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The psychology of disclosure: what breaks or maintains the silence on silent protest day and beyond?

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Abstract

This research project is a part of a larger umbrella study that aims to explore the perceived psychological effects of Silent Protest day at the University of Witwatersrand. The research participants were students that participated in the event, whether or not they have been victims of sexual violence, or participated to show support for those who have.

The intention of this research project was to identify factors that influence the disclosure of sexual violence on the Silent Protest day but also in general, and to explore the process of, and reasons for keeping silent about or disclosing the experience of sexual violence (whether to one person or to many).

Sexual violence is a considerably big problem in South Africa, and unfortunately the majority of sexual offences go unreported. It has been shown that survivors of sexual violence often display signs of psychological distress and might develop a psychological disorder. The silence and stigma around sexual violence can prevent victim-survivors from reporting incidents and most importantly from seeking help. Research has shown that emotional inhibition about and/or nondisclosure of traumatic events is significantly associated with psychological problems such as dissociation, anxiety, depression, PTSD and mood disorders.

The aims of this research project were therefore to get a better understanding of the nuances surrounding the actual process of disclosure on Silent protest day and in victim-survivors lives, to explore why individuals decide to, or not to, disclose sexual violence, and the emotional and psychological aspects and effects that are elicited and experienced within that process. Five participants that had participated in the 2015 Silent Protest were interviewed.

The themes that emerged from the research were: factors that may prevent disclosure; factors that may facilitate disclosure; factors that appear to have a mixed effect on disclosure; and the researcher's reflections on participants' disclosure to her. Underlying these themes were various sub-themes such as feelings of shame, not

knowing how to disclose, fear, having the opportunity to disclose; the nature of the relationship to the perpetrator; anticipated reaction from others; the survivor's general feelings on disclosure, and their views of other survivors' experiences of disclosure. The findings imply that the ability to tease out and understand the survivors' internal processes from the external factors is key in aiding the actual process of disclosure in a supportive manner.