

Five Things People Misunderstand about Sexual Assault

By Aaron Boe, Aaron Boe Productions

Well, it's actually *non-stranger* rape and sexual assault that is misunderstood. Nobody really misunderstands sexual assault or rape that is perpetrated by a psychotic stranger with a weapon. It is understood by virtually everyone how wrong that type of violation is and why it would be a traumatic experience with life-altering effects.

Non-stranger sexual assault, however, is by far the most common type that occurs on a college campus (or in the years before a student comes to college) (DOJ, 2005; BJS, 2000), and it is perhaps the most widely misunderstood social issue. There is a reason we struggle to comprehend non-stranger sexual misconduct, and that is because it doesn't really seem to make sense. In fact, we could say that non-stranger sexual assault is uniquely qualified to be misunderstood.

Ironically, it is partly because stranger rape and assault is so clearly understood that we fail to comprehend the realities of non-stranger violations. Applying Bandura's Moral Disengagement Theory (2002) to non-stranger sexual misconduct, we can explore a number of explanations for why we may misunderstand these types of violations, as well as explanations for how otherwise decent people can justify their own harmful behaviors, or those of others.

Bandura's eight cognitive mechanisms for dismissing moral implications of a situation include: *Advantageous Contrast, Disregard/Minimization of Consequences or Harm, Dehumanization or Devaluation, Euphemistic Labeling, Attribution of Blame, Moral Justification, Displacement of Responsibility and Diffusion of Responsibility.*

We will look at multiple aspects of Bandura's theory by discussing a set of simple statements about sexual assault that many people fail to clearly comprehend:

1. It does not take what one might imagine as violence to violate someone and cause a disturbing emotional experience.

Bandura explains that we tend to apply *Advantageous Contrast* to our own behavior or to the behavior of others by contrasting these behaviors with others that are much worse. The effect of this advantageous contrast is that it minimizes or nullifies the wrongdoing in our less extreme actions.

For example, an individual who exhibits abusive behaviors may not identify him or herself as an "abuser" because he or she believes the actions are justified and that real abuse is something more extreme. Similarly, no one sees him or herself as a rapist because that is clearly an awful act that only a psychotic person would engage in.

But, the reality is that it does not take stereotypical physical violence to cause most of the harm that occurs during a sexual assault. Whether it is because the other person is frozen in fear, incapacitated from alcohol or another drug, or resisting in a way that is not *convincing* to the other person in his subjective assessment, it is quite feasible for one person to traumatize another without a dramatic struggle.

2. The harmful effects of being violated by an acquaintance or person you know can be the same or even worse than the effects of being violated by a stranger.

This truth is perhaps the best example of why non-stranger sexual assault does not seem to make sense.

The way a sexual violation happens without the use of a weapon or without extreme physical violence is different from the stereotypical view of sexual violence, but the effects are the same, or can even be worse. In other words, the sexual misconduct that makes up virtually all of the violations that occur on a college campus can produce *the same traumatic effects* as if all of those acts were perpetrated by a psychotic, strange-looking person with a weapon.

Because of our tendency toward *Advantageous Contrast* and to *Disregard/Minimize Harm*, it seems logical to assume that if it was a “regular person” who is a friend or a person from a previous sexual relationship, rather than a stranger who was the perpetrator, then the harm must be correspondingly not as great.

This is perhaps the most common and most tragic misunderstanding because it leads to apathy on this issue, insensitive responses to a person who has been traumatized, and sometimes even widespread public support for a person who is actually a serial rapist.

3. It does not take a psychotic person to commit a sexual violation.

Rather than saying there is a lack of awareness on this issue, it is more accurate to say that there is a lack of belief in it. And that lack of belief comes from the failure to understand just how realistic it is for a sane and otherwise decent person to violate and traumatize another person.

The reason it is true that a significantly high number of our young women really are being harmed in life-altering ways, and that many of our young men are responsible for that harm (in addition to also harming other men) is because it does not take a mentally ill, sadistic person to traumatize another person. It really only takes a person who does not understand the harm that would be caused by engaging in a sexual act with a person who does not want to participate in that act; a person who disregards the other person’s potential emotional discomfort with their actions.

Applying Bandura’s theory in a simple way, if a young man or woman merely assumes that his or her actions would be either harmless or that the other person will enjoy what occurs, then there is no psychological self-regulation to stop him or her.

4. Situational factors do not remove or reduce an individual’s responsibility for the harmful effects of violating another person sexually.

It is each person’s responsibility to make sure he or she is not doing something with another person’s body that is not wanted at the time. It is not up to the other person to put up a strong enough defense to make the other person stop.

Situational factors such as how much flirting or other consensual sexual activity was going on prior to the violation, or how much alcohol was involved, are factors that exist independent of whether or not a person’s most basic rights were violated.

Alcohol use can be correlated with a lot of behaviors, but it does not remove responsibility for one’s behavior. Whether it is theft, assault and battery, or violating another person sexually, responsibility is not removed or reduced because of the use or abuse of alcohol.

5. **Personality and biographical factors do not remove or reduce an individual's responsibility for the harmful effects of violating another person sexually.**

If it is reported that a person has violated another person sexually, it is common for others to immediately look at the available stories about those two people. So, rather than simply determining whether Person A violated the rights of Person B by engaging in a sexual act by force, by threat, or by taking advantage of an inability to adequately resist, we end up with a narrative that invariably brings in cognitive distortions and influences our assessment of the situation.

With biographical stories for each person involved, people begin to imagine that they can determine on their own where the responsibility lies and how much harm there could really be, if any.

It is common for people to think, "A regular guy who hasn't been in serious trouble before is accused of *rape*? What kind of a person would accuse a decent guy of *rape*?" Instantly, the focus has shifted in this case of non-stranger rape from Person A, the one allegedly responsible for violating the other, to Person B, the victim/survivor. Person A becomes intensely humanized—"You're going to ruin his life!" And Person B becomes dehumanized—"What kind of a person would accuse someone of something like *rape*?"

Notice that this is the opposite of what happens with stranger rape. In stranger rape, the victim/survivor is intensely humanized and people naturally and rightly have extreme compassion for him or her, and the person responsible for the assault is dehumanized because he is seen as being responsible for an awful act that obviously causes extreme harm.

So What?

As Bandura explains, when a combination of cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement work together, it can result in otherwise decent people behaving in very harmful ways (or failing to help in ways in which they are needed).

These failures to comprehend the realities surrounding this issue can have profound effects.

Perpetrators and potential serial perpetrators can justify traumatizing acts and believe they've done nothing wrong.

Bystanders can fail to even recognize problematic situations, or fail to perceive that real harm was done when they hear about an incident.

Fraternity and sorority leaders on our campuses who could lend their talents and social influence to shift their chapter and community culture can fail to see the relevance of this issue and not understand why it matters for them to be engaged to prevent it.

Friends who could otherwise be the urgently needed support system for a victim/survivor will often, out of ignorance, blame their friend who was violated, and may even side with the person who traumatized their friend.

Administrators who determine the priorities of initiatives can fail to recognize why this issue is an urgent matter. They might work to be "in compliance," but motivations to comply or avoid negative public relations issues do not have the same power as motivations born from a true comprehension of the reality of this issue.

Since we know misunderstanding is common, or even the default norm, it is our task to counter that with strategic education. It is only by doing so that we will be able to achieve the true culture shift required for real change.

References

- Bandura, A. (2002). Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, 31(2), 101-119.
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2005). *National crime victimization study*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv05.pdf>
- U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2000). *Sexual assault of young children as reported to law enforcement*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/saycrle.pdf>