques to support their claims. These techniques, while manifesting uniquely in each moral battle, are well documented across cases. Though far from exhaustive, some common morality work techniques include medicalization, claims to helplessness, group comparison, claims to necessity, appeals to a higher loyalty, denial of injury, and condemnation of the condemners (Cromwell and Thurman 2003; Hewitt and Stokes 1975; Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957). These techniques have been documented specifically in women's accounts of IPV, in which women work to both remoralize the self and also justify the behavior of abusive partners (Ferraro 2006; Ferraro and Johnson 1983).

Our study is unique in its application of the morality work framework to the collective struggle over moral boundaries. Although certainly some of the claims makers in our data set rely on personal experiences to make their arguments, the battle over women who stay is literally forged on the body of Janay. In analyzing Twitter content in relation to the case, and doing so at multiple levels, we parse the debate over women who stay as a moral identity category.

METHODS

We used a mixed-methods design in our analysis of the Janay and Ray Rice case. We began with a sentiment analysis, scraping Twitter at three key time points, with Janay as our subject of interest. The three time points are February 19 (Time 1), the day that TMZ released the partial video of Ray dragging Janay out of the elevator; September 8 (Time 2), the day that TMZ released the full video of Ray striking Janay; and September 9 (Time 3), the day that Janay publicly defended Ray via Instagram. We used these data to discern broad trends in the affective response to Janay as a recipient of abuse. This data mining created an archive, which we then hand coded using interpretive analysis techniques. This design combines big data with qualitative methods, illuminating broad trends while combing through the nuanced complexities.

To examine the broad trends in social affect, we engaged in web scraping and sentiment analysis. Web scraping is the act of extracting data from websites in an automated fashion. The data that is extracted can be text, photos, design elements, or other data contained within the outward appearance of the webpage or within the hidden computer code used to generate the webpage.

For the current study, we utilized Web Scraper Free and Topsy.com. Web Scraper Free is a free extension for the Google Chrome internet browser.¹ Web Scraper allows the user to build sitemaps that guide the scraper software to the desired data. Topsy Labs, which was bought by Apple and shut down in December 2015, was a social search and analytics company, a certified Twitter partner, and maintained a comprehensive index of tweets dating back to Twitter's inception in 2006. The tweets that Topsy archived were public tweets. Topsy did not archive the tweets of users whose accounts were set to private or tweets from deleted accounts. Topsy.com allowed users to search for tweets using keywords. Using the search term "Janay," we collected archived tweets from February 19 (Time 1), September 8 (Time 2), and September 9 (Time 3). Although Topsy.com is no longer in service, other websites offer similar services.

We specifically examined tweets that mention Janay (rather than Ray, the Ravens, TMZ, etc.) because our theoretical interest is in women experiencing IPV. We therefore constructed our analysis with Janay at the center. We chose these specific dates to represent key turning points in the timeline of events. Again, Time 1 is the day that TMZ first released the partial video showing Ray drag Janay out of the elevator. Time 2 is the day that TMZ released the full video showing the actual punch. Time 3 is the day that Janay defended Ray via her Instagram account. For each date, we attempted to collect 100 tweets per hour for 24 hours. During hours when there were more than 100 tweets containing "Janay" the 100 tweets that we collected serve as a sample of the tweets during that hour. In hours in which there were fewer than 100 tweets, the search returned all of the tweets during that hour. We designed a sitemap in Web Scraper that would collect tweet texts and save them in a comma delimited text file. Before continuing with our analysis, we removed non-manual retweets and duplicate tweets. This brought our overall numbers to 1,640 tweets at Time 1, 1,851 tweets at Time 2, and 1,656 tweets at Time 3 for a total of 3,671 tweets analyzed.

Once we collected the Twitter data, we conducted a sentiment analysis as an efficient way to examine the overall trends in the language used to make public statements about the situation that reference Janay. Sentiment analysis is a technique often used by businesses to gauge the feelings that the public holds in regard to their company, brand, or a particular product. [Minqing Hu and Bing Liu \(2004\)](#) explain the technique in greater detail. Essentially, we created an automated code in the statistical program R that counts instances of specified words contained within the text of our collection of tweets. These specified words are called an opinion lexicon or sentiment lexicon. It consists of lists of positive and negative sentiment words. We utilized Hu and Liu's sentiment lexicon, found on their webpage,² and adjusted it to our purposes. Specifically, we included 1 additional positive word: "strong" and 11 negative words, most of which are sexist or racist slurs. Once counted, the sentiment score is the sum of positive matches minus the sum of negative matches. Thus, a negative sentiment score means that there were more negative words in a tweet's text and a positive sentiment score means that there were more positive words in a tweet's text. This strategy is not flawless, but it allows for a relatively quick quantification of the language being used to discuss a given topic.

Although big data methods are unique in their capacity to uncover patterns among a mass of content, they have been critiqued for overlooking, and at times even obscuring, the full story ([boyd and Crawford 2014](#); [Tufekci 2014](#)). We therefore include a qualitative component in which we closely examine the pieces of data on which the sentiment analysis is built. The process of scraping data for sentiment analysis created an archive of individual tweets. We separated these into three databases, each representing one of our key time points. We then hand coded each set of data using interpretive analysis techniques ([Gadamer 1975](#); [Geertz 1973](#)). Such techniques involved an examination of data for cohesive trends and competing narratives.

Specifically, we read each individual tweet in the sample, creating broad categories in the process ([Glaser 1978](#)). We then combined, tweaked, eliminated, and created new categories as necessary. This was an iterative process, in which broad categories were refined into subthemes, and subthemes parsed

1 See <http://webscraper.io/> (retrieved April 7, 2017).

2 See www.cs.uic.edu/~liub/FBS/sentiment-analysis.html#lexicon (retrieved April 7, 2017).

further. Disagreements or uncertainty of categorization between researchers was handled through discussion and reference back to the literature (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

Because texts often maintain multiple meanings, we allowed for fluidity between categories, with single tweets at times occupying more than one thematic category. Similarly, a single tweet may contain multiple components, some of which fall into one category, and some of which fall into another. A key theme to emerge was that of moral stigma and its variation over time, in line with shifting sentiments.

ANALYSIS

We begin with a broad view of the affective reaction to Janay Rice as her abuse was made public, as the NFL and mainstream media responded, and as Janay made her voice heard. We use this broad view as an impetus and foil for an in-depth analysis of the public moral debate, as it plays out over our three key time points. In this latter piece of analysis, we employ the morality work framework, examining closely both moral accusations and strategies of remoralization.

Sentiment Analysis

Table 1 displays the mean sentiment scores of all tweets collected at Times 1 through 3. As you can see, the means show that the overall sentiment toward the situation is negative. This is not to say that the sentiment toward Janay is negative (that is left for the qualitative analysis). What it does mean is that overall public sentiment in tweets that mention Janay is negative. This makes sense given that overall people speak negatively about intimate partner violence, and Janay is a person who experienced intimate partner violence. However, notice that the response decreases in its negativity over time. Time 1 and Time 2 exhibit more negativity than does Time 3. We conducted an analysis of variance and the Tukey post-hoc test to determine whether these differences in mean sentiment score per time period are statistically significant (see Table 2).

We find that, indeed, at least one of the means is statistically significantly different from the others. The Tukey test reveals that Time 3 is driving the significant results of the ANOVA. The difference between Time 1 and Time 2 is not statistically significant. However, Time 3, the 24 hours after Janay publicly defended Ray, shows significantly less negative, or more positive, sentiment toward the situation.

In summary, analysis of our sample shows that the overall public sentiment in tweets that mention Janay is negative (−.520). However, the degree of negativity diminishes at each crucial time point. The greatest negative sentiment exists at Time 1, the day that TMZ first released the partial video (−.650), followed by Time 2, the day that TMZ released the full video (−.561). Although these values differ, their difference is not statistically significant. So, we might say that Time 1 and Time 2 exhibit equally negative public sentiment. Time 3, on the other hand, the day that Janay publicly supported Ray via Instagram, owns the least negative public sentiment (−.460). This value is statistically significantly different from the values at Time 1 and Time 2. Negative sentiments therefore decreased with Janay’s defense of her husband/attacker. Since we analyzed tweets that used Janay’s name, and the sentiments of these tweets became more positive with Janay’s statement, it is tempting to interpret this as an indication that women who stay are not the subject of moral denigration but instead find relative support as public knowledge approaches the sophisticated brand of empathy honed by critical feminist activists and advocates. Our qualitative analysis, however, tells a more fragmented story.

Table 1. Mean Sentiment Scores

	Mean	SD	N
Time 1	−.650	.66	1,640
Time 2	−.561	.73	1,851
Time 3	−.460	.78	1,656
Total	−.520	.75	3,671

Table 2. Analysis of Variance, Sentiment Score by Time Point

<i>Source</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between groups	2	5.950	10.574	.000
Within groups	3,668	.563		
Total	3,670			

<i>Tukey Honest Significant Difference Test</i>				
<i>Point A</i>	<i>Point B</i>	<i>Mean Diff (A – B)</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Time 1	Time 2	–.089	.061	.311
Time 1	Time 3	–.190	.061	.006
Time 2	Time 3	–.101	.025	.000

Qualitative Analysis

The sentiment analysis indicates that negative sentiment persists throughout the case, but that it decreases significantly at Time 3. Time 3 is notable as the moment after which Janay entered into the public discourse, defending her husband and requesting privacy and respect. The themes we identify through our qualitative analysis are present across all three time points. What varies between time points is the prevalence of each theme, and of course, the material with which Twitter users are working. For instance, at Time 1 viewers saw only a partial video, and Janay and Ray were not yet married. By Time 2 the full video was released, they were married, and the NFL had administered its original punishment (a two game suspension). Time 3 included Janay’s Instagram post.

The qualitative analysis reveals that across all three time points, people expressed distress and sadness about the case in general. For example:

Can’t believe the video between Ray Rice and Janay Palmer! So sad. (Time 1)

I’m really terrified for Janay Rice right now. (Time 2)

So sorry that Ray & Janay Rice grew up in dysfunctional families that led to this kind of violence happening. (Time 3)

Time 3, however, saw an increase in Twitter users publicly excusing themselves from intervention, given Janay’s request. This took two forms: genuine appeals to privacy and autonomy, and indignant dismissal of Janay as a person worthy of help or respect. The following exemplify the former:

If Janay Rice got over the situation and forgave that man I feel like it ain’t our business to judge that woman for standing by her husband. (Time 3)

Why Janay Rice stays with Ray Rice is none of your business. (Time 3)

Representing the latter, two others state:

Janay Rice lashed out at the public “Leave us alone! This is our life!” Will do. Moving on. (Time 3)

Why are people so bothered by Janay Rice’s response? If she likes getting her ass kicked; her business. Who am I to care? Or we? (Time 3)

This shift in the content at Time 3 with regard to the case in general is further reflected in the treatment of several key actors, and helps explain the significant shift in sentiment at the final time point.

Tweets at Time 1 consist almost exclusively of links to the abbreviated video, sometimes accompanied by negatively toned commentary directed at the situation and/or at Ray. Time 2 tweets include links to the full video, along with explicit moral derision directed at three distinct culprits: Ray, the NFL, and the media. Janay is largely absent as a primary subject at Times 1 and 2, but appears as an object upon which Ray, the NFL, and/or the media acted injuriously. At Time 3, Janay becomes a primary subject, and her moral standing comes into question. That is, after inserting her voice into the story, Janay becomes a target of moral evaluation, but a contestable one. It is only at Time 3 that Janay is truly granted subjectivity, as she moves from *victim* to woman who stayed. This subjectivity, however, is accompanied by active moral questioning.

We interpret the decrease in overall negative sentiment between Time 1 and Time 3 as indicative of a shift from morally clear targets to a morally ambiguous one. Ray, the NFL, and the media occupy the roles of abuser, facilitator of abuse, and exploiter, respectively, becoming sites of boundary reinforcement on which Twitter users publicly place their outrage. In contrast, Janay occupies the morally ambiguous category of a woman who stayed, and the public response represents a struggle over the morality of Janay as an occupant of this role. Time 1 and Time 2, following the release of the abbreviated and full versions of the abuse video respectively, largely cast Janay as a pure victim at the hands of an abusive (black) man, a profit-motivated NFL, and/or an exploitative media. At Time 1, the focus was primarily on Ray, and moral sentiments were expressed in the titles of the links back to the abbreviated video, and the commentary framing the links. For example:

A shocking, upsetting video of Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice dragging his fiancée Janay Palmer out of a . . . ift.tt/1cqB2B5. (Time 1)

Ray Rice knocked out fiancée Janay Palmer after striking her, police complaint says. nydn.us/MfqVor. (Time 1)

Time 2 includes links to the full version of the video, and opinionated commentary on not only Ray, but also the media for their exploitation of the content, and the NFL for its handling of the case. For example:

Actually disgusted by Ray Rice video m.tmz.com/#Article/2014/you give black men a bad name. I pray for your wife Janay Palmer. (Time 2)

I'm not watching the video. It's an egregious, awful violation of Janay Rice's privacy. Fuck TMZ and this sensationalist garbage forever. (Time 2)

The @nflcommish didn't need to talk to Janay Rice. If he saw the video, the decision was easy. Shame. 2 meaningless games. (Time 2)

Time 2 also includes a small number of tweets in which Janay is the primary subject, and derided for her decision to marry her abuser. For example:

I'm not gonna sympathize with Janay Rice because even after she got her ass knocked out she still married Ray. (Time 2)

Can't feel bad for Janay Rice she stayed with him. (Time 2)

I felt sorry for Janay Rice . . . Then she married Ray. (Time 2)

This brand of tweet, in which Janay is debated or censured as a moral subject, increases dramatically at Time 3, following the release of her statement on Instagram in which she both enters into the public discussion and also asserts her active decision to remain with her partner following an incident of IPV.

Moral Derision and Morality Work

A structural reading of Janay's statement in defense of Ray Rice maps closely onto historical patterns of black women who protect their abusers by remaining silent. Silence among black women who experience abuse reflects efforts to avoid perpetuating damaging stereotypes of black men as dangerous and violent (Collins 1998), and also (well-founded) concerns that speaking out will not elicit the desired response (Richie 1996, 2012). When TMZ released the abuse footage, they took away Janay's option to handle the matter privately. Therefore, we can partially understand Janay's statement as an effort to regain control over an already-out narrative. In shaping the narrative, however, Janay became the target of moral debate.

Upon inserting her own voice into the public discourse surrounding her abuse, and asserting uncompromising support for her husband, Janay became the site on which a moral boundary war was fought. We begin by delineating the specific moral accusations charged against Janay, and then identify the techniques by which her moral worth is discursively defended. We embed this analysis in the understanding that both moral accusers and the morally accused, though instantiating their claims through the circumstances of specific people and a specific case, are nonetheless engaged in a much larger debate about the moral meaning of, and acceptable actions for, women involved in occurrences of intimate partner violence. Specifically, this discursive battle surrounds the identity category of women who stay and the concomitant image of a "real" victim. We believe that it is this moral ambiguity that accounts for the decrease in negative sentiment, as the target shifts from identity categories with clear (negative) moral meanings, to an identity category with moral meanings that remain uncertain.

Janay's moral detractors wage a barrage of charges against her. Many of these are general charges of moral failure. For example:

what respect I may have had for Janay, is absolutely gone now. (Time 3)

Just read Janay Rice's comments defending her husband. I feel sick.
(Time 3)

what's worse is that she STAYS with him. so, yes, Janay . . . we ARE judging you and rightfully so. (Time 3)

Beyond general moral derision, we identified two subthemes among the moral accusations: greed and mental incapacity.

At the time of the abuse incident, Ray had recently signed a multimillion-dollar contract with the Baltimore Ravens. Moral detractors accuse Janay of staying in the relationship to maintain access to those funds. For example:

Janay Rice is only pissed because she married for the money. (Time 3)

Has anyone mentioned the obvious? Janay Rice stays together with Ray Rice because he is (or was) a big earner. (Time 3)

I can't believe Ray Rice punched the hell out of his wife Janay and they were engaged, but she still married him?! Yeah GOLD DIGGER CHICK. (Time 3)

Implied in these moral accusations of greed is a gendered assumption that women depend financially upon their husbands, and make family decisions based upon this financial dependence. Intersecting

this is the uniquely raced accusation of “gold digger,” a stereotypical trope implicitly and explicitly leveraged against black women through popular culture and political rhetoric (Stephens and Phillips 2003). This moral accusation at once ignores the structural conditions under which racialized gender arrangements persist (Richie 1996, 2012) while chastising Janay for her presumed adherence to these arrangements.

In addition to accusing Janay of greed, moral detractors contend that Janay is mentally weak and/or operating at a low mental capacity. This manifests in insults against both her sanity and her intelligence. For example:

Janay Rice is defending her husband on social media ... yeah poor girl has a concussion ... brain damage ... the fuck going on here lol. (Time 3)

Janay Rice said they're gonna “continue to grow and show the world what real love is” LOL HOW ARE YOU THIS RETARDED. you deserve each other. (Time 3)

Janay Rice is the definition of a dumb bitch. (Time 3)

Across both general and specific moral charges, Janay is chastised not only for her weakness of character, but also for the broader race and gender implications of her public response to abuse.

I'd like to give a shout out to Janay Rice, for single handedly setting women back 100 years. (Time 3)

Janay Rice is an example why black women stay losing. staying in abusive relationships only black bitches do that shit. (Time 3)

Janay Rice may be fine with getting knocked cold in an elevator, but most women are not and never will be. She needs to STFD [stand the fuck down] and STFU [shut the fuck up]. (Time 3)

As a woman who stays, Janay is cast as both a (perceived) threat to other women—and black women in particular—by enabling and normalizing violence, and also a threat to the post-colonial ethic of protectionism in which women both deserve and need extrinsic defense (Spivak 1988). Moral accusers who invoke structural arguments therefore express dissatisfaction with Janay's actions not because of the harm these actions did/may do to her, but for the damage they claim she inflicts at the cultural level and in the lives of other women. Ironically, in leveraging a structural critique against Janay, accusers adeptly avoid a structural reading of Janay's motivations for defending and staying with her husband.

In response to Janay's moral censure, a contingent of Twitter users engage in collective morality work, remoralizing Janay and those who occupy the position of woman who stays. Just as some moral detractors rely upon tropes of race and gender in their indictments of Janay (e.g., “gold digger”), supporters draw on the activist platforms of race, gender, and sometimes, their intersection. We find that the message of remoralization takes two distinct routes. In one route, moral defenders neutralize Janay's decision to stay by painting her as a pure victim, abused into submission both by her husband and society, and therefore absolved from blame. In the alternate route, the decision to stay is itself validated, and Janay defended as an autonomous adult, worthy of both empathy and respect. That is, moral defenders shift Janay along the moral continuum (Davis 2014), relocating her to neutral and even valorized positions, while reinforcing negative sentiments against Ray, the media, and the NFL. In doing so, they make moral claims against the moral accusers, condemning them for their insensitivity and perpetuation of both inequality and violence along gendered and raced lines.

Moral stigma indicates a blemish of character, and so hinges on culpability (Goffman 1963). A well-worn means of moral neutralization is the practice of excusing an act or attribute as out of the subject's control. In this way, the act or attribute remains negatively valued, but the perpetrator is relieved from blame (Scott and Lyman 1968). We see such neutralization tactics among Twitter users

who cite the detrimental effects of abuse as the very reason for remaining in an abusive relationship. For example:

Janay Rice's statement epitomizes the psychological effects of domestic violence. Blame everyone EXCEPT the abuser. (Time 3)

Janay Rice is not an idiot for staying with Ray Rice. She's shackled by the chains of mental and physical abuse. And money isn't helping either. (Time 3)

The ridicule of Rihanna [another celebrity of color who famously experienced IPV and then remained with her abuser] and Janay really reflect this. Why would black women, historically, leave black men when they had no one else? (Time 3)

Additionally, Janay is neutralized through medical discourse. Medicalization reinforces the negative meanings of an act or attribute, but locates the malfunction within the body/brain in juxtaposition to the self (Conrad 2005; Conrad and Schneider 1992; Corrigan 2000; Phelan 2005; Scott and Lyman 1968). Moral defenders frequently invoke "battered woman syndrome," in which persistent abuse brings a woman into compliance with and defense of her own abuser (Walker 1979, 1984). Although advocates, activists, and IPV scholars widely regard battered woman syndrome as an outdated construct, our data show that it still holds sway within the public imagination:

I feel so bad for Janay Rice . . . She definitely has battered woman syndrome. This syndrome is very serious and real #Pray4Janay. (Time 3)

Janay Rice's issue is deeper than just money. There are women with broke men that stay in abusive relationships. They all have a syndrome . . . (Time 3)

Medicalization and other neutralization techniques, while absolving a subject from blame, reinforce the negative meanings associated with that subject's position. In this case, "staying" is the devalued act, but one for which a victim cannot be blamed. In contrast, other moral defenders insist upon Janay Rice's autonomy and demand respect for this woman and the voice she projects.

I want Ray Rice to be punished for what he did, but what I want more is for Janay Rice to be heard. (Time 3)

You can't invalidate Janay Rice's point of view, and you can try to understand it in context. No one wants to be reduced to a victim. (Time 3)

Janay spit some real shit. shout out to her for having the confidence every girl should have. (Time 3)

Beyond demands for respect, some moral defenders make claims about Janay's moral superiority, explicitly applauding her decision. Mirroring long documented patterns among abused wives themselves (Ferraro 2006; Ferraro and Johnson 1983), moral defenders on Twitter cite the sacred nature of marriage that Janay's statement upholds. That is, Janay is heralded as a "good wife," who actively sustains the sanctimonious institution of marriage.

Janay Rice is still there holding her husband Ray Rice down through all this mess, and I respect that! (Time 3)

Completely understand and respect Janay Rice's statement. Oath of marriage is deep, we all imperfect, they accept each other's fault. (Time 3)

Finally, a hashtag emerged (#WhyIStayed) in which those who have experienced intimate partner violence shared their own stories, standing with Janay, and supporting her as a moral being. For example:

“She’s an idiot” “She’s a fool” “Dumb bitch!” NO! We need to STOP shaming Janay because of her choice to marry Ray Rice. #WhyIStayed (Time 3)

Because I don’t know why Janay made that choice (& even if I did know) I have no space to speak about her choice to marry him. #WhyIStayed (Time 3)

Janay’s moral neutralization and valorization, through varied discursive routes, reflects the multileveled nature of morality work in which processes of remoralization relocate key actors along the moral continuum (Davis 2014). Indeed, public discourse about Janay fluctuates along this continuum, rendering her morally inept, morally neutral, and also, morally laudable in her response to the nationally televised abuse event.

The shift from Ray, the media, and the NFL to Janay as subjects of discourse morphed from a ritual of boundary reinforcement to one of boundary negotiation. The discursive push and pull between moral accusers and defenders locates women who stay in varying places upon the moral stigma continuum. Moral detractors accuse Janay of mental weakness and greed, for which not only she, but society in general, will suffer. The moral defenders, in contrast, both neutralize and even morally valorize Janay as a woman who stayed, while defining those who deride Janay as morally suspect for their sexism, racism, ignorance, and/or empathic deficiencies. It is this push and pull that we believe accounts for the continued but decreasing negative sentiment as we move in our analysis from Times 1 and 2 to Time 3.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Women who stay in abusive relationships occupy a morally ambiguous position. They are at once pitied for their victimhood, while blamed and shamed for their participation in it. Janay Rice, as a representation of this morally ambiguous position, became the site on which a moral battle was waged.

Through a combination of big data analytics and qualitative analysis, we examined responses to a highly public incident of intimate partner violence. We showed that sentiments maintained an overall negative tenor, but shifted over time, decreasing in negativity as Janay actively defended her husband. By closely examining the discourse, we showed that this shift in sentiment was a result of a shift in the target of moral judgment. Early in the case, moral censure was leveraged against Ray Rice, the media, and the NFL as nefarious actors. These moral accusations acted as a means of boundary reinforcement, through which the negative meanings of abusers, enablers, and exploiters were solidified. In contrast, Janay’s active decision to remain committed to her husband elicited simultaneous moral derision, moral neutralization, and moral valorization. That is, in debating the moral standing of Janay, Twitter users publicly negotiated the moral boundary around women who stay. In this way, the debate over Janay is an example of public morality work, in which moral censure is charged and then negated through claims of non-fault and redefinition.

The outcome of this boundary negotiation is far from clear. Women who stay occupy a morally ambiguous identity category, all the more so when those women actively support their abusers. This moral ambiguity leaves uncertain avenues for women who want violence to end, but not necessarily their relationship. Not only do they have limited scripts on which to rely, but the decision to stay may be read alternatively as morally irresponsible or indicative of lost agency. That is, women who experience abuse are then faced with the social challenge of managing the meanings of that abuse, and defending their decisions as autonomous social actors. As shown with the data above, a woman who stays is in a socially tumultuous position.

A better understanding of women who stay and public sentiment around them is an important endeavor with practical and theoretical implications. Advocates, activists, and scholars have become thoughtful about the careful balance between empowerment and respect for women who experience

IPV, while also recognizing the cultural constraints placed upon them. Recent developments in both knowledge and training make space for women who want help, but do not want out. Yet public sentiment remains fractured. Moral debates about Janay, as a woman who stayed, shed light on the experiential realities of women who experience IPV as they move from the safe spaces of shelters and service agencies to the everyday interactions with friends, neighbors, family, and colleagues. Training for friends and family as part of the recovery process (like those already instituted in some treatment facilities³) and larger public awareness campaigns could be effective in cultivating support networks that empower and reinforce autonomy without patronizing, revictimizing, or increasing danger.

More broadly, the methods and analytic frame of our study offer a useful model for social problems research as it pertains to contested identities and people in morally precarious positions. For instance, researchers could fruitfully employ the techniques presented herein to examine those who engage in violent protest, police officials who enact violence against “criminal suspects,” women who proudly display “large” or “fat” bodies, or public figures who identify as LGBTQ+. Applying the morality work framework at a collective level captures the process by which moral meanings are formed, fought, and adjusted. Social media are an important tool in capturing this process. As repositories of public opinion with interaction built into the design, social media platforms provide a dynamic picture of cultural boundary construction and maintenance. By combining big data methods with interpretive techniques, researchers can interrogate both general trends and, also, the content that animates these culturally situated patterns.

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3 See, for example, the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence, <http://mnadv.org/find-help/for-friends-and-family/> (retrieved April 7, 2017); the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, www.opdv.ny.gov/help/fss/friend-sfam.html (retrieved April 7, 2017); and the Samaritan House Friends and Family Support Group, www.samaritanhouseva.org/th_event/friends-and-family-support-group-3/ (retrieved April 7, 2017).

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