

The Sister Survivors Have Spoken

How 204 Sexual Abuse Victims Used
Language to Confront Their Abuser



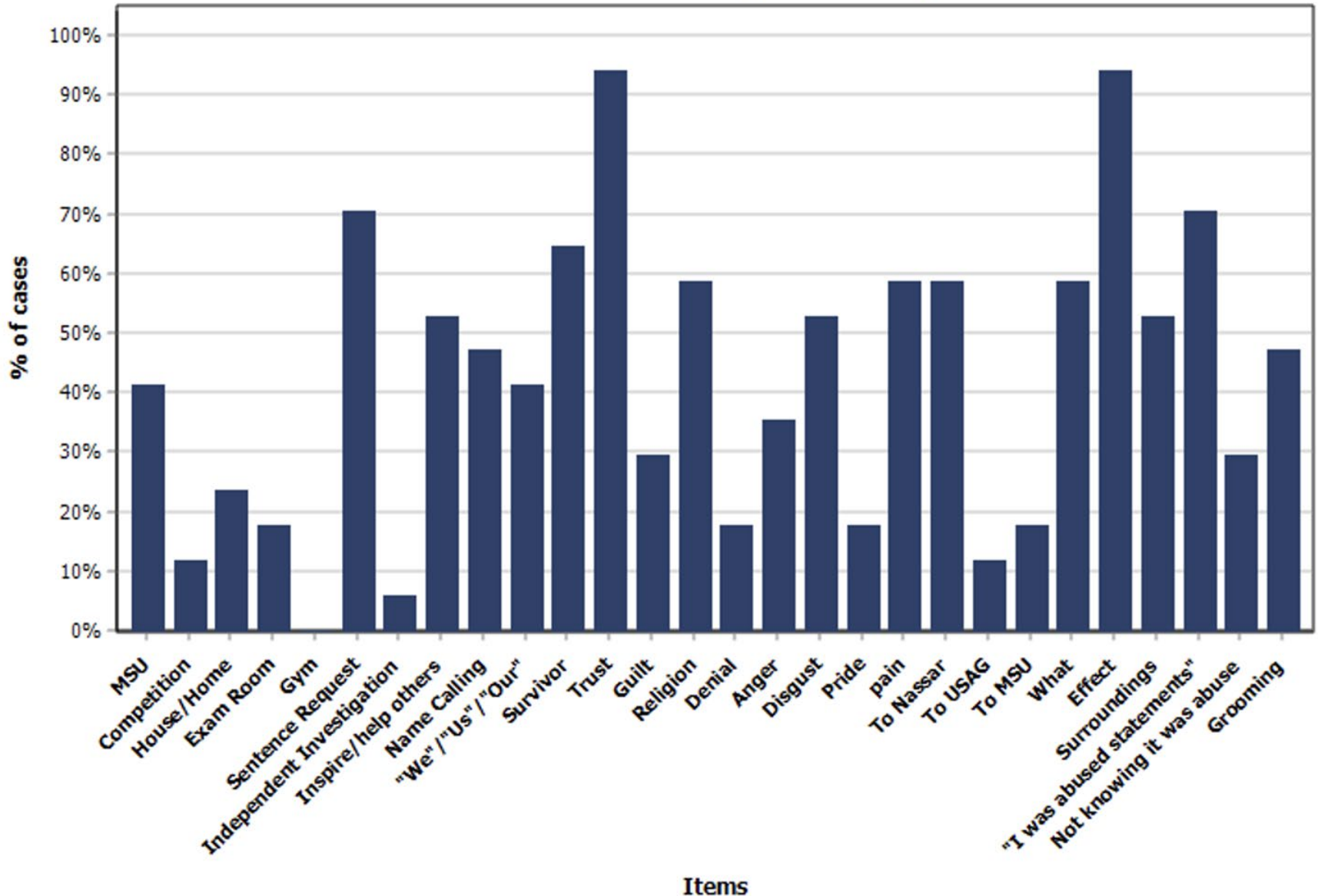
Corrine Longenbach
clongenbach@ycp.edu

Research Questions

- Do the individuals presenting victim-impact statements at Larry Nassar's hearing adhere to or contradict previous rhetorical analyses of sexual abuse survivors and victim-impact statements?
- What are the rhetorical devices used by sexual abuse survivors in their victim-impact statements?
- How does age, publicity vs anonymity, and gender affect the rhetoric of individuals testifying in the case against Larry Nassar?

Overview of Findings

Distribution of codes (% of cases)

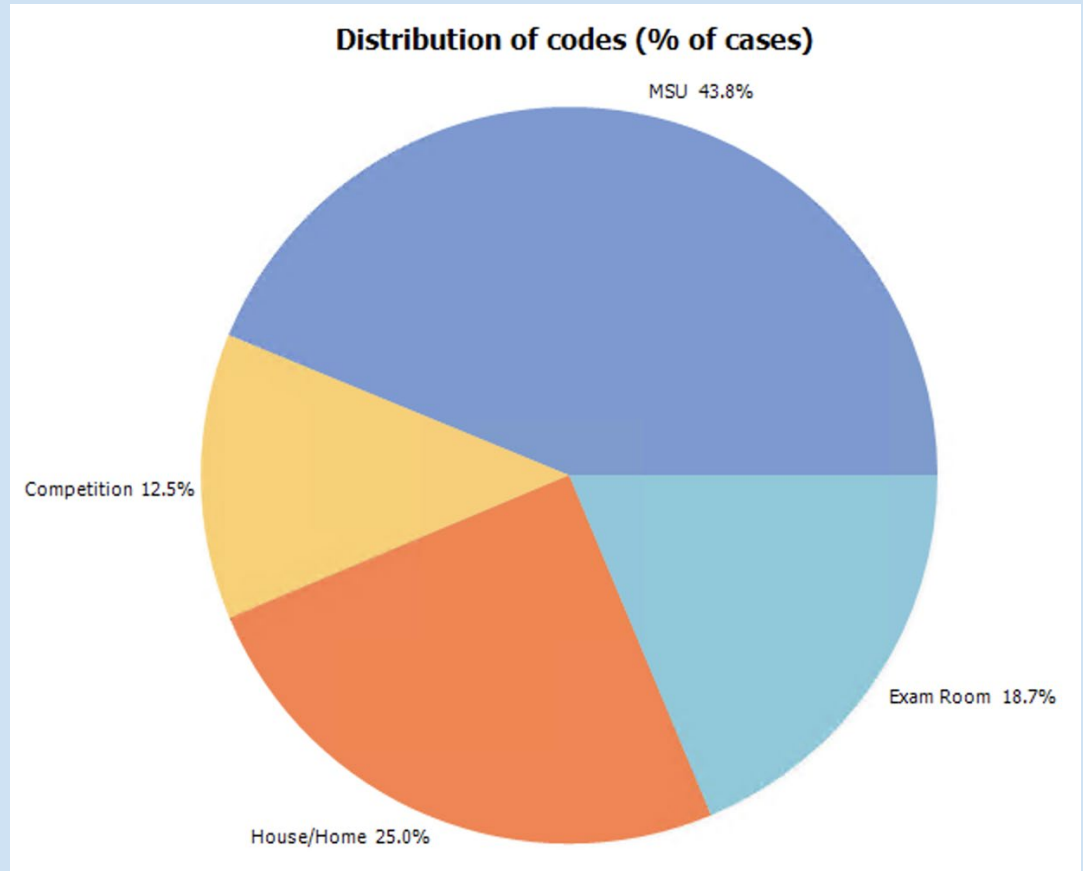


Research Methods

- Qualitative Coding
- Critical Discourse Analysis
- Data Collection Methods
 - Strategized random sampling
 - 17 statements total, approx. 10% of each category
 - Transcribed victim-impact statements accessed through inourownwords.us
 - Coding focused on patterns and shared ideas
- Context, Call to Action, Language, Emotion, Audience and Abuse

Context

Though all of the survivors describe the abuse in near identical ways, each context in which the abuse occurred has unique characteristics.



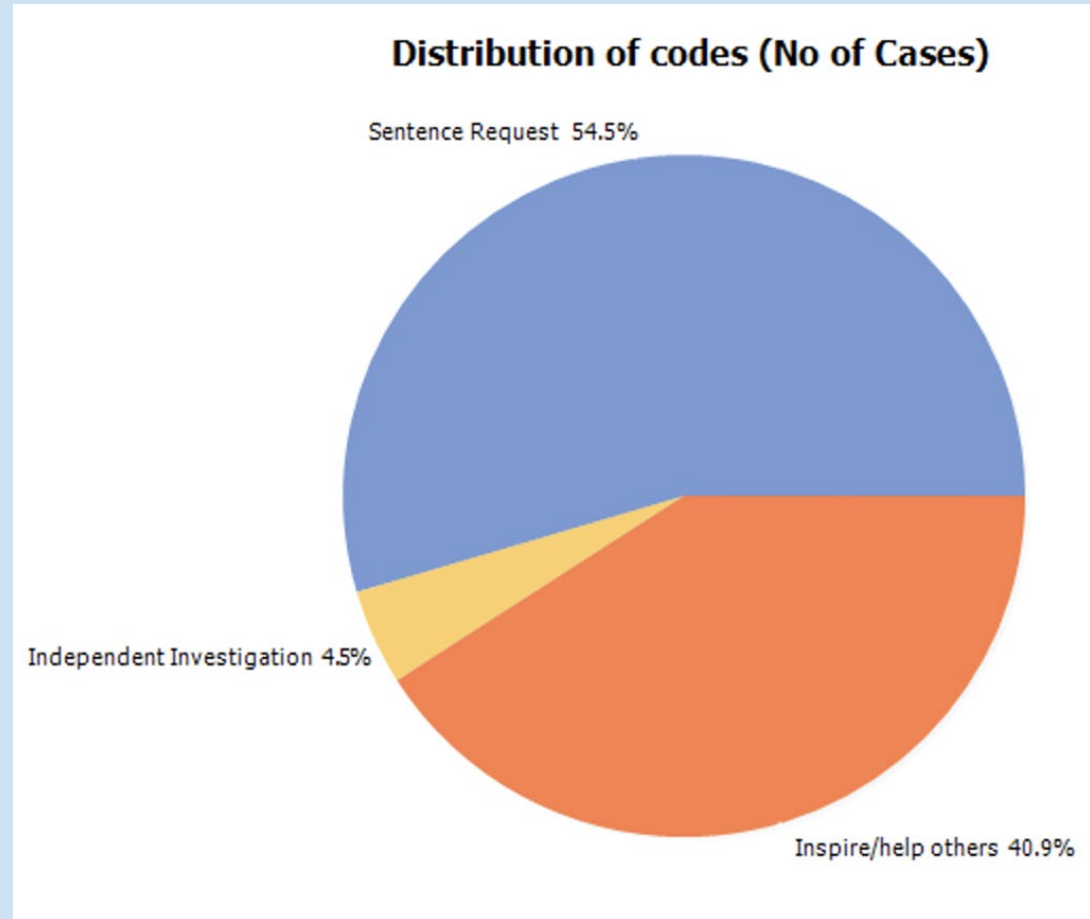
Context Evidence

“My teammates and I would go to his **office after hours** and he would sneak us in the back door to get treatment. We would even go to his home and get treatment in **his basement.**” -Victim 163

“Larry was the Olympic doctor and he molested me at the **2012 London Olympic Games.**” -Aly Raisman

Call to Action

Survivors used their victim-impact statements and freedom to speak during the hearing to request actions to be taken in order to prevent future abuse and punish Nassar for the abuse he inflicted on the survivors.



Call to Action Evidence

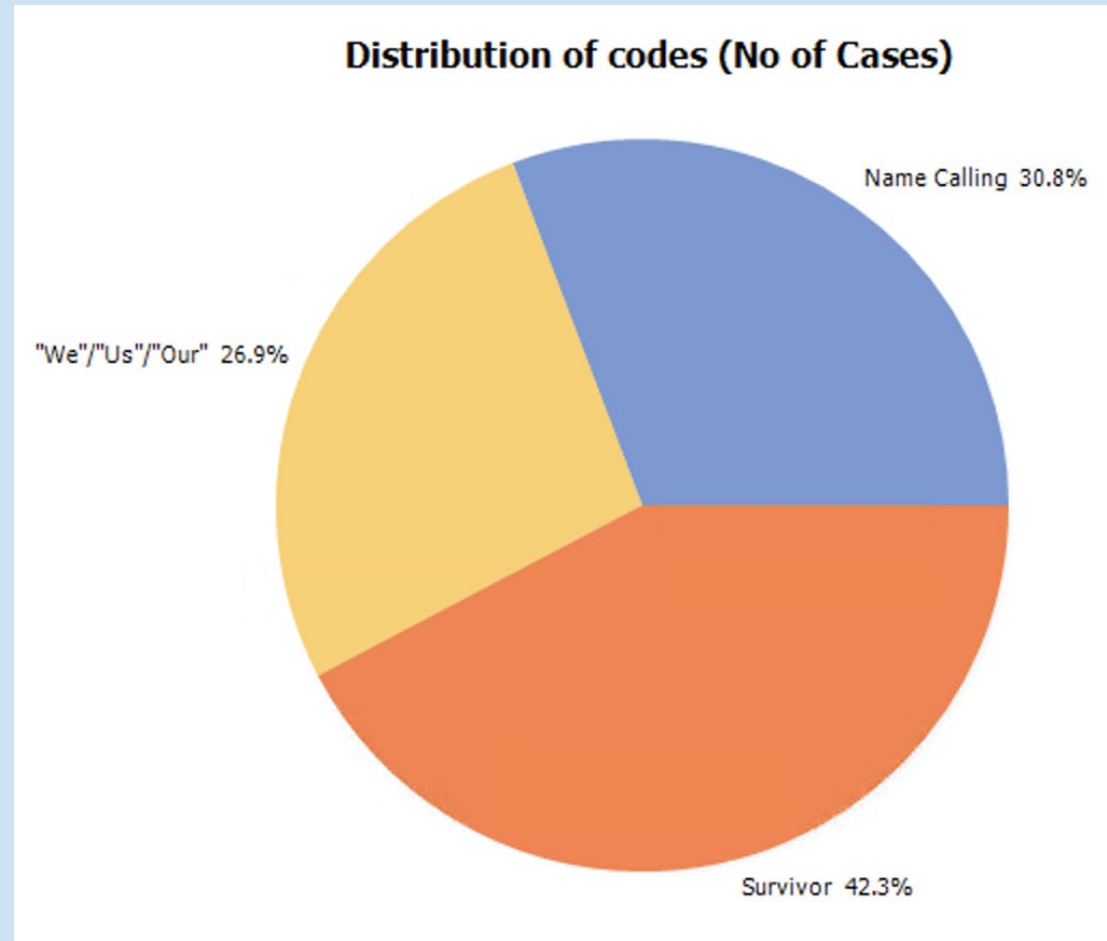
“And please, your honor, stress the **need to investigate** how this happened, so that we can hold accountable those who empowered and enabled Larry Nassar, so we can repair, and once again believe, in this wonderful sport.” -Aly Raisman

“There are many girls out there who have been victims of this powerful man as well as many other crimes like this and **they are getting to see all the strong and powerful women who are choosing to stand up and speak the truth.** It makes me feel proud to speak up and not be afraid anymore.” -Lauren Michaelek

“Judge Aquilina, this monster deserves nothing but the **absolute maximum sentence** that this court can impose under this plea agreement.” -Kaylee Lorincz

Language

Each of the language choices made individually by each survivor when writing their statements reflects the larger sense of community felt by the survivors.



Language Evidence

“**U**s women, **w**e are strong. **W**e are survivors. **W**e are human.” -Victim 163

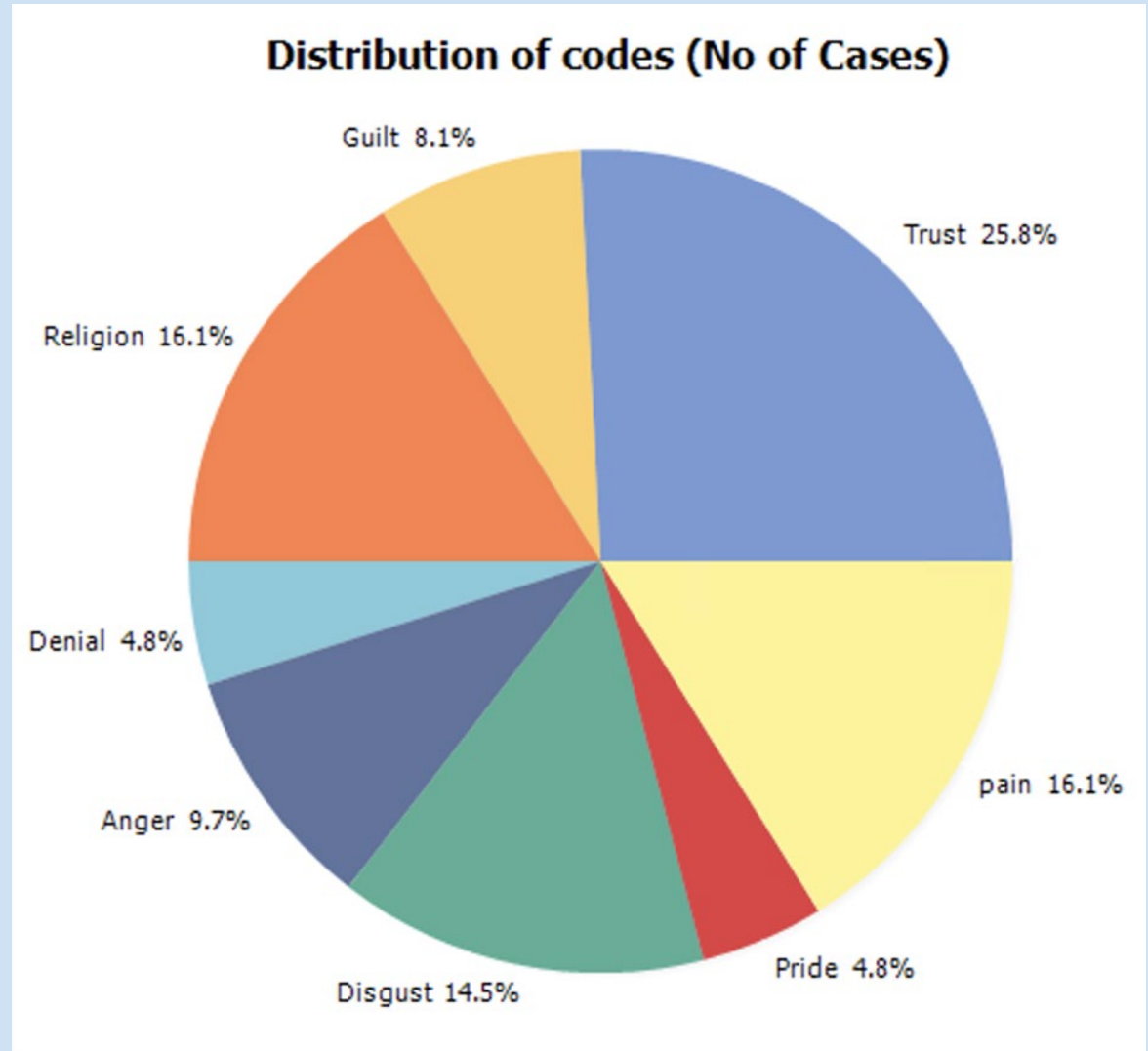
“I have been affected by this **monster** in more ways than I am allowing myself to think.” -Presley Allison

“I am here to face you Larry, so you can see I have regained my strength — that I am no longer a victim, **I am a survivor.**” -Aly Raisman

“The **survivors** have spoken and will speak and will grow and become stronger as he sits and rots in his cell.” -Victim 153

Emotion

Survivors presenting victim-impact statements are forced to confront the emotions associated with the abuse, the aftermath, and facing their abuser.



Emotion Evidence

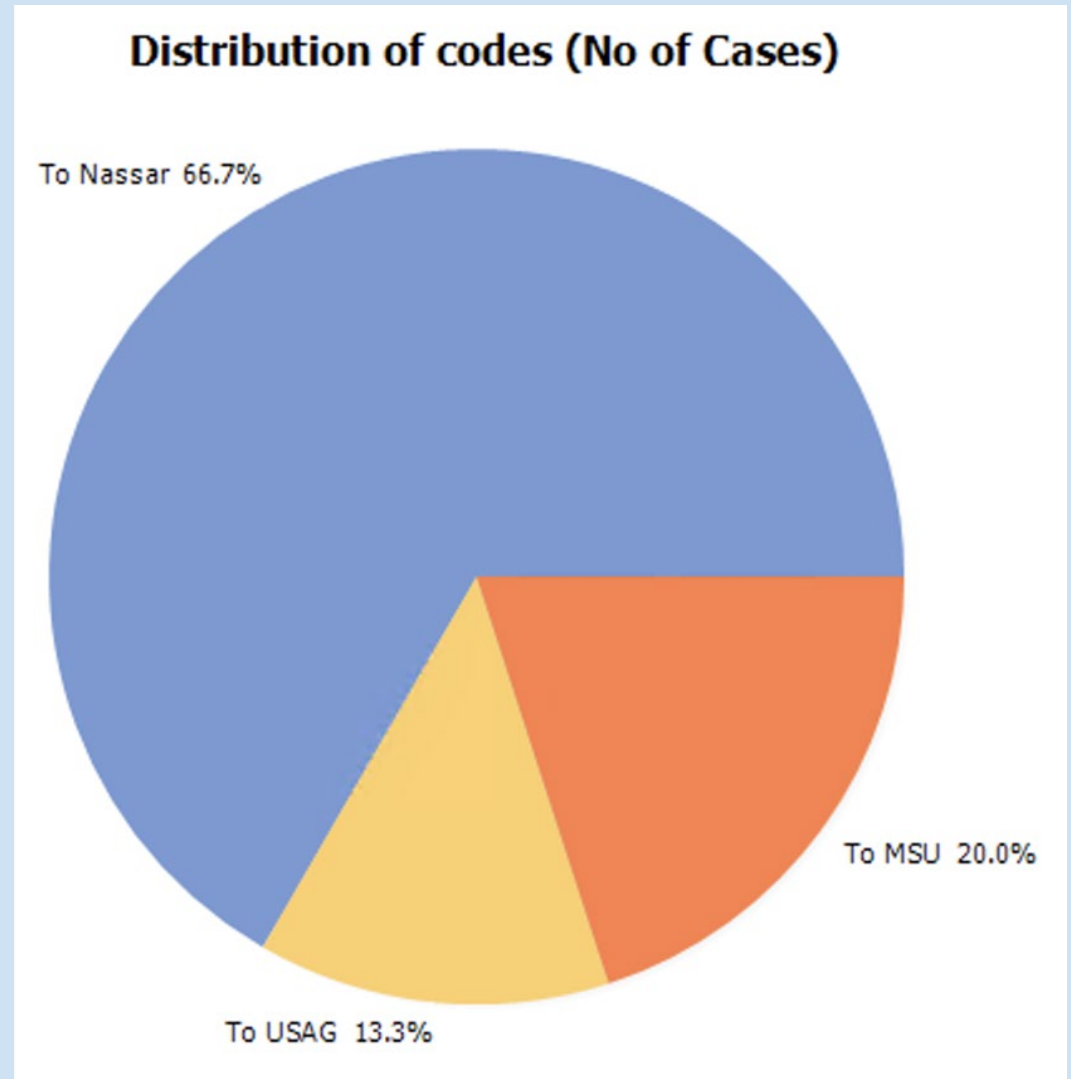
“You intentionally and strategically placed yourself in positions of **trust** and power around girls and you intentionally chose each and every time to assault us.” -Jennifer Hayes

“Larry, **I pray** for your soul. **I pray** for your family. **I pray** for everyone that is here and to all of these out there that I know were for sure part of the back and hip injured group, and to the others that are scared to come forward and scared of the pain it will cause them to remember.” -Trinea Gonczar

“I have continuously felt **disgust** and **shame** and **anger** because I **trusted** him and he took advantage of me.” -Victim 136

Audience

Survivors knew that despite the primary purpose of their victim-impact statements being sentencing, their voices would be heard much further than the courtroom. Many took advantage of the publicity and called upon Nassar's enablers to be better.



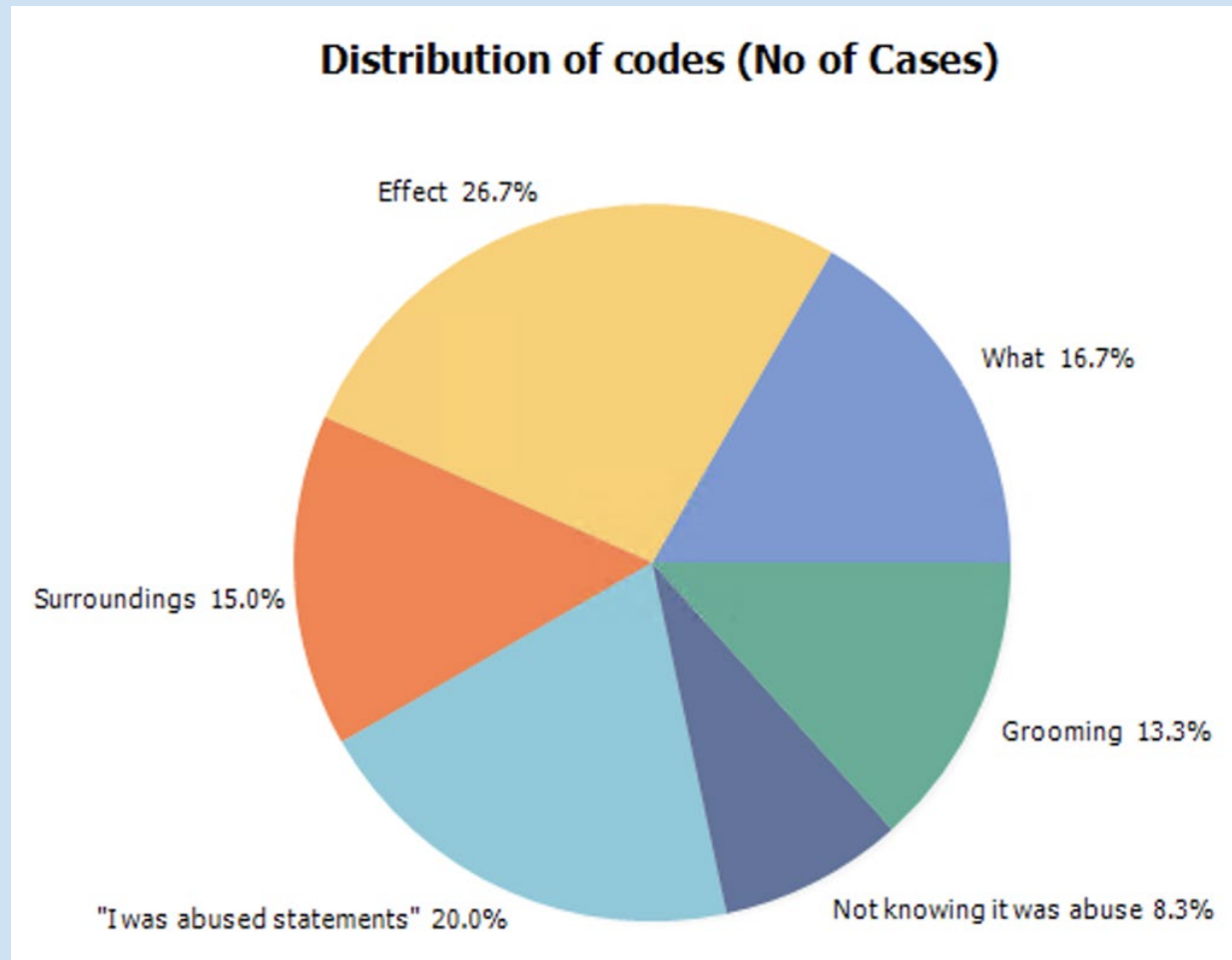
Audience Evidence

“I will not call **you** Larry. I will not call **you** Mr. Nassar, and I will certainly not call **you** a doctor because a real doctor is a hero not a pedophile. I will call **you** nothing but defendant because, frankly, I don't think **you're** worthy of a name.” -Ashley Brenner

“I am disgusted by USA Gymnastics. I am disgusted by Twistars and John Geddert, and I am disgusted by Michigan State University. **Where were the people who were supposed to protect us?** Instead of protecting us, they were enabling him. The fact that he was able to practice medicine at MSU while girls were filing reports to USAG, are you serious? You let us all down.” -Victim 163

Abuse

The abuse category of codes included some of the most frequent codes within my sample. There were many other aspects to the abuse that were acknowledged in addition to the actual abusive actions.



Abuse Evidence

“I have **lost countless hours of sleep**. I have been struggling with the worst **nightmares** ever. I have **lost weight** and have trouble eating sometimes because I don't have an appetite. It's disgusting. What Nassar did is affecting my whole life; work, friendships, my family, my sexual relationship, my physical and mental state. **It's hard to see into the future and think that this will not affect me forever.**” -Amy Labadie

“I started to recognize that **I, too, was a sexual assault victim** of Doctor Nassar and Michigan State University.” -Victim 136

“But I also remember the vaginal manipulations. I remember them always being part of my treatments. Whether I was there for my heels or my wrists, I was also always there for my back and my hips. I don't think I ever had a time I didn't get this treatment. [...] I remember bringing my own shorts as the one they provided weren't very comfortable. **I remember watching the newest Olympic gymnasts go up on the wall** one by one as you grew more and more famous. [...] I remember the times at MSU Sports Medicine **when my mom was there or my dad** or many other times when I was alone.” -Trinea Gonczar

Discussion

- I was surprised by the explicit acknowledgement of trust and broken trust within the victim-impact statements. Some details about their surroundings during the abuse that seem unimportant were described by several survivors as significant context.
- While the Nassar survivors' rhetoric is consistent with the rhetoric of other sexual abuse victims, their distinctive situation gives way to rhetorical techniques unique to the hundreds of victims of Nassar.
- This gives insight as to how survivors of sexual abuse on a large scale use rhetoric and victim-impact statements.

Discussion

- Limits: no contact with survivors, small sampling
- Recommendations for future research
 - How do survivors of other large-scale sexual abuse crimes use rhetoric?
 - How does the rhetoric of non-domestic sexual abuse victims compare to singular victims of a domestic abuser?

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