

TURNING POINTS THAT TEACH US TO PAY ATTENTION



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For those who experience it, sexual violence is a traumatic event, one that marks a major turning point in their lives. Recent years have witnessed many social changes affecting attitudes towards this type of violence.

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In 1983, the American woman Cheryl Araujo walked into a nearby bar to buy cigarettes and have a drink with a friend. She did not walk out, though – she ran, fleeing from four men who had

sexually assaulted her in a brutal way while other men watched and cheered. Much later, the American public heard the lawyer representing the men say these memorable words: “If you’re living with a man, what are you doing running around the streets getting raped?”

Victim blaming

The Cheryl Araujo trial was the first trial to be televised live. It was also the first trial in which charges were pressed not only against the perpetrators, but also against those who had incited them to continue

their violent behavior. More importantly, however, it was the first trial that allowed many Americans to see how people who experience sexual violence end up getting treated – even in such a seemingly obvious case as that of Cheryl Araujo. Although the term “victim blaming” was not yet present in the scientific nomenclature in the 1970s, the practice has existed for centuries. Holding the victim themselves at fault for the harm they suffered, was, is, and will continue to be a problem that requires further research and, above all, demands significant shifts in public awareness. This trial, with the victim being treated as the oppressor and the oppressors as victims, sparked off a wave of criticism and attacks against Cheryl Araujo that bore little resemblance to the kind of support one might expect to be extended someone who had suffered such harm. Much later, the judge presiding over the case questioned whether it had been appropriate to broadcast the trial live on nationwide television, doubting whether the victim of a brutal rape could additionally manage to endure such violent attacks from the public and then get her life back into some kind of balance and recover her mental health.

Could this trial be described as a turning point? Cheryl Araujo’s case marked a sudden change in how the stories of those who had experienced sexual violence were presented. It was an important and nationwide event in the United States, one that additionally put the spotlight on a social phenomenon that could hinder the healing process following a traumatic event – years later, the backlash from the American public was analyzed and attempts were made to understand the source of such drastic and negative opinions about Cheryl Araujo. Psychological research into negative social reactions and victim blaming are still crystalizing, bringing more and more data needed to ensure proper healing conditions for those who experienced a traumatic event.

Raising awareness

However, progress in the public understanding of the psychological consequences of sexual violence has taken the form of a sine wave: with ebbs and flows tied to various trends in research on the problem but also varying degrees of public interest in and knowledge of the phenomenon. Judith Herman, a scholar who has devoted her career to studying violence and its understanding in the social context, sees one of Sigmund Freud’s writings as marking the first major turning point in this field. Indeed, Freud’s paper entitled *The Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896) could have precipitated a significant change in the understanding of the consequences of violence experienced by its victims. It could have – but it was rejected by the psychiatric community, who played a leading role in the field of psychology at that time. Its rejection was

a very important event in the history of psychology: a possible breakthrough in our deeper understanding of individuals exposed to extreme stress, and of its psychological and social consequences, turns out to have been prevented by skepticism on the part of the very people who should have shown the highest level of empathy.

Moreover, when we look back at the breakthroughs and turning points in the psychology of traumatic events, including sexual violence, they include changes that occurred slowly, in the course of research conducted by specialists in the field, and also certain spectacular events that made history. However, changes that took place on the scientific level often did not translate into public understanding of the intricate consequences and difficult-to-comprehend reactions of those who experienced violence. Why did the scholarly, scientific knowledge fail to get translated into social language? What was missing? Apparently: yet another breakthrough.

Shifting attitudes

In 2013, sexual violence was included among the traumatic events leading to specific clinical consequences, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), listed in one of the most important diagnostic and scientific publications: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5). Why could this event be regarded as a turning point? First of all, in view of the timing: after Freud’s paper, it was not until 1974 that another attempt had been made to describe in a comprehensive way the consequences of sexual violence. A research paper by Ann Burgess and Lynda Holmstrom on the topic of “rape trauma syndrome” did not meet with the expected reception in the scientific community, but it did touch off an important debate. Nearly 40 years later, sexual violence came to



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be included in the DSM classification, which made it possible for the first time to diagnose post-traumatic stress disorder in individuals who had experienced various types of sexual violence.

Another major turning point came four years later, in 2017, as an event that made history. The #MeToo movement that then emerged not only demonstrated the magnitude of the problem we face in the context of sexual violence. It also highlighted, for the first time on such a scale, a problem that was no less important – the reluctance of victims to talk about their experience and, at the same time, the absence of adequate responses on the part of the community of those who had indeed dared to tell their story. However, the events of 2017 differed in their pace from those surrounding Cheryl Araujo’s trial – the period between the two situations, in which there had been successive studies and public campaigns, translated into a lower level of ostracism and victim blaming. For the first time in the history of sexual violence, the public was more likely to believe victims than to blame them. But the situation was still not perfect.

The courage of those who experienced sexual violence led to the conviction and imprisonment of several high-profile and also extremely dangerous individuals. What did #MeToo teach us? The lessons included paying the proper attention to what happens to those around us. But the movement has also stressed how easy it is for us to be complicit in another person’s tragic experiences – by maintaining our silence, by invalidating the experience of violence, or by allowing our opinions on sexual violence to be shaped by harmful myths.

Negligence

Tangible proof of the consequences of myths about sexual violence and their role in the treatment of its victims came to light, also in 2017, with the discovery of thousands of untested rape kits. In Detroit alone,

around 10,000 untested kits were discovered. This means that 10,000 reported cases of rape followed by evidence collection procedures had not been investigated at all by the police. In turn, when evidence collected in Cleveland was analyzed, more than 5,000 untested kits were found there. When evidence collected from the kits was examined, 1,935 matches were identified. Of these, 737 perpetrators had committed sexual violence more than once, which means that they were repeat sex offenders. In Detroit, 2,616 extracted DNA samples were matched with data from police databases. The work of a team appointed to study the discovered kits is presented in the documentary *I Am Evidence*. It takes an in-depth look at the problems outlined here, revealing statistics that may shock us and raise questions about what could have led to negligence of such magnitude.

The failure to set into motion procedures on behalf of people who experienced sexual violence had been signaled earlier: a 2012 report highlighted the role of myths about sexual violence in how police and prosecutors handle sexual violence cases. The report indicates that only cases described in the police documents as “real rape” were investigated further. This notion of “real rape” was based on myths about sexual violence. The incident reported by the victim had to meet several criteria: the victim did not know the perpetrator, had sustained considerable injuries and actively resisted the perpetrator, and was typically raped in an isolated, unknown location. In fact, such criteria are met by only a minority of rapes – according to a WHO report from 2002, most rapes are committed in a familiar location by a perpetrator known to the victim, and rarely involve major physical injury or the use of weapons. The report highlighted an important aspect of the functioning of myths about sexual violence not only in the social setting, but also in an environment created to be impartial, non-judgmental and, most importantly, safe for victims so that they could tell their story and fight for justice.

Changes in our understanding of individuals who have experienced sexual violence, in both the social and psychological aspects, will take place rapidly, allowing us to deepen our knowledge, but also to better understand certain phenomena and events in the social context. The studies and examples of sexual violence mentioned here could be indeed described as milestones, even if their achievement has been at times an arduous process that brought about no results for a long time. However, regardless of the steps taken, a true turning point will come once we are able to talk about sexual violence without forming our opinions based on harmful sources or myths, which present the experiences of the victims through the prism of a distorted mirror of false beliefs. Once we know how to talk without judging the victims and to pay the proper attention to their needs and their stories. ■

Further reading:

Krakauer J., *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, 2015.

Farrow R., *Catch and Kill: Spies, Lies and A Conspiracy to Protect*, 2019.

Herman J.L., *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 2015.