The Invisible Walls of the Whisper Network

#MeToo
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#MeToo makes us all responsible for confronting sexual harassment.

Let me begin by saying that it has been difficult for me to write about #MeToo. Although the topic falls within my scholarly interests, I struggle to frame it academically because it made me feel angry, helpless, and deeply sad to read women’s accounts of harassment, rape, and abuse as they poured out onto the Internet and social media. These stories were not new to me. On the contrary, much of the content of #MeToo stories was all too familiar. Tales of harassment and violence have long circulated among women in intimate contexts and among groups of friends, a phenomenon now widely dubbed “whisper networks.” I first heard these stories as a young woman and I continue to hear them frequently from women—some of whom I know well, others virtual strangers—in private contexts.

A fundamental tenet of linguistic anthropology is that speech is action—when people use language, they effect change in the world. These actions range from the very literal effects of baptizing a baby or firing an employee, to the more subtle kinds of actions that we perform by using particular words, grammar, or even pronunciation. Different kinds of actions are performed through the ways that we tell and circulate stories, whether they are stories of sexual abuse or just a story about a walk in the park. What kind of difference do we make in the world by telling a story to a circle of intimates through whisper networks or by broadcasting it over social media for the world to hear?

To answer this question, let’s start with some basics of speech acts. Classic speech act theory divides a speech act into three parts. The locutionary force of an utterance is its literal meaning, its content. The illocutionary force is its intended effect. Finally, the perlocutionary force is the effect that the speech act has; how it changes the world by its utterance (Austin 1961). For example, when a person says, “It’s cold in here,” they may be making a simple statement of fact—their own perception of the temperature in a room. More often, however, this statement has the illocutionary force of a request...
“Please turn up the heat” or “Please shut the window.” The action taken when the request is received results in the perlocutionary force; someone either turns up the heat or does not, shuts the door or does not.

When women share a story of harassment or abuse within a circle of friends, the intention, or illocutionary force, is often to warn other women who might come into contact with the same person. At other times, the storytelling is about sharing an experience that has brought pain—giving emotional support to other women who are likely to have experienced something similar in their lifetime. Within whisper networks, women tell stories both to give other women sustenance and to arm them with information. This is the limit of their perlocutionary force in these contexts.

The illocutionary force, or intention, of these stories has been called into question as stories circulated through whisper networks have become public. Much of the backlash to the #MeToo posts relies on interpreting them as accusations—for example, the *Harper’s Magazine* article “The Other Whisper Network: How Twitter Feminism Is Bad for Women” (Roiphe 2018) and responses in the *New York Times* (Goldberg 2018) and the *Atlantic* (Garber 2018)—and charges of “Twitter justice” and “witch hunts.” When stories that have long circulated in private networks are made public, they can convey the force of an indictment—not just of society, but of particular men who are named as offenders, regardless of what the offense may be. (The television show *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* produced a witty and compelling rebuttal of the *Harper’s* coverage).

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The shift in context from private to public entails a shift in illocutionary force, but is it really about accusation? An essential point here is that the #MeToo stories draw on an established genre of speech that is familiar to any woman. These conversations range from “Be careful of XY, you don’t want to have a coffee alone with him” to “Don’t take that position in Z’s lab, it’s a hostile work environment” to simply “I believe you and that sounds really shitty.” (Indeed, one of the first hashtags that I saw circulating in response to #MeToo was simply #IBelieveYou.) Through whisper networks, women have long used these stories to protect each other.

Why, then, make these stories public? Linguistic anthropologists have examined the use of hashtags to create communities around social activism (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). The truth is that women have created and used the covert community of whisper networks for a long time. And yet whisper networks have their limitations: They are not legal procedures. They are not administrative channels. They are not restraining orders. They are entirely invisible to people who find themselves, for one reason or another, outside them. Using the #MeToo hashtag and telling stories out loud has the effect, or perlocutionary force, of destroying the covert element of whisper networks by including everyone in them.

#MeToo does not create a community; it opens an existing community to public discussion. The #MeToo hashtag asks people to open their eyes and ears to stories they may have once been able to ignore. It might be easy to ignore or dismiss one woman, but can you discount the stories of nearly every woman you know? The widespread use of #MeToo exposes or educates members of society who may not have been conscious of the ubiquity of sexual harassment and assault—precisely because whisper networks are closed or among friends, following informal channels.

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When we widen our audience, we give hearers the power and authority to repeat our stories (Hill and Irvine 1993). When we hear stories over and over, we become storytellers in our own right. There is a striking difference in the way that people approach stories in my field site, in rural Bolivia, and in the United States. In the United States, I have often seen people fidget when hearing a story told too many times by an older relative, or heard such an event described as evidence of the person’s decline. In Bolivia, in a society that values oral histories, old people’s stories are beloved, oft-repeated, told so many times that many of the hearers can tell them as well, and so over time the stories become the property of all the hearers.
Whisper networks educate, but they also confine. They make only some of us responsible for our stories. One of the difficult things about the Larry Nassar case and other recent sexual abuse scandals is the long list of people who could have, should have, were in a position to know what was going on and chose not to know. Telling a secret in public means it is no longer a secret. With that authority comes responsibility; when we all know the stories, we can't claim “I didn't know.” The use of the #MeToo hashtag, then, not only opens up the closed community of whisper networks to public view, it asks the public to take responsibility for the stories they hear, to see things they may not want to see.

In the end, the assumption that #MeToo overtops is the received knowledge that it is women who hold the responsibility for keeping women safe. This unspoken assumption is behind the fact that women are trained to use keys and high heels as weapons, to always go around in groups, to carry mad money, to make a point of saying “I'll call you when you get home” when a friend gets into a taxi unaccompanied. (These strategies were parodied in the Saturday Night Live “Welcome to Hell” sketch, which uses a sugary pop music style to detail and poke fun at all the ways that women defend themselves.) As these stories have circulated and I have examined my own practices, I have realized that I know very well how to train my young daughter to protect herself against aggression from men and boys. But it is much less clear to me how to teach my young son how to become a man without being socialized into toxic masculinity.

Speech act theory tells us that #MeToo is a statement, but it is also a request. Women are not simply remarking that it is a hard, cold world out there; we are asking you to shut the window, and the door, too. You have heard our stories and they belong to you too. Now, help us to make a world where we don't need to teach girls to defend themselves because we ask our boys to express their masculinity in gentle and constructive ways, and where we don't shame survivors of harassment and assault, but hold the people who harass and assault them responsible for their actions. Speech is action, yes, but #MeToo is only the beginning of the change we need to see in the world.

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