Preventing Sexual Assault: Ethical Performance in Interpersonal Communication

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Sexual Assault Prevention: Conceptual, Ethical & Traumatic Considerations

• A Conceptual Foundation
  ▫ Researchers define sexual assault as “forced sexual aggression or contact with or without penetration against a victim” (Black, Weisz, Coats, & Patterson, 2000, p. 589).

• An Ethical Perspective
  ▫ Sexual assault is an acute form of violence that constitutes a reprehensible breach of ethics resulting in severely caustic and visceral trauma.

• Traumatic Consequences
  ▫ In the weeks, months, and years following sexual assault, survivors may experience depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and poor self-esteem (Butterfield, Barnett, & Koons, 2000).
  ▫ In addition to the serious physical and psychological consequences that rape has on college students, “many women who are assaulted drop out of school” (Bohmer & Parrot, 1993, p. 1).
Significance of Sexual Assault

- Contemporary Research Evidence
  - The incidences of sexual assault on college campuses across the country are extremely high (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004).
  - Studies demonstrate that one out of four women attending college steadily report surviving sexual assault or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004).
  - In our local community, five college women were attacked or assaulted during the fall 2006 semester—one at Long Beach City College and four on the CSULB campus (Daily 49er, November 6 and November 15, 2006).
  - Research also shows that date or acquaintance rape is an especially common form of assault among college students (Berkowitz, 1992; Holcomb, Sarvela, Sondag, & Hatton-Holcomb, 1993).
Preventing Sexual Assault: A Proactive Approach

• Proactive Performance: A Conceptual Definition
  ▫ Proactive performances present complicated, realistic scenes about domestic violence and sexual assault.
  ▫ Audience members enact possible, ethical interventions on stage with trained peer educators, reflecting the diversity of our urban campus.
  ▫ Theatrical interventions fostering a “proactive” audience stance create the most participatory form of peer-education performance (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987).
  ▫ Why is this “participatory” approach effective?
Proactive Performance: A Theoretical Explanation

• Proactive Performance & Self-efficacy Theory
  ▫ According to Bandura, “perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).
  ▫ Two of the most important sources of perceived self-efficacy are performance experience and vicarious experience.
  • Performance experience refers to the ability to control one’s behavior as a direct result of one’s efforts and actions in the world.
  • Vicarious experience refers to the ability to control one’s behavior as a consequence of the observations one makes about the actions of others as well as the results of those actions.
Cultivating Performance and Vicarious Experience: The Proactive Method

• **Performance Experience**
  ▫ Inviting student to come on stage and enact a variety of behaviors that can prevent sexual assault (e.g., attempting to change a situation so that an assault is thwarted, using humor to diffuse the situation) and help comfort a sexual assault survivor (e.g., taking the role of a helpful friend who listens, and letting a survivor know that her story is believable).

• **Vicarious experience**
  ▫ Watching the performance of ethical behavior presents vicarious experiences because students see their peers, on stage, enacting empathic and comforting responses intended to facilitate change during simulations of potential sexual assault or domestic abuse episodes.
Proactive Performance: Cultivating Self-efficacy Beliefs Effectively

• During a Proactive Performance: Lessons Learned
  ▫ Audience members are taught to believe in their ability to:
    • Prevent sexual assault even when faced with difficult antagonists (preventive self-efficacy)
    • Respond ethically to sexual assault survivors even when the protagonist is uncooperative (responsive self-efficacy)
    • Understand the plight of sexual assault survivors (perspective taking)
    • Connect with the feelings of distress that occur in sexual assault episodes (emotional synchrony)
    • Show concern for the welfare of sexual assault survivors (empathic concern)
    • Comfort survivors of sexual assault
Significance of Proactive Performance Research

- Proactive Performance Research
  - *Empathy* is a key factor that helps college students respond ethically to potential sexual assault victims and survivors (Rodríguez, Rich, Hastings & Page, 2006).
  - College students who view or participate in these performances report that they can console sexual assault survivors by delivering comforting messages (Rich & Rodríguez, 2007; Rodríguez, Rich, Hastings & Page, 2006).
  - Developing these communication skills among college students is important because research shows that perceived lack of social support after trauma is a key predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Brewing, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000).
  - Symptoms of PTSD are also predictable when sexual assault survivors experience antisocial reactions from others (Ullman & Filipas, 2001).
  - Proactive interventions focusing on empathy and the enactment of comforting responses to sexual assault disclosures represent a critically important communicative and performance-based phenomenon worthy of further research and applied practice in college settings.
Empathy and Preventing Sexual Assault: Conceptual Considerations

• The Meaning of Empathy: Contemporary Perspectives
  ▫ Thompson argues, “Empathy in a moral sense is a basic cognitive and emotional capacity underlying all moral sentiments and emotions one can have for another” (2007, p. 401).
  ▫ Batson and his colleagues define empathy “as an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else” (2002, p. 486). These researchers also argue “If the other [person] is perceived to be in need, then empathic emotions include sympathy, compassion, softheartedness, tenderness, and the like” (2002, p. 486).
  ▫ For Decety, “…in addition to emotional sharing and self-awareness, a key aspect of human empathy is the ability to consciously adopt the perspective of the other” (2005, p. 153).
  ▫ Decety also argues that “Another process associated with empathy is the sense of agency...” (2005, p. 153).
  ▫ Using these conceptual foundations—in the context of sexual assault—empathy is an intersubjective experience involving other-regarding moral sentiments or emotions, eliciting perceived visceral concern for the welfare of a vulnerable person or persons, with the intent of preventing or alleviating rape-related suffering.
Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Empathy: The Foundations of Ethical Performance

- Religion
- Phenomenology
- Neuroscience
- Social Psychology
- Philosophy
Religious Perspectives on Empathy: Buddhist & Judeo-Christian

• Empathy: Perspectives from Religion
  ▫ Buddhist
    • In Buddhism compassion is defined as the wish that all beings be free from suffering. Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to rid the world of its misery. We cannot take the task upon ourselves, and there is no magic wand to transform affliction into happiness. Yet we can develop our minds in virtue and thereby help others do the same. (The Dalai Lama, 2001, p. IX).

  ▫ Judeo-Christian
    • In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling...compassion means “to feel with,” ...most commonly compassion is associated with feeling the suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something (Borg, 1994, p.47 emphasis in the original).
Phenomenology, Neuroscience & Social Psychology: Perspectives on Empathy

- **Empathy: The Experience of Connecting with Others**
  - **Phenomenology**
    - Participation in another’s mental life creates a sense of feeling / sharing with / understanding the person, in particular the person’s intentions and feelings... The essential point is that when people move synchronously or in temporal coordination, they are participating in an aspect of the other’s experience. *They are partially living from the other’s center* (Stern, 2004, pp. 79-81 emphasis added).
    - It is as if the other’s intention inhabited my body, and mine his (Merleau-Ponty, 1945)
  - **Neuroscience**
    - It is as if the other becomes another self (Gallese, 2006).
    - Mirror neurons help us reenact in our brain the intentions of other people, giving us a profound understanding of their mental states (Iacoboni, 2008).
  - **Social Psychology**
    - ...empathy means to perceive the internal frame of reference of another person with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings that pertain thereto as if one were the person... (Decety, 2005, p. 145).
Empathy and The Ethical Relation: A Philosophical Stance

• Emmanuel Levinas: Empathy is not Narcissism or Egocentrism
  ▫ The other is always beyond my attempts at complete conceptual understanding.
  ▫ The self cannot objectify or conceptualize the other because the other deconstructs this totalizing project.
  ▫ The other undermines any attempts at total knowledge because the other is infinite—the other is beyond finite definition.
  ▫ The other is fundamentally different from the concept of self, and this difference is preferable.
  ▫ Defiance of definition is preferable because it forces the valuing of difference. For Levinas, this feature (difference) is a fundamental characteristic of our experience of the other in the world.
  ▫ Interpersonal encounters represent the fundamental ethical relationship because the self is called into question during encounters with the other.
Ethical Performance and The Ideology of Concern: Who am I and What can I do?

- **Moral Responsibility & Dignity: The Ethical Self**
  - “...the dignity of the self arises in and as an unsurpassable moral responsibility to and for the other person” (Cohen, 2006, p. xxvii).
  - I am the only person who must act—the responsibility is mine.
  - I matter because I can do something to help.
  - I can make a difference in this situation.
  - I feel the need to do something for the other person.

- **Thinking Like Levinas: The Bottom Line**
  - I become a “self” that matters because of my unshakable ethical responsibility for the welfare of other person.
  - An undeniable “call” to prevent or alleviate suffering invites “me” into existence.
Ethical Performance: A Conceptual Definition

• Performing Ethically: What are we Talking About?
  ▫ As the basis for all other-oriented sentiments of concern, empathy is the ground from which ethical performance flows onto the stage of lived experience.
  ▫ Without the authentic experience of empathy, ethical performance is highly unlikely—even under conditions that involve an agent, developing empathic skills through rehearsal.
  ▫ Ethical performance is the enactment of other-regarding moral behavior, emanating from an on-going perception of visceral concern for the welfare of a vulnerable person or persons, with the intent of preventing or alleviating suffering.
Ethical Performance: The Essential Features

• Identity
  ▫ The role that you are playing in any situation (e.g., Who are you playing in this scene?).

• Intention
  ▫ The goal or purpose that you are pursuing or achieving (e.g., What is your goal?).

• Agency
  ▫ The action or actions that you are taking while pursuing your goal or goals (e.g., How are you achieving your goal(s)).

• Context
  ▫ The setting, situation or environment where the action is unfolding (e.g., What is happening in this scene?).

• Awareness
  ▫ The experience of sensing, noticing, hearing and witnessing while acting or reflecting on living in situations (e.g., What are you intuiting?).
One by One: The Five Essential Features of Ethical Performance

- First: Identity
- Second: Intention
- Third: Agency
- Fourth: Context
- Fifth: Awareness

How can we think about these concepts in ways that help us “be” ethical actors or performers?
The Ethics of Identity

- Being A Moral Person: The Ethical Identity
  - “Being a moral person means that I am my brother’s [sister’s] keeper” (Bauman, 2002, p.51).
  - Creating an identity for ethical, social performance.
  - Defining “me” as caring “for” the other person.
The Ethics of Intention

• Creating an Ethical Purpose: Ethical Intention
  ▫ Creating an intention for ethical, social performance.
  ▫ Defining “my” purpose as one that is caring “for” the other person.
The Ethics of Agency

• Enacting Ethical Behavior: Ethical Agency
  ▫ Performing ethical, social action.
  ▫ Performing caring behavior “for” the other person.
The Ethics of Context

• Ethical Behavior in Social Situations: Contextual Ethics
  ▫ Defining the ethical situation.
  ▫ Viewing the situation as a “call” to care “for” the other person.
The Ethics of Awareness

• Awareness of the Ethical: Perceptual Ethics
  ▫ Noticing the ethical features of a situation.
  ▫ Sensing the arising of an inner “call” to care “for” the other person.
Thought to Practice: Ethical Performance in Action

• Identity, Intention, Agency, Context, and Awareness

• How can we use these concepts to perform ethical action or actions?
Ethical Performance: A Daily Practice

• The Ethics of Everyday Action: What is Most Important?
  • Reflective and Unreflective Action
    • “... our countless small and unreflective actions towards each other, and the patterns of living and relating which each human being gradually creates. It is here that we are systematically respected or discounted, accepted or rejected, enhanced or diminished in our personal being (Kitwood, 1990. p. 149).
  • Rationality vs. Skilled Practice
    • “... the arena [of ethical performance] must be recognized not primarily as one of rational decision-making, but of skilled practice (Kitwood, 1990, p. 41).
    • How can we practice ethical performance most effectively?
The Practice of Ethical Performance

- Creating Empathic Identity
- Developing Empathic Intentionality
- Informing Agency with Empathy
- Viewing Empathy in Context
- Sensing the Empathic Response
- What questions help us cultivate ethical performance?
Creating Empathic Identity

• Casting “Yourself” as an Agent of Change
  ▫ As you respond to this scene, what character can you play in this situation to be helpful? In other words, how can you play a helpful role? How can you be a helpful or useful person? What role can you play that is most helpful in this scene?
  ▫ For example: “I can play the role of ________...”
Developing Empathic Intentionality

- Creating an Ethical Purpose
  - As you respond to this scene, what is your goal? What is your purpose? What helpful results can you attempt to create? What helpful consequence(s) can you try to achieve? What helpful outcome would you like to happen next in this situation?
  - For example: “In this situation, my goal is __________ ...”
Informing Agency with Empathy

• Performing Ethical Behavior
  ▫ As you see this scene unfolding, what action(s) can you take to be helpful? What can you do—that is under your control—to make things better? What action can you take to be a helpful influence? How can you act in a way that is most beneficial?
  ▫ For example: “I can act in a helpful way by __________...”
Viewing Empathy in Context

- **Situational Ethics**
  - What can be done to create a scene with helpful consequences? What can be done to make the situation better? What (if anything) can be done to change the situation in the most helpful way?
  - For example: “I think that it might be helpful to change the situation by ______.”
Sensing the Empathic Response

• Noticing the “Call” to Ethical Action
  ▫ As you see the scene unfolding, what are you noticing? What are you sensing? What are you witnessing? What are you intuiting? What insights are arising for you in this moment?
  ▫ For example: “As I watch the performance, I sense that ________...”
Enacting Empathy in Daily Life: The Portfolio Assignment Summary

- Casting “Yourself” as an Agent of Change
- Creating Ethical Purpose
- Performing Ethical Behavior
- Seeing Empathy in Context
- Noticing the “Call” to Ethical Action
- Reflecting on Learning: Your Turn
  - Please Answer the Portfolio Assignment Questions
  - Everything Clear?
  - Any Questions?
Implications of Proactive Performance: Cultivating Empathic Responses

- The opportunity to perform and watch others perform provides a visceral, lived experience that heightens the perceived importance of sexual assault interventions.
- Inviting spectators to be active witnesses and performers or spect-actors.
- Casting “would be” spect-actors—in the audience—as possible agents of prosocial change.
- Unique, performance-centered features provide instances of enhanced intersubjectivity (vicarious experience) between spect-actors coming on stage, and audience members observing the presentation.
- Enhancing the capacity to intervene effectively through performance and vicarious experiences that cultivate empathy.