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Documenting the Locker Room?: The Dalhousie Dentistry Scandal

The Scandal

A highly publicized scandal rocked Dalhousie University in December 2014 when some of the contents of the all-male “Class of DDS 2015 Gentlemen” Facebook page were made public. Contents included: a poll by one fourth-year male dentistry student asking his male colleagues which of their female peers they would “hate fuck”; an invitation from the same student to vote on which of their peers they would like to “sport fuck”; a photo of a bikini-clad woman captioned “bang until stress is relieved or unconscious (girl)” followed by the comment “Can you tell me what chloroform smells like?”; a post defining “penis” as “the tool used to wean and convert lesbians and virgins into useful, productive members of society”; and one member’s comment on the penis definition post saying “by productive I’m assuming you mean it inspires them to become chefs, housekeepers, babysitters, etc.” (Task Force Report, pp. 5-7).

After learning that some female members of their class had found out about the “hate fuck” poll, some of the “Class of DDS 2015 Gentlemen” expressed concerns about the loss of this space where they could “cut loose”. Others lamented the fact that one of their own members had shown the page to one of their targeted female class members. Said one of the “Gentlemen”, “Lockerroom (sic) talk if you will. Should stay in the locker room.” Another asked “who the fuck is showing the girls ... I also want to know I can say whoever I want to HATEFUCK and know some guy isn’t going to go running and tell the girls”. Although one group member advocated getting “rid of the evidence”, another commented it was “not like its (sic) anything (sic) serious lol”. While some members suggested an apology would be appropriate, one said, “fuck an appology (sic)” and another scoffed “what are they going to do? ... Kick every guy out of 4th year? Tell us you guys are mean for saying those things?” (Task Force Report, pp. 8-9).

The reporting of these events to various dentistry school and university officials led to a series of seemingly *ad hoc* and poorly orchestrated responses, but also to the appointment of the Task Force of Misogyny, Sexism and Homophobia in the Dalhousie University Dentistry Faculty chaired by Constance Backhouse. The Task Force Report identifies a series of missteps, including service of no-contact orders on some of the male members of the Facebook group without the knowledge of the targeted female student who sought redress from officials. As a result, even some male peers who had not be served with the orders refused to speak to her, asking “why would anyone want to speak to you?” She was isolated from the rest of her class to write her exams, making it obvious to everyone that she was the person who had turned the screenshots over to the administration (Task Force Report, p. 10). In January 2015, 13 of the Facebook posters had their clinic privileges suspended on

the grounds of “unprofessionalism”, “concerns for patient safety” and the “safety of those working in the Clinic” (Task Force Report, p. 14).

In the ensuing months of maelstrom, it was ultimately decided (after consultation with some of the women targeted by the poll and most of the men who had posted on the Facebook site) that the matter should be pursued as an informal complaint under the Sexual Harassment Policy, using a restorative justice process (Task Force Report, p. 13). Participation in the restorative justice process was voluntary, required participants to sign a form agreeing that they would disclose “all information relevant to the issues raised”. Participants were assured that the information would be received in confidence and not used in any other Dalhousie proceeding without their consent (Task Force Report, p. 15). Fifteen of the 25 men and 14 of the 21 women in the dentistry program participated in the restorative justice process. Others on campus pressured for more formal, publicly transparent measures (Task Force Report, pp. 16-17).

Ultimately, the only person to undergo a formal misconduct hearing was the male student who had initially revealed the postings to one of the women students targeted by the poll. He was found guilty of professional misconduct and only allowed to return to clinical work subject to conditions (including participating in remedial activities). A record of that suspension will appear on his transcript (Task Force Report, p. 17). Meanwhile, the other male Facebook members avoided similar hearings by participating in the restorative justice process, which culminated in two joint letters – an apology from the men involved and a letter from the women targeted in the poll stating they had not been coerced into joining in the restorative justice process (Task Force Report, pp. 21-22). The suspensions of the men who had participated in the restorative justice process were lifted, and they were permitted to complete their clinical hours and graduate on time (Task Force Report, p. 25).

The report on the restorative justice process issued in May 2015, revealing that the process had involved “multiple individual and group meetings, lectures and workshops, as well as small and large group circles” and that the students from the Facebook group had spent “about 150 hours in group sessions” (Task Force Report, p. 22). It did not include the perspectives of the targeted female student who chose not to participate in the process, nor that of three other female students who had encouraged the university to proceed with a code of conduct complaint filed by faculty members (Task Force Report, p. 24). The absence of these female students’ perspectives from the restorative justice report left them feeling ostracized and discredited, with one saying that it was as if she “didn’t want to educate [her] classmates” (Task Force Report, p. 24).

The Task Force Report issued in June 2015. Without excusing or justifying the behaviour documented on the Facebook page, the Report contextualizes that behaviour within a misogynistic, homophobic and racist culture. It recommends nothing short of a cultural transformation, identifying a series of systemic actions

designed to inculcate respect for inclusion and diversity, including studies to address rape culture.

An Old Story

In many ways, the Dalhousie dentistry scandal is a relatively straightforward re-telling of an old and tiresome story of intolerance and misogyny. While in this case misogyny was communicated on a virtual wall, as the Task Force Report points out, “layers of sexist, misogynistic, homophobic graffiti” had for years been being added to a physical wall in the students’ dental lounge (p. 1), with nothing being done about that graffiti until the scandal broke.

Even the “new” virtual platform isn’t that new in any significant way for purposes of figuring out how best to handle the situation. The idea that locker room talk should stay in the locker room isn’t a new one, nor is the notion that misogynist comments can be thought of as boys being boys, just words or only joking. The (ab)use of expressive rights and freedoms to justify these kinds of attacks is a tactic well-known by feminist and other anti-oppression activists. This tactical turning of the tables is meant to shift attention from the harm occasioned on targets to the harm being done to (in this case) a promising young group of would-be male professionals, who were just letting off a little steam in their virtual locker room.

And the impact of this turning of the tables too often results in sympathy for the misogynistic actor resolving into aggression against the target. Classic victim blaming in the Dalhousie dentistry scandal manifested in ostracization of the targeted woman who first reported, a questioning of her motives and a sense of disdain for her decision not to participate in a restorative justice process with those who had attacked her. The Task Force Report well documents the sense of isolation and blame she experienced. Not only did some of her male colleagues refuse to speak to her after finding out that she’d reported the events, she was physically isolated from her class to write her exams (rather than isolating the men involved). We know little about the experiences of the other women who were targeted, but chose to articulate what happened to them within the confidential setting of the restorative justice process and thus, their stories were not explored in the Task Force Report.

We do know that victim blaming and isolation have deep historical roots in sexual violence cases. Too often we hear, “why did she dress that way? What was she doing there so late at night? Why can’t she just toughen up? Where’s her sense of humour? Why doesn’t she want to educate her classmates?”

The Dalhousie dentistry scandal also exemplifies another powerful and deeply historically rooted characteristic of rape culture – the threat or use of sexual violence as a tool for keeping women in their place. Why would picking out which of your colleagues that you would “hatefuck” be a preferred way of “letting off steam”? Without in anyway minimizing what the women at Dalhousie went through, many of

the themes and patterns at play in that case repeat tired excuses for using sexual violence as a tool for expressing resentment when women pursue their equal right to participate in public and professional spaces.

With a “New” Twist?

Even if I don’t tend to believe the digitized communications tools generally create totally new situations calling for a complete revamping of existing values and law, I increasingly appreciate the fresh spaces that emerging communications tools create for dialogue – especially for dialogue amongst those who haven’t necessarily had much to say to each other in the past. For me, the Dalhousie dentistry scandal represents one of these situations.

While some might point to the fact that the Facebook page was “private” in the sense of being initially accessible to members only, the spillage of information beyond an originally confined context isn’t one *created* by technology. Just like in the physical locker room of old, there may well be a sense of privacy within the group, but even in those cases there was always the prospect of information communicated in that setting leaking beyond its physical boundaries. After all, even in the physical locker room, there have certainly been whistleblowers – guys who broke the unspoken pact and revealed what was said. In this way, professional bodies have always faced the task of evaluating what, if any, risks of harm the leaked information presents for the public that is to be served by that profession, as well as for others practicing in that profession themselves.

What’s (relatively) new about social networking is both the magnitude of the potential for public disclosure, and also the difficult-to-deny written record. In many Western societies that have been dominated by a virtual obsession for “documentation”, written “evidence” and “corroboration” (especially in order to credit allegations of sexual violence), the power of the screenshot can be significant. Of course, there is always the possibility of hackers posting fake messages in someone else’s name and so forth, but in contexts like the Dalhousie scandal, the specificity of the documents, the naming of names and so forth, seem to have made the record difficult to refute. Somehow this record lent a certain level of credibility to previously voiced but largely ignored claims about a misogynistic, homophobic and racist culture that the Task Force reports had engulfed the dentistry faculty for some time. Seems the most convincing evidence of sexually violent attitudes comes not from those who experience them, but from the records of their expression. Perhaps in this way the technology’s documentary and disseminatory capacity created something of a tipping point.

Locker Room Revealed: Where to Go from Here?

To where does this old story with a new(?) twist lead? In a professional context, professional regulatory bodies are bound to (and will presumably continue to) pursue protection of the public interest through their licensing and discipline

procedures. Looking at the bigger picture though, it seems to me that nothing short of a social and cultural shift offers any sort of meaningful long term solution. Instead of throwing up our hands and asking “what should we do?”, why not commit to implementing the proactive proposals recommended in the Task Force Report or even dusting off one of the many excellent task force reports or studies on rape culture and sexual violence that already line the shelves? In the long run a commitment to social change is essential. This means not only plans for educating around inclusion, diversity and equality, but transparent institutional carry through of those plans. While reacting to individual instances is obviously necessary (especially to hold accountable individuals who are part of professions serving the public), wouldn't it be preferable to avoid them in the first place? Are we afraid to imagine a future where sexual violence isn't a joke or a way of letting off steam or of expressing resentment for women in general? Or are we just too apathetic to commit to doing what it takes to make that future a reality? If so, perhaps the relentless distribution of the record will jar us out of our complacency.