

TITLE: “I WANT TO GET THIS OFF MY CHEST:” WHEN PERPETRATORS PUBLICLY DISCLOSE HOW THEY RAPED THEIR VICTIM

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INTRO: Health officials recently declared sexual assault (defined as sexual activity that occurs through force, threat of force, coercion, or otherwise without the victim’s consent) to be a worldwide epidemic. Confusion regarding what constitutes consent continues to serve as a potential risk factor for sexual violence perpetration. About 25% of men have self-reported perpetrating sexual assault, with many claiming that they did so because they misperceived a partner’s sexual intention. Additionally, men are more likely than women to assume permission for sexual activity; as such, this disparity between the way men and women perceive consent may result in miscommunication. Differing perceptions of consent may also explain a sexual perpetrator’s mindset.

METHODS: Using qualitative data, the current study investigated the relationship between perpetrators’ understanding and perceptions of the incident with their decision to disclose publicly or anonymously. The data includes 77 first-hand accounts of sexual violence perpetration experiences from the popular social news website, Reddit.com. Using thematic analysis, we examined experiences for reoccurring and co-occurring statements.

RESULTS: Researchers read the narratives and identified common emotions or actions described by respondents. Through these emergent themes, it became clear that confusion about what constitutes consent, use of alcohol, misunderstanding of the victim’s sexual intent, and an active intent to sexually assault an individual all were factors in the reported assaults. Indeed, from the thematic analysis, an overlap between perpetrators’ rationale for assault and their desire to disclose appeared. By examining such constructs as perceived consent, active intentionality, and remorse, we found that the majority of disclosures remained anonymous, but that those perpetrators who expressed remorse or guilt were more likely to disclose publicly, using their real Reddit user account.

CONCLUSION: The findings supported the hypothesis that perpetrators disclosed more if they perceived a rationale for the event. This shows that future research should be done to examine if men would act differently if they were educated on women’s perceptions of such events.