

## **Sexual Assault Is the Norm, So Why Are We Surprised?**

**By Tom Bissonette, MSW**

We live in a rape culture, yet we pretend to raise our young to behave appropriately and respect the boundaries of others. Recently, in a brainstorming session with college students about how to prevent sexual assault, I gave an example of a typical dating ritual that constitutes sexual assault but is rarely treated as such:

*“When in the presence of a potential sex partner it is common to touch them without asking permission. A young man fondles the breast of his date or acquaintance. She may push his hand away or tell him not to repeat the action, but technically, he has already sexually assaulted her. The same would be true if she touched him without asking.”*

Consensus on this conclusion wasn't easy to reach and one student said, “You're right, but how can we explain that to a high school or college students without sounding crazy?” He identified the main problem with normative behavior; it becomes invisible, so pushing the cultural reset button seems unnatural and extreme! If this type of ritualized behavior didn't exist, the scenario might go something like this: (excerpt from *Sexual Civility – The Hot New College Romance*).

*Person #1 asks, “May I touch your breast?”*

*Person #2 replies, “One of them, or both?”*

*Person #1 – “Both, I guess.”*

*Person #2 – “Do you mean touch or squeeze?”*

*Person #1 – “Both, I guess.”*

*Person #2 – “How long were you planning to do this?”*

*Person #1 – “A few minutes I suppose.”*

*Person #2 – “What do you want from this?”*

*Person #1 – “I just want to know what they feel like.”*

*Person #2 – “Is this an experiment for Biology class?”*

Of course, the above dialog is absurd, but somewhere between absurdity and assault is a reasonable conversation that could establish boundaries without cultural scripts or games.

Sexual curiosity and desire are compelling forces and not inherently unhealthy. In the context of a rape culture, however, they become toxic and destructive. When a university fraternity (true story) sends out an e-mail survey asking, “Who on campus would you like to rape?”, we see curiosity infused with deep violence and hostility. The outrage over this incident focused on a few young men behaving badly. The spotlight should have been on whatever is happening in our society that makes them feel this level of insensitivity, and allows them to think - even for a moment - this is acceptable behavior.

Restated, the question could be, “What other cultural aberration besides ritualistic approaches to human sexuality contributes to the thoughtlessness associated with the rape mindset?” At the top of my list would be the invention of “gender” and its worming its way into our collective psyche. To be clear, “Male and Female” are real, but “Man or Woman, Boy or Girl,” are social constructs. The marketplace loves this contrived diversity and profits from exaggerating the differences through beauty product sales, clothes, etc.

Another advantage of these constructs lied in the efficiency of not having to negotiate every interaction between males and females. No ten-minute discussions about who should open the door, etc. But efficiency is not always the best way and many people today rebel against these conventions. Objectification and categorization of people serve a vital purpose at times, but has genderization outlived its usefulness?

Several years ago, I spent a few years in Ann Arbor, Michigan and socialized frequently and sometimes “dated.” I was a very traditional male at the time. Because Ann Arbor has a high number of committed feminists per capita I could never be sure if offering to pay for dinner would offend my companion or not offering would offend.

Once I became comfortable with this - to my delight - I was forced to have this conversation and received the bonus of learning a lot about the person I was with very quickly. Frank, effective communication is a healthy type of speed-dating. It helps us learn important things

about a person before we form an emotional attachment. We have all seen how emotions can cloud our judgment. Choosing partners is too serious to rely solely on a fluttering heart.

Although it takes time and effort to have conversations, it's better than not having them and being frustrated, and sometimes seriously harmed by miscommunication. The challenge is that when we choose to take this more open and direct approach it moves us outside the comfort of our gender roles. This can be a buzzkill at times. This even applies to same sex relationships. Object-A meets object-B is less risky than person-A meets person-B.

Our culture further enables this avoidance of real intimacy by promoting the idea that males and females are so different, they cannot possibly understand each other. Why bother with dialog if it will only lead to confusion, anxiety, conflict, and possibly animus?

If we stay in our roles and focus on types we can fall back on "they're not my type." If we are genuine, we might find out that they are different than we thought and they may have potential to become a good friend or partner. Conversely, love-at-first-site can dissolve into disenchantment-at-first-insight, the minute they start to open up.

So how does this strict adherence to gender roles turn into serious sexual acting out? Males or females with high levels of insecurity about their role performance as a man or women need confirmation of this and will go to any length to get it. They are out to prove something! Thus, they harass, seduce, or rape their way into temporary feelings of safe conformity to their idealized gender self-concepts. This also applies to same-sex couples because they too may have preconceived ideas about what a partner should be.

We must overcome these no longer useful gender biases if we are serious about healthy relationships and prevention of sexual and relational violence. We will fail to come to terms with sexual mistreatment unless we recognize that it's a pervasive cultural problem, not just a few people or certain personality types misbehaving. We do a terrible disservice to ourselves and the casualties of abuse when we oversimplify the problem.