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## Questioning Beliefs About Sexual Violence

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This editorial is appearing in the fifth and final issue Volume 21, published in 2020, of the *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation (JTD)*. At the time of writing this editorial (in June 2020), the world is in the grip of a deadly and disruptive pandemic, yet also remains in a period of profound cultural transformation. In the past few years, #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have established prominent social movements that have forced many to reckon with the extent of systemic and discriminatory violence in society. We are hopeful for a better future because of the work of those who have been exposing and confronting racism, sexual violence, and institutional betrayal.

Unfortunately, however, there continues to be those who actively disbelieve the pervasive harms of violence. For instance, as powerful, public testimonies of sexual violence have continued to proliferate since #MeToo's 2017 surge in awareness, unfortunately so too have calls to readily deny, discredit, and disbelieve such testimonies. Such a response has the potential to cause further harm and remains one of the primary villains to vanquish in the fight against sexual violence. How best can scholars not only document the extent of violence and the scale of its effects, but actively question and dismantle these persistent, oppressive systems of reflexive disbelief?

A recent popular approach to address such disbelief has been to directly implore others (through social media or otherwise) to #BelieveWomen. Emerging from the larger success of #MeToo, #BelieveWomen confronts a familiar trend in sexual violence – a male perpetrator assaults a female victim, and when she comes forward, she is less likely to be believed than the male perpetrator. #BelieveWomen demands that we reverse this pattern and flip the standard response on its head.

At face value, #BelieveWomen is appealing in many ways. In addition to being parsimonious and “catchy,” the slogan provides a directive with radical potential. The sweeping call to trust women's narratives without question overcorrects for a world in which women have suffered from profound

epistemic injustice for too long – a world in which women often bear the brunt of sexual violence in society and are commonly met with institutional betrayal (e.g., Holland & Barnes, 2019) or a DARVO response (e.g., Harsey & Freyd, 2020) when they do come forward. #BelieveWomen is a phrase that validates women who have been wronged and betrayed, and it serves as a rallying cry to bring attention to injustice. For instance, the day after the confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh, the dating site Bumble sent a powerful message by purchasing a full-page ad in the New York Times that simply stated, “Believe Women” (Sharf, 2018).

However, is the use of the imperative “believe women” a good choice for scholars and citizens hoping to create lasting culture change – and potentially vanquish the villains of reflexive disbelief and gender-based violence for good? As recent commentaries have noted (e.g., Faludi, 2020; Hesse, 2020), #BelieveWomen suffers from significant limitations that can dilute its usefulness for significant social change. #BelieveWomen has been gradually transformed to #BelieveAllWomen by those who actually mean to mock and thus undermine the #MeToo movement. Many will agree that #BelieveAllWomen is an unreasonable demand; women, being human, sometimes do not tell the truth.

Even before the slogan became #BelieveAllWomen, the mandate to simply #BelieveWomen may still pose a conundrum. Is #BelieveWomen a reasonable demand? Or put alternatively, is this slogan the best way to phrase a reasonable request? We will consider both the word “believe” and the word “women.”

We start with the word “women” in this phrase. Although sexual violence is gendered and sexism is one of our primary villains, the reality of gender-based violence is nuanced. Women are indeed victimized at higher rates than men (and by predominantly male perpetrators), but that is not the whole story. Research indicates that women can be perpetrators of sexual violence (e.g., Turchik et al., 2016), that men can be victims of sexual violence, and that non-binary individuals are disproportionately affected by violence, as well (e.g., Martin-Storey et al., 2018). Further, it would be a serious mistake to neglect the historical use of allegations of rape (of White women) as a tool of White supremacy to justify the lynching of Black men (McGuire, 2010). The slogan’s reliance on the standard heteronormative script of sexual violence not only limits its reach, but may also further reify this script and unintentionally silence the experiences of others.

We now turn to the word “believe.” Is it the role of clinicians or scientists (or citizens) to tell others what to believe? We are reminded of the historical context of the word *believe* as used by Western colonialists who often commanded conquered communities to believe in the colonialists’ version of God. Should others command someone to believe something? The word *believe* connotes that it is an individual’s choice to accept something as true. Invoking the word *believe* to empower survivors of violence might risk replicating the same colonialist language that has historically maintained systems of

oppression. It is no accident that the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees freedom of thought and belief in its Article 18 (United Nations, 1948).

Another concern about the injunction to believe women relates to the experience of some survivors; we can imagine scenarios in which the *believe* approach could unintentionally isolate survivors of complex trauma who may struggle with feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty about their own experiences of violence. Just as survivors can be harmed by reflexive disbelief, some survivors may be harmed by reflexive belief. The guiding issue here is about the fundamental role of empowerment and autonomy in healing from sexual violence. As Herman (1998) has noted so eloquently:

Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control over her own life; therefore, the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery . . . No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest.

Both reflexive disbelief and reflexive belief can take power away from the survivor to be the author of her own experience. Thus, survivors may find the mandate to believe interferes with their own healing to work through their own beliefs about their own experience.

It is important for us to emphasize that that our critique of the slogan #BelieveWomen is not a critique of the broader social movement; indeed, we think that the movement and its organizers are pushing for important and great change in the world. We support many of the allies and survivors who use this phrase, certainly almost always with noble intentions. Both of us personally believe reports of sexual violence made by specific others, including Anita Hill, Christine Blasey, and many other brave survivors who have shared their experiences in order to heal and seek justice.

However, holding and even sharing our individual beliefs is different from imploring others to share our individual beliefs. As Joseph Kennedy III said, "There is a difference between exercising religious beliefs and imposing them on others. Our Constitution fiercely protects the former and expressly prohibits the latter."

In questioning the slogan #BelieveWomen, we are *not* saying that we should *not believe* women. Importantly, the directive to *believe* women does not mean the same thing as *do not disbelieve* women. Although seemingly pedantic, there may be a key distinction between these ideas – two negatives do not always equal a positive. As described in *Elle* by Doyle (2017), #BelieveWomen may instead be a call to "[not] assume women as a gender are especially deceptive or vindictive and recognize that false allegations are less common than real ones." We wholeheartedly agree with these premises.

If #BelieveWomen is not the ideal slogan, what is an alternative? What can help conquer the villains of sexual violence and reflexive disbelief of women without invoking a third villain implicit in the injunction to believe? We do not have a perfect answer. Although a possible option could be to forgo slogans entirely, we observe that sticky slogans often have an important role in liberation movements and particularly in the case of liberation from sexual violence. One alternative slogan that we are enthusiastic about is #ListentoWomen. This slogan has already been proposed as an alternative and has been used in a variety of contexts, including listening to women's testimonies of sexual assault in the public domain and listening women's health complaints in the medical care setting. Although we were unable to find the originating source of this hashtag, this has already garnered a fair amount of support on Twitter, as well as mentioned as a possible alternative by Hesse (2020).

We also recommend that trauma psychologists, in particular, use their power to encourage the public to listen to women, seriously consider their complaints, and act when appropriate, rather than to demand that others must believe a person because of her gender.

This may take the form of conducting research on perpetrator tactics leading to disbelief, such as DARVO (e.g., Harsey & Freyd, 2020), promoting advocacy work for survivors of trauma (e.g., Cook et al., 2020), and writing about trauma research for the general public (e.g., Cook, 2018).

We do not presume that this is an open-and shut issue; instead, we hope that these nascent ideas will spawn further discussion about the most effective tools to use to dismantle nefarious systems of reflexive disbelief that maintain and minimize sexual violence. We hope that these discussions will reveal the best path forward to support survivors of sexual violence.

## State of the journal

Journal of Trauma & Dissociation articles continues to have a global reach. The most downloaded articles over the past year were, "The abused and the abuser: Victim–perpetrator dynamics" (Middleton et al., 2017) followed by "Sexuality and trauma: Intersections between sexual orientation, sexual functioning, and sexual health and traumatic events" (Smidt & Platt, 2018) and "What Mindfulness can learn about Dissociation and what Dissociation can learn from Mindfulness" (Forner, 2019). The top Altmetric scoring (social media reach) articles were "Government-mandated institutional betrayal" (Smidt & Freyd, 2018) followed by "Still the last great open secret: Sexual harassment as systemic trauma" (Fitzgerald, 2017) and "As the world becomes trauma–informed, work to do" (Becker-Blease, 2017).

We are grateful to Taylor & Francis for providing a cash award for a particularly excellent publication in *JTD* for the ninth consecutive year. We are also grateful to Dr. Bethany Brand who once again generously served as Chair of the Awards

Committee. The Richard P. Kluft Award for the *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 2019 Best Article was for Paul Dell's article "Reconsidering the autohypnotic model of the dissociative disorders" (Dell, 2019). The award committee explained:

*This article addresses what the author argues is a long-standing conceptual error about the relationship between dissociation and hypnotizability. Dell makes a cogent argument for autohypnosis as an important contributor to the development of DID. As such, this paper redefines and elaborates the trauma model of dissociation and DID.*

The awards committee also selected four additional articles for Honorable Mention:

Chandele Butler, Martin Dorahy, and Warwick Middleton's article, "The Detachment and Compartmentalization Inventory (DCI): An assessment tool for two potentially distinct forms of dissociation" (Butler et al., 2019).

*This paper is laudable for its careful development and empirical validation of a measure which assesses two distinct profiles of detachment and compartmentalization, which are domains of dissociation, in both clinical and nonclinical samples. This measure shows promise for the dissociation field.*

Christine Forner's editorial, "What Mindfulness can learn about Dissociation and what Dissociation can learn from Mindfulness" (Forner, 2019).

*The editorial by Christine Forner articulates the characteristics of mindfulness and dissociation with the goal of bridging the distance between knowledge of dissociation and knowledge of mindfulness in and off itself and as a therapeutic approach. Her essay compares and contrasts with extensive references so that readers can pursue further, in-depth information. The focus on attachment as a commonality enriches the value of this contribution. Forner's systematic consideration of the potential barriers to or costs for the person of replacing dissociation with mindfulness provides a jumping off point for advancing clinical care of people with dissociative disorders. This paper was the most viewed and generated the most attention of all papers in Volume 20.*

Rachael Goodman-Williams, Rebecca Campbell, Dhruv Sharma, Steven Pierce, Hannah Feeny and Giannina Fehler-Cabral's article, "How to right a wrong: Empirically evaluating whether victim, offender, and assault characteristics can inform rape kit testing policies" (Goodman-Williams et al., 2019).

*In addition to appreciating the innovation and methodological rigor with which this investigation was conducted, the real-world impact of this work is substantial. This study shows how using the study's evaluation processes of rape kits can identify more rapists, hopefully leading to the apprehension of more offenders and a reduction of the sense of betrayal victims feel when the criminal justice system fails to test rape kits or apprehend rapists. Among the usual audiences for trauma research, this paper should be required reading for policymakers and those who work in the criminal justice system.*

Adriano Schimmenti and Vedat Sar's report, "A correlation network analysis of dissociative experiences" (Schimmenti & Sar, 2019).

*Using a large sample and novel methodology, this study provides an important extension of network analysis to the investigation of the structure of dissociation. The paper empirically identifies three central features of dissociation and shows that dissociative amnesia is involved in all three features. This will lead to further machine learning analyses that can clarify the structure of dissociation and dissociative disorders and empirically advance theory and clinical practice.*

Paramount to *JTD*'s success are our dedicated editorial board, associate editors, and ad-hoc reviewers, whose astute reviews are invaluable. We appreciate your work, and the journal would not be possible without you. We are very pleased to welcome our new Editorial Board members for Volume 22 (to be published in 2021): Drs. Lindsey Monteith and Marina Rosenthal.

Finally, we are excited to let you know about our new passion project. With the urgent need to understand and combat institutional betrayal in mind and the help of an incredible team of supporters and scholars, Jennifer Freyd has recently founded the Center for Institutional Courage. This nonprofit research and educational organization (called *Courage* for short) will focus on the movement for transparency and equity. Courage is committed to stopping the harm that occurs when institutions fail the very populations they are should nurture and protect. This would be a challenging task even without a pandemic, and now because of this crisis, the need to replace institutional betrayal with institutional courage has additional urgency. We believe that with an intensive program of research, publication and advocacy, and with outreach to many audiences, Courage will make a difference in today's world. We invite you to learn more about Courage at <https://www.institutionalcourage.org/>.

Please keep sending us your best work for consideration for publication in *JTD*. We look forward to reading your submissions in the year ahead.

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