



Rethinking Campus Sexual Assault: We must Be Leaders in Anti-Bias Practices, Civil Rights and Human Rights

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Abstract

During an era when campuses nationwide are increasingly in the spotlight for a range of sexual assault infractions, Rothman proposes four groundbreaking thought experiments that challenge the status quo in campus-based prevention programming and call for us to do better. Namely, Rothman's thought experiments—which suggest that campuses 1) invest in fighting structural oppression at the societal level, 2) direct their social norming work at the macro level, 3) educate preventionists in consent and pleasure related to kink, anal sex and group sex, and 4) enact education and counseling for sexual violence perpetrators—provide us with fresh opportunities to examine our willingness and capacity to change and to become even more impactful leaders in practices to reduce sexual violence. In the present editorial, I argue that for Rothman's experiments (which are focused fundamentally on changing underlying power structures at the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, ability status and socioeconomic status) to be optimally effective, campuses must first engage intensively and systematically in anti-bias curricula to prepare us to be effective fighters for civil rights and human rights. Accordingly, we must be willing to acknowledge that biases exist in all of us, that biases operate in across environments to both privilege and disadvantage at the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, ability status and socioeconomic status, and that we must replace our biases with equity-focused actions for greater equity for all. I applaud Rothman in her outside-the-box thought experiments, join her in challenging us to do things differently on our nation's campuses, and hope we have the courage to be leaders in anti-bias, civil rights and human rights practices to more impactfully reduce sexual violence against women and non-majority groups.

Keywords Sexual violence · Sexual assault · College · Prevention · Programs · Human rights

Women accuse ex-USC campus doctor of sexual abuse, say the school 'let it happen' reads a recent headline for ABC News (Thorboeke 2018). Over the last six months, this headline is tragically one among many revealing sexual violations involving campus doctors and students. Other universities with similar headlines: Michigan State University and Ohio State University.

Universities are increasingly in the hot seat, with many scrambling to reexamine and reevaluate prevention and response practices and policies. While the range of prevention and response activities varies across college campuses, most U.S. campuses have student-focused intervention and

bystander programming, such as Green Dot which is effective in reducing sexual assault and relationship violence (Coker et al. 2016).

Yet, student-focused campus prevention programs and approaches are not enough to stop sexual violence. Why? First, by targeting only students in prevention programming, campuses miss the full range of occupants, including students, alumni, administrators, faculty and staff—all of whom collectively shape campus climate, dialogue and interactions. Second, sexual violence is normative within our broader societal culture (Farrow 2017) and embedded within larger civil and human rights infractions involving sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and classism. Third, as in the case of the ex-USC physician, not all campus sexual assault involves student perpetrators.

This is why the essay by Rothman, “Preventing Sexual Violence on Campus in the U.S.: Four Thought Experiments,” (Rothman 2018) is timely and groundbreaking. In the essay, Rothman proposes four thought experiments that

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challenge the status quo for sexual violence prevention programming on college campuses and call for us to do better. Rothman's thought experiments provide us with fresh opportunities to examine our willingness and capacity to change and to become leaders in practices to more substantially impact sexual violence against women and other non-majority groups.

Rothman's **first thought experiment** is that universities stop investing in sexual assault prevention and instead fight structural oppression—including sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and classism—which creates the underlying context and conditions for sexual assault. This is not at odds with the plethora of human rights concerns raised by the Michigan State University community during a town hall following the sentencing of former MSU physician Larry Nassar for his sexual crimes involving more than 300 women students and athletes (Nawyn and Bonomi 2018). Namely, during the town hall which drew 3000 to 5000 people from the campus community, the 750 who squeezed into the town hall room demanded fundamental change in how we privilege and deny power and rights by gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, abilities, and tenure status (the class system in academia) (Nawyn and Bonomi 2018). In essence, Rothman's first proposal is consistent with what many within a heavily scrutinized college campus—Michigan State University—are calling for.

As well, Rothman's proposal aligns with Martin Luther King's appeal for each of us to:

Become a dedicated fighter for civil rights ... It will enrich your spirit as nothing else possibly can. It will give you a rare sense of nobility that can only spring from love and selflessly helping your fellow man. Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle of human rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country and a finer world to live in. (King 1959)

To become dedicated fighters for civil and human rights requires us, in an initial step, to get serious about anti-bias curricula aimed at reducing sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and classism. Moreover, unlike bystander intervention and other prevention programming, which is typically aimed at changing student behavior, all campus administrators, faculty, staff and students, must take part in anti-bias curricula in ongoing, sustained ways. The evidence shows that participation in campus-based anti-bias curricula by at least 25% of faculty and administrators within an academic unit improves equity actions in the short term (Carnes et al. 2015) and produces more equitable hiring outcomes in the long term (Devine et al. 2017).

What might this look like? To start, we might collaborate as administrators, academic units and service provision units in anti-bias curricula aimed at the plethora of gender bias (Carnes et al. 2015), including biases that implicate women as sexual

gatekeepers (England et al. 2008), blame them for sexual crimes (Niemi and Young 2016), and disadvantage them in nearly all aspects of life, including academic leadership (Carnes et al. 2008). In simultaneous fashion, we must examine how gender bias operates at the intersection of race, including how women of color are disproportionately excluded from research and national conversations concerning violence against women (Jones 2014), and how they experience less equitable opportunities for key leadership positions on college campuses (Mainah and Perkins 2015).

For anti-bias curricula to work in preparing us to be effective fighters for civil and human rights more broadly at the societal level, we must be willing to acknowledge that biases exist in all of us, that biases operate across environments to both privilege and disadvantage at the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, ability status and socioeconomic status, and that we must replace our biases with equity-focused actions for greater equity for all (Carnes et al. 2015). And, as Rothman astutely notes, working toward greater equity for all will require those with power to surrender some of it for the greater good (Rothman 2018). On college campuses, this means, for example, evenly distributing women and men in key administrative roles. It means doing away with the common practice of appointing those with minority status as token members of key committees and decision-making bodies (Davis 2017); rather, individuals from minority backgrounds must be represented equitably at the table, with equitable voice and decision-making authority. In sum, if our ultimate goal is fighting for civil rights, for human rights at the societal level, we must also do so in our own backyards.

Rothman's **second thought experiment** is that universities refocus their social norming missions beyond campus to the macro level, such as raising awareness at the macro level about how adhering to traditional gender role norms and sex role scripts elevates risk of sexual violence. Rothman's proposal can garner energy in the midst of national social norming movements aimed at raising awareness about sexual and relationship violence; for example, the recent Twitter hashtags #MeToo, #MaybeHeDoesntHitYou engaged millions in online conversation about the realities of violence against women (McCauley et al. 2018).

As an initial strategy, what if university administrators partner with faculty, staff, students and alumni to lead social media dialogue that first acknowledges how upholding traditional gender roles privileges men over women in academic settings (e.g., former MSU physician Larry Nassar's sexual abuse was downplayed for a period of time) and then establish measurable pledges to challenge adherence to these norms to create more equitable conditions for all? As an example, recent Twitter dialogue following the hashtag, #HowIWillChange, is engaging men and boys in the #MeToo movement (PettyJohn et al. [In press](#)). To enact this effectively, significant efforts must be made to break through the problematic reality

and tradition on college campuses of privileging some voices over others. In this regard, I maintain that all campus administrators, faculty, staff and students will need systematic (and ongoing) anti-bias training at the intersection of sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and classism, and commit to fighting for civil and human rights to promote equity for all.

Rothman's **third thought experiment** is that sexual assault prevention experts be trained in consent and pleasure related to kink, anal sex, group sex and increasingly popular (but traditionally non-normative) sexual behaviors on college campuses. Such training would bring college campuses up to date with the reality of the sexual lives of college-age students. While I agree with Rothman's proposal, I maintain that such training be provided to all campus administrators, faculty, staff and students within the context of anti-bias curricula—which will encourage an in-depth examination of deeply ingrained biases that implicate women as sexual gatekeepers (England et al. 2008); for example, biases that might lead to our wrongly ascribing blame to women for not stopping kink sex from crossing over into unwanted sexual assault. It will also require training for all across campus regarding the role of alcohol and drugs within kink sexual interactions and sexual crimes, including the ways in which alcohol is normative on college campuses and the ways in which it is used to manipulate sexual consent (Bonomi et al. 2018).

Rothman's **fourth thought experiment** involves campuses providing education and counseling for sexual violence perpetrators. Supported by the surging emotion and momentum at the national level associated with #MeToo, #MaybeHeDoesntHitYou and high profile sexual violence scandals, for education and counseling for sexual violence perpetrators to be received well on college campuses, we will need to first demonstrate genuine support and engagement in anti-bias curricula to address the widespread disadvantages that exist for women, for persons of color and those from international backgrounds, for sexual minorities, for those with different abilities, and for persons from lower socioeconomic environments. As well, campuses will also need to demonstrate clear commitment and action in fighting for civil rights, for human rights in partnership with others at the broader societal level; this will again require the surrendering and evening out of power, which will test our courage and will.

In summary, I applaud Rothman for having the courage and innovation to abandon her “standard lecture notes on the social-ecological model and bystander intervention” to challenge us during this historical period, when national social movements (e.g., *MeToo*, *Black Lives Matter*) might be leveraged to support change efforts on college campuses, and universities can serve as leaders in national movements to impact historic and contemporary injustices at the intersection of sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and classism. Through her courage and innovation, Rothman has provided

us with four thought experiments, which call for us to do things differently, and at the very root, fundamentally challenge our willingness and capacity to change and to become leaders in anti-bias, civil rights and human rights practices to more substantially impact sexual violence against women and non-majority groups. I join Rothman in her outside-the-box thought proposals, and challenge us to step up for civil and human rights.

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