

A Therapist's Perspective On Rape, Trauma, Tara Reade, and Credibility

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Introductory Note

After Bernie Sanders dropped out of the 2020 Presidential Election, many on the left have been assessing next steps. Of course, many rightfully focus on decisive pandemic-economy related struggles led by nurses, Amazon workers, renters and the unemployed. These struggles are critically important. That said, many on the left are unresolved about whether and how to engage the electoral arena, now that Joe Biden has taken a decisive delegate lead in the Democratic primaries and has been endorsed by most members of the Party establishment. Until Tara Reade came forward with her allegations of digital rape, many felt quite certain that no matter what, they would vote against Trump, even if that meant a vote for Joe Biden.

After hearing Reade's allegations, however, many people who call themselves "feminists" or otherwise support the #MeToo movement, struggled to resolve their own cognitive dissonance and feelings of hypocrisy. In doing so, they often resurrected deeply sexist, pre-#MeToo conceptions of rape, sexual assault and women's credibility. Sounding very much like the GOP in its defense of Brett Kavanaugh, ordinary voters and reputable journalists attacked Reade's credibility, scoured her social media track record and otherwise undermined the legitimacy of her allegation—all while

making very few demands upon Joe Biden.

Whether or not one decides to participate in “lesser evil” politics, it is vital that we counter such regressive attacks on Tara Reade. In such attacks, the Democratic Party not only squanders one issue on which it once held the moral high ground, it sets back the feminist struggle by decades. A profound harm on its own, the so-called “private” issue of sexual assault—and the social relations from which it gets generated —is linked to the broader political and economic oppression that women face in every other part of their lives: unequal pay, domestic violence, unpaid child care, discriminatory hiring. If the left seeks to build a collective struggle against authoritarian neo-liberalism, it must take seriously Tara Reade, support her calls for justice, and take a stand in defense of #MeToo, regardless of how it impacts Biden.

Like many of us, I have been disturbed and deeply troubled by the story of Tara Reade. Perhaps I was naive, but as a psychotherapist and expert witness in the field of rape and sexual abuse, I was incredibly moved by #MeToo. In particular, after Christine Blasey Ford bravely came forward and after Harvey Weinstein was prosecuted, I felt hopeful that millions of people could identify with and understood the nuances of rape, disclosure, and memory.

So I have been surprised, and more than a little disheartened, when the media did not offer the same benefit of the doubt to Tara Reade as recent history had led me to expect. But more than that, I have been deeply discouraged by the degree to which friends — all of whom call themselves feminists — have rubber band-snapped back to pre-#MeToo understandings about the dynamics of sexism, sexual harassment and sexual assault. And to me, that is tragic.

In particular, many friends have circulated an opinion piece written by Michael Stern, published in *USA Today* on April 30th, 2020. For many, this piece felt neutral, authoritative and trustworthy. It helped many well-intentioned friends try to resolve their own internal dissonance: how can they support Joe Biden (or more accurately, support the anybody-but-Trump candidate), support #MeToo and still not believe Tara Reade.

I get it. The dissonance is loud.

Unfortunately, for those who are informed about these matters, Stern’s piece does nothing to resolve that dissonance. And I want to tell you why.

But before I do, some key points.

- **First:** I obviously do not know what happened between Joe Biden and Tara Reade. I am not certain, either way. That said, my instinct and my experience has led me to believe her. Perhaps more importantly, nothing in the media accounts convinces me that it didn’t happen. Quite the opposite.
- However, I understand why there are doubts and I don’t fault people for having doubts. I do, however, have a problem with the vitriolic and strident certitude that Reade is lying. Indeed, in my opinion, such certitude flies in the face of all we know about the dynamics of rape and trauma. Certitude, in this context, can only be based on stereotypes that I had hoped we’d move past after #MeToo.
- **Second:** I am not taking the perspective of prosecutor, whose job is to convince a jury “beyond a reasonable doubt” — a high evidentiary bar. Instead, I take the perspective of a psychotherapist who has worked with rape victims as they navigate the court system and as an expert witness in trials involving sexual abuse and rape. Even when we are viewing things

from the perspective of trauma-informed, feminist sex crime prosecutors, it is nevertheless true that the vast majority of rapes do not get prosecuted.

- This is precisely because rules of evidence, the nature of rape, privacy and societal attitudes about sex and sexual assault make that forum notoriously clunky and unresponsive to the lived reality of such situations. Some of the best prosecutors I know are deeply troubled by the frequency with which they must turn down factually true cases for “lack of evidence” or anticipated “jury bias.”

Successful prosecution is one thing. Truth is another.

With those two points in mind, from my perspective as an advocate for rape survivors , I'll address Stern's concerns in the order in which they appear.

1) Delayed reporting ... twice

This is not at all unusual. Stern's experience is already dealing with a very rare group of rape victims: those that report at all. And of those that report, a much smaller subset of cases even makes it to a prosecutor's desk. This is after alleged victims go through the incredibly painful process of being interviewed repeatedly by police, asked to turn over endless records, exposing one's entire relationship history, scouring and accounting for one's social media posts, telephone records, texts and tweets.

The group of alleged victims that get to the prosecutor's desk already have a different profile — they have already crossed huge thresholds of stamina, social support, clarity of memory, and so on. And while the vast majority of rape survivors don't file reports, I have known many other survivors who get up the courage only years or decades later. And among those survivors, many began the process, sized up the risk and backed off. Then they tried again. That is not at all uncommon.

This is even more true when the alleged victim has complex feelings of loyalty, support, reverence, dependency, concern, shared ideas or shared lives with the alleged offender. Sadly, that is actually the majority of rape scenarios.

2) Implausible explanations for changing story

One of the *key* factors in whether or how someone comes forward is how they feel they are being perceived — whether they feel blamed or believed. Already filled with self-doubt about the right course of action, already feeling guilt — yes, guilt (nearly every survivor I know initially felt guilt) — about naming the person that assaulted them, survivors are often exquisitely sensitive to verbal and nonverbal clues about whether they will be believed.

For that reason, I literally have no idea why the Stern is so incredulous that a journalist could be off-putting as he interviewed Reade about rape allegations against Biden. Unless we are to assume a journalist is trauma informed, why is it remotely hard to imagine that a reporter could intimidate a victim of rape? Or have a demeanor that suggested her story would not be fairly told?

Indeed, through #MeToo, we've learned precisely the lengths to which the journalism industry has gone to cover up sexual assault and harassment. Remember how long Donald Trump has managed to silence reports, how Harvey Weinstein got endless free passes, how Matt Lauer was overlooked, how Chris Matthews just confessed, and how Roger Ailes earned himself a movie about his sexual assault empire.

Given this reality, it is not at all surprising that Reade finally felt comfortable talking with a female reporter who had no vested conscious or unconscious interest in protecting her alleged assailant.

Indeed, the entire ideology of Biden prepares journalists to be skeptical of Reade. The image of Biden as that of the family man. The man with empathy. The man who cares about violence against women. Again, for many, the entire process of disclosure is a constant evaluation of whether or not they are safe. Whether they are in “good hands.” I have no reason to doubt that Reade felt that she was not in safe hands when she first came forward to a journalist.

3) People who contradict Reade’s Claims

First, I am not at all sure why such denials by invested non-witnesses are deemed more trustworthy or less “coached” than the witnesses who have come forward corroborating Tara Reade’s story. Indeed, more than Reade’s supporting witnesses, they have enormous vested interest in covering for Biden and for themselves. Biden staff members were part of a whole culture that believed and absorbed the dominant line on Biden and his status as “one of the good guys.”

Second, it is entirely possible that when Reade made a complaint, she minimized the events for the reasons I said above. It is also entirely possible that Biden’s staff didn’t remember such a complaint — particularly because it did not involve the larger claims of assault. It is quite possible that her complaint was not perceived as a big deal — as worth remembering.

But more importantly, such denials are contradicted by what we do know about Biden and about the volume of sexual harassment on the Hill. Not only do we know that many women have complained about Biden’s touching and boundary crossing, we also know that in the mid-1990s, sexual harassment was rampant. Ultimately, the fact that Biden staff members “don’t remember” Reade’s complaint does not mean that it didn’t happen.

For example, I know a young woman who was assaulted by a beloved teacher. Her community could not fathom that this teacher could do such a thing. He was a key, respected member of the community. *So certain of his innocence, the entire town rallied against the young woman.*

Her family had to move, she began doubting her own story, started using drugs, felt guilt towards the community and, eventually, she became suicidal. Later, when push came to shove, the teacher confessed. Vehement denials and perceptions of innocence by non-witnesses are not dispositive.

4) Missing formal complaint

Business Insider has shed light on the complaint process that existed at the time Reade filed. Far from being an orderly process in which a complaint is filed, copies made, and procedures are handled in a clear and traceable fashion, the process at the time was murky and confusing. Furthermore, it is becoming more obvious that no one is certain where such a complaint is now stored and whether it is accessible. One scenario I’ve read suggests that after she was told to submit the form, it somehow got channeled into the void of administrative bureaucracy.

Under these circumstances, it is not clear to me what people are expecting her to have done at the time. For Reade to have a copy of the complaint, before smartphone cameras, means that she would have had the presence of mind to fill out the complaint, ask the office to make a copy and demand accountability, even as she was confused about the process.

Yes, it would have been helpful to make a copy. But far from proving she isn’t credible, I find her dissembling even more realistic, more credible. Even heart-breaking. I recognize that person.

Indeed, I think about the women I know who go to the police, only to find out that a process they thought was casual becomes formal; off-record becomes on-the-record, voluntary forms suddenly become mandatory. Only in hindsight are most of the procedures obvious.

So why do I think it makes her more credible, rather than less? It's actually more logical. On the one hand, Reade has stated that she filled out a complaint but didn't have a copy. Many people see that as reason to suspect she never even filed a complaint.

But then: if she actually "never filed" why would Reade admit to filing an incomplete or inaccurate complaint, one that didn't specifically name "harassment," much less, assault? *Indeed, if Reade was making up the entire complaint process, why would she make up a story suggesting that she filed a less-than-perfect complaint?*

What is far more logical is what she actually says. She provides absolutely credible and vivid memories of a confusing process. She provides credible descriptions of what she did write on the complaint: about discomfort when asked about drinks and about comments about her legs. Without using legal terms of "hostile work environment" or "harassment," she described the actual experience.

Finally, the fact that Reade did not disclose the assault itself is not conclusive. Her disclosure could be considered a "partial disclosure" which is so common in the trauma field that entire books have been written about the psychology of partial disclosures. I can easily imagine a scenario where Reade mustered courage, disclosed easier parts of the story and hoped that would be enough to settle the complex feelings and choices in her mind.

One very plausible take: she was caught off guard by the process (like many clients), did not think to make a copy at the time and wrote out what she felt safe talking about. Am I right? I don't know. But it is far more realistic in my mind than Stern's notion that she both never wrote a complaint and pretended to write an incomplete version that made her look bad.

5) Memory lapse

Honestly, I am stunned that this is one Stern's chief concerns. For any of us, when we think back on any non-scheduled emotionally troubling event — do we first remember the specific date? Even after experiencing emotionally disturbing events, we remember many things — but the exact date is not always one of them. Even more so for traumatic events.

Traumatic memory is sequenced and stored differently — what is remembered are sensory aspects, feeling states, bodily sensations. Survivors of trauma may remember seasons, textures, colors of clothing, images on the wall, whether it is day or night. Indeed, *any* trauma informed forensic interviewer or detective knows that traumatic memory is complicated. While it would of course be helpful if Reade remembered dates and times, it tells us nothing that she cannot.

In fact, trauma survivors are not usually able to narrate their own trauma as it is happening. They are too busy managing their feelings. As a result, every single trauma victim I know tries very hard to fill in memory gaps — primarily for their own sanity. Some survivors construct bridge memories to reconcile what they remember with what they don't. Far from manufacturing helpful but untrue memories, Reade allows her memory to be realistically incomplete: she doesn't pretend more than she remembers. As one who knows about rape and trauma, that makes Reade more compelling, not less.

6) The lie about losing her job

I am gathering that the "lie" here is that once, Reade said she felt "pushed out" after complaining and another time, she stated that she was "fired" for making a complaint. We are talking about the difference between feeling pressure to leave and overt firing. That is fair enough — those aren't exactly the same thing.

But as any employment lawyer can tell you, bosses can create enough pressure to compel an employee to leave under circumstances that hardly feel like “free choice.” Indeed, that is a well-worn trick of private employers to avoid lawsuits. Technically, Stern is correct: being pushed is not the same thing as being overtly fired.

But the gist — which no one actually disputes — is the same. Reade felt that the environment substantially changed after she made a complaint and that her departure was not freely chosen, was sudden and was not on her own terms. “Fired” versus “pushed out”? In my view, there is not enough of a difference there to doubt her overall credibility.

7) Compliments for Biden

I’m not convinced by this one, either. It is true that some rape victims despise their perpetrators. On the other hand, I know some who don’t. And as we have learned from the Weinstein prosecution, many rape victims continue relating to the person who raped them. As do domestic violence survivors. Do we deem them incredible?

From what I can tell, Reade was somewhat enamored by the entire process of working for a Senator and working on the Hill. She believed in the Senate. Given that Reade held both Biden and the Senate in high esteem, it does not surprise me that at the time, she did not want to draw bad publicity to Biden.

It does not surprise me that in her call to Larry King, Reade’s mother mentioned “respect” for Biden. I can easily imagine that pre-#MeToo — she had not yet traveled that far in her mind that she could publically call out Biden. Instead, I can imagine that she just wanted things to stop.

Regarding Biden’s work on the Violence Against Women Act, it was in fact praiseworthy. But Stern is basically saying that Reade is a liar because she didn’t tweet: “My old boss is a fucking hypocrite who raped me even as he passed a really good law” While I can certainly imagine someone writing just that, I can also easily imagine that she wouldn’t. It is not a deal breaker. Nor is it “bizarre.”

8) Rejecting Biden, embracing Sanders

On the one hand, Stern suggests that Reade is lying because she once praised Biden. On the other, he suggests she is lying because she shifted to supporting first Warren and then Sanders. Other than drawing a specious link between Sanders and Tara Reade, Stern seems to be applying a political litmus test to whether or not a rape occurred twenty-seven years earlier.

Yes, Reade’s political positions have changed. That is hardly unusual: these last several years have been profoundly polarizing and post #MeToo, many women have drawn more radical conclusions about the direction in which our country is going. Changing political opinions do not de facto indicate that someone is not credible. If it were, we’d have to examine the credibility of a wide range of current political figures.

9) Love of Russia and Putin

Much has been said about Reade’s political positions. And yes, they appear to shift and, at times, seem bizarre. That said, I can imagine that in reaction to the onslaught of anti-Russian stories appearing in the media, Reade took a somewhat contrarian stance about Russian society. Silly? Perhaps. Over-the-top? Quite possibly. Substantially different from other politicians who hold other non-adversarial dictators in high regard? No. Evidence that rape didn’t occur twenty years earlier, when she told corroborating witnesses? Hardly.

10) Suspect Timing

With respect to Stern's concern about Reade's timing, it is impossible to ignore the fact that she was/is aware of the power of her allegation. That seems irrefutable. Many may not like her timing. Many may feel that she should have waited. Under present political circumstances, that is understandable. It is also understandable that Reade believed her story was relevant to the question of whether Biden should be the Democratic Party nominee.

But questioning an alleged survivor's motives for disclosing an assault does not mean that the assault did not happen. Frequently, survivors finally come forward at critical or decisive moments in their lives — where pressure builds and a tipping point emerges in favor of speaking up, rather than remaining silent. In fact, that appears to be exactly what happened when Dr. Ford came forward in her allegations against Kavanaugh. As we may recall, the GOP endlessly questioned Dr. Ford's decision to come forward just at the moment of his nomination to the Supreme Court. Like Reade, Dr. Ford's choice had profound impact on the nomination process.

Reade's timing has impact. Without a doubt. It is causing upheaval. That too, is beyond doubt. Does that mean the assault itself didn't happen? That does not follow.

11) The Larry King call

As can be inferred from what I have written above, I do not believe that the call her mother made to Larry King detracts from Reade's credibility. Instead, to my mind, it adds to it. When Reade first stated that she had spoken to her mother at the time, skeptics doubted that she had even told her mother that anything occurred — because she was "lying." Once the video was released, it became clear that Reade was not lying about having told her mother.

Stern then appears to move the credibility goal post and suggests that it is not enough that evidence indicates Reade was not, in fact, lying about telling her mother. Instead, he now suggests Reade's credibility hinges on whether her mother disclosed all the sordid details of her daughter's experience to the television personality host.

Her mother did not give full details to Larry King. Yes, I can certainly imagine an irate and protective parent choosing to offer such full details in an anonymous context. However, I can just as easily imagine that same protective parent choosing to keep such highly explosive details out of her call, limiting herself to factual questions about how to move forward.

Indeed, there is some indication that Reade was not happy that her mother made the call — which suggests that her mother was both trying to get helpful advice, while also honoring some degree of privacy or discretion sought by Reade. She was not calling Larry King to expose Biden and she was not calling Larry King to tell Reade's full story. She was calling Larry King for advice about how she can support her daughter in making progress in resolving concerns.

That either scenario is plausible is precisely the point. It is a motivated stretch to speculate about Reade's own credibility on the basis of unsubstantiated inferences about her mother's disclosure decisions — anonymous or not.

Regarding her mother's use of the word "respect" in explaining Reade's reluctance to go to the press, I am equally not surprised. As I have mentioned above, it appears that Reade was enamored with and generally very eager to participate in the Senate process. She acknowledged that she liked Biden's politics and supported his work.

While some assault survivors do feel hatred towards their perpetrators, it is equally common for

survivors to want to protect perpetrators from further unnecessary harm while also getting behavior to stop. In fact, had Reade decided to go to the newspapers at the time, it's easy to imagine that such a decision would have been viewed as manipulative, radical and brash.

Damned if she does and damned if she doesn't.

12) Statements to others

Ultimately, Stern is engaged in circular reasoning on this question. Since Reade is not trustworthy, anything others say on her behalf is necessarily a lie or coached. That is logical — if one believes her to be untrustworthy. The same is true, of course, for Biden, whose witnesses have a great deal at stake.

However, the reverse is also true: if Reade is trustworthy, by definition, those who verify her story are also trustworthy. And if those statements are trustworthy, they clearly indicate that Reade disclosed details of her assault to other people far earlier than during this election season.

13) Lack of other sexual assault allegations

In this regard, the sensational nature of #MeToo has led to very misleading analysis. While data does indicate that perpetrators often commit more than one assault (just as data indicates that women rarely make false reports), that does not in fact mean that all perpetrators always commit more than one assault.

One problem with the way #MeToo has played out is that it has made it very difficult for individual women to speak their story: if they don't have a line up of multiple victims, they can't be telling the truth. Setting aside the possibility that there could in fact be other silent survivors of assault from Biden, it is profoundly unfair to use abstract data to discredit the story of an individual.

That is akin to suggesting that because most people die from a certain type of cancer, no single individual can survive. Abstract data does not tell us anything about a specific case. If it did, people would believe Reade insofar as abstract data indicates that women rarely make false reports.

14) What remains

What remains is the same as what often remains in cases involving sexual assault: no video tapes, no witnesses, contradictory statements. That is precisely the point: in many ways, Reade's allegation is not substantially different from most sexual assault allegations. That is why many women choose not to report. And many cases, once reported, do not go to prosecution. And if prosecuted, many cases of assault do not result in conviction.

Ultimately, as we can see — how one assesses Reade's credibility is a matter of perspective. A matter of choice.

If one starts from the premise that she is lying, the facts line up in the way that Stern suggests.

However, if one starts from the premise that she is telling the truth, the facts look very different.

And if there is a lesson in #MeToo, it is this: the pervasive realities of sexual assault and harassment mean that we must start with the premise that women are telling the truth. We investigate with a trauma-informed eye. While we don't end there, we absolutely must start with "believing women." From that premise, everything else flows.

This is an updated version of an article first posted on Medium.com.