

WE ARE ALL SURVIVORS, WE
ARE ALL PERPETRATORS //
WHAT TO DO WHEN
SOMEONE TELLS YOU
THAT YOU VIOLATED
THEIR BOUNDARIES,
MADE THEM FEEL
UNCOMFORTABLE, OR
COMMITTED ASSAULT

a start



Introduction: WE ARE ALL SURVIVORS, WE ARE ALL PERPETRATORS

from *Rolling Thunder* #1 (crimethinc.com), by redefiningconsent at yahoo dot com

The discussion about how to cope with sexual assault within radical communities is constantly evolving, and fortunately, at least in some circles, it is finally beginning to be carried on in the open. Much can be taken from this discussion and applied to the ways other types of conflicts are addressed; but at the same time, there is much that needs to be reworked. We would do well to reconsider the current language available for addressing these issues: what the terms mean, what purposes they serve effectively, what their shortcomings are.

In our relationships, we often set boundaries and sometimes even ask each other for consent. In most relationships, these boundaries are unspoken, assumed: *I will not sit on my friend's partner's lap. I will only hug this friend for hello and goodbye.* In romantic relationships, we tend to define these boundaries more explicitly with our partners: *I will not have unprotected sex. It is not okay for my partner to kiss me in front of my parents.* In relationships of all kinds, from platonic to sexual, we can cross others' boundaries and hurt them or make them uncomfortable. This happens frequently, especially in relationships in which boundaries are only implicit.

Sexual assault is an intense manifestation of this violation of boundaries. When a sexual assault occurs, the one who crosses the boundary is labeled the perpetrator and the one whose boundary has been crossed is called the survivor, a more empowering term for victim. This is forceful terminology, and it can be really useful for assisting the survivor in naming and processing an experience. Simply having language with which to break the silence imposed by such a difficult experience can be a powerful thing. This language is also useful for dealing with those who are unwilling to be held accountable for their actions, who refuse to talk about and work through their issues. Being labeled a perpetrator of sexual assault carries a heavy weight; naming an act sexual assault means that the matter will be taken seriously and, hopefully, addressed by all who hear about it. In this way, the labeling of the perpetrator can pick up where self-initiated dialogue leaves off.

However, beyond these specific situations, the perpetrator/survivor language has many limitations. There is a wide spectrum of interactions that are unhealthy and non-consensual, but the term sexual assault describes only a narrow range of that

spectrum. Imagine if we could plot our interactions on a line from the most consensual to the least. The ones that are completely consensual, in which no boundaries are crossed, would occupy a small space on one side, while those interactions labeled sexual assault would occupy a small space on the other; somewhere in the middle, between these extremes, there would still be a whole range of interactions in which boundaries are crossed to varying extents. As it stands, the language used specifically to describe sexual assault is not sufficient for describing those interactions that fall somewhere in the middle.

The language of perpetrator and survivor can also promote a false sense that sexual assault is the only form of boundary violation worth addressing. Describing sexual assault and the survivors and perpetrators that experience sexual assault as distinct from other, presumably “normal,” experiences of sexuality misrepresents any experience not labeled sexual assault as free of coercion. On the contrary, in our authoritarian society, domination infects everything, resulting in even our most intimate and cherished relationships being tainted with subtle—or sometimes not so subtle—unequal power dynamics. A division between “sexual assault” and “everything else” lets everyone off the hook who has not been labeled a sexual assaulter; it thus focuses attention away from the ways we all can stand to improve our relationships and our sensitivity to one another.

One of the most problematic consequences of our lack of appropriate language is that people are often reluctant to address more subtle or complicated experiences of boundary violations at all. The perpetrator/survivor language is so serious that in less dramatic cases—for example, in situations that are not violent or physically forceful—the survivor may even wonder if what he or she is feeling legitimately constitutes a serious problem worth exploring and addressing. If a person chooses not to use the language of sexual assault to describe a violation of his or her boundaries, does that mean it is not important? Many people are understandably hesitant to accuse loved ones of sexual assault or label them perpetrators because of the stigma attached to these terms and the drama that often ensues when they are used. This should not mean that non-consensual interactions go unaddressed.

It also seems to be the case that, as much as the perpetrator/survivor language is useful when dialogue is impossible, it can also halt dialogue where it might otherwise be possible. This language creates categorizations of people rather than descriptions of their behavior, reducing an individual to an action. As such, it tends to put people on the defensive, which often makes it harder for them to receive criticism. The definitive implications and accusatory tone of this language can precipitate a situation in which, instead of focusing on reconciling differing experiences of reality, people on opposing sides struggle to prove that their

interpretation of reality is the “true” one. Once this dynamic is in effect, the discussion is no longer about people working through their problems and trying to understand and respect each other’s unique experiences, but an investigation about “objective” reality in which all parties stand trial. No one should ever be forced to defend what he or she feels, least of all someone who has survived a violation of his or her boundaries. Regardless of “what really happened,” a person’s experience is his or hers alone and deserves to be validated as such. To decide which reality is “the truth,” we must give value to one person and not the other: this is validation on the scarcity model. When conflicts arise surrounding a question of sexual assault, communities are often forced to take sides, making the matter into a popularity contest; likewise, individuals can feel required to support one person at the other’s expense.

If we could develop a way of addressing these situations that focused on promoting communication and understanding rather than establishing who is in the wrong, it might make it easier for those who commit boundary violations to hear and learn from criticism and less stressful for those whose boundaries are crossed to address these instances. Whenever a person feels that his or her desires have not been respected, regardless of whether or not a court of law would find there to be sufficient evidence to substantiate charges of sexual assault, all those involved in the situation need to hold themselves accountable for the ways they have not communicated with or respected each other and work out how to make sure it never happens again.

We also need a language that can account for situations in which it is not clear who is the perpetrator and who is the survivor. Identifying one person as a perpetrator may not make sense if both or all of the people involved in the interaction both crossed another person’s boundaries and had their own boundaries crossed. The language we currently have available to describe these situations creates a false division of the world between perpetrators and survivors, when—just as with oppressors and those who are oppressed—most people experience both sides of the dichotomy at one time or another. Such a binary sets up one class of people as entirely in the right and one as entirely in the wrong, as if one always bears all accountability and the other has no responsibility or no way to make their relationships more consensual. In extreme cases, this is indeed the case, but we also need to be able to address all the other cases, in which both parties could stand to improve their communication skills and sensitivity.

We need a new way to conceptualize and communicate about our interactions, one that takes into account all of our different boundaries—sexual, romantic, and platonic—and the ways they can be crossed. Practicing consent and respecting

others' boundaries is important both in sexual relationships and in every other aspect of our lives: in organizing together, in living collectively, in planning direct actions securely. Non-hierarchical, consensual relationships are the substance of anarchy, and we need to prioritize seeking and promoting consent in all our interactions.

As every experience is unique, we should use language specific to each one, rather than attempting to force all our experiences into abstract categories; we can do so by describing each individually: as a deliberate boundary violation, for example, or as a decision in which consent was ambiguous. We can do much to break down the stigma and shame surrounding the issue of sexual assault by opening up dialogue about non-consensual interactions of all kinds. In developing our communication skills about our abuse and abuser histories, our sexual histories, our desires, we can create the spaces to begin to talk about the grey areas of consent. We need to foster a culture that takes into account the fact that, despite how desperately we want to be good for the people we love, we sometimes make mistakes, fail to be truthful, and cross boundaries. We need to support both survivors and perpetrators: not to condone non-consensual actions, but because we all need to rid ourselves of the ill effects of living in a hierarchical, capitalist society, and to do so, we must work together.

To broach these questions is not to deny that there is such a thing as sexual assault, nor to defend it as acceptable behavior. On the contrary, it is to demand that we acknowledge that we live in a rape culture: a culture in which sexual assault is pervasive, as are the forces and dynamics that promote it. Sexual assault is a part of all of us who have grown up in this society; we cannot ignore it, or pretend that because we ourselves have been assaulted or because we work to live anarchy in all aspects of our lives that we are not capable of sexual assault. The only way to rid our lives of sexual assault is to open the issue up. This means we must make it safe enough to come out as an assaulter, so that each of us is able to address, openly, honestly, and without fear, everything from the most minor acts of inconsideration to the most serious boundary violations. We are all survivors; we are all perpetrators.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE TELLS YOU THAT YOU VIOLATED THEIR BOUNDARIES, MADE THEM FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE, OR COMMITTED ASSAULT

via Philly's Pissed (phillyspissed.net), by forgetme at riseup dot net

This guide offers suggestions for what to do if you're told that you've assaulted/hurt/violated someone or crossed their boundaries. These things can be sexual, but do not have to be.

Assaulters are not villains. They/we are not doomed. We are humyn, and how we address these situations (and ourselves), after being told of it, makes a hell of a difference. Literally. Dealing with assault is possible. It is *your* responsibility. *You* can make a *big difference* by owning up to it and taking concerted measures to address it.

You can be loved. We can heal from this. Don't give up. This helps. Being called out is a gift. It is an opportunity to grow. Embrace that. Assault is cowardly. Owing up to it is brave. Good luck.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS

Apologize. If that's hard: do not say, "I'm sorry you feel that way" because that puts the blame on them, instead say "I'm sorry that my actions hurt you." Admit if you fucked up on a boundary or went too far. Admit what your body did. Admit what you said. Admit what you did *not* say or ask.

Fight off feelings of defensiveness. If you are unable to get past that, tell the other person you need a break so you can respond properly. Seek help. Admit *to yourself* that your actions can affect others negatively, regardless of your intentions. Know you are not doomed, but you have hurt another person. People will support your efforts to address it.

Admit that even if you do not remember the event, or recall it differently, or if you do not believe you *would* have done or said it – that it is possible and what the person experienced is valid. If you do not understand how what you did made someone feel violated, do not put them on trial or argue. Instead, seek help (options listed later on).

SUPPORT THE OTHER PERSON BY GIVING POWER BACK

Always ask the other person first. Asking puts choice back in their hands. **Asking is empowering.** Ask them how they felt and feel. Ask them what you could do to help them feel empowered. Do your best to make it happen. Even if you think their boundaries or needs are extreme, support, enable, and respect them. *That is support.* Being supported and feeling safe are key to healing and rebuilding trust.

Do not argue, question, or suggest changes to their needs. Admit it if you cannot handle their needs. Seek support. Make sacrifices to help them feel safe and respected. Your giving up a little is worth restoring the power your actions took from them.

Ask them if it's okay to bring this subject up with them or if you should wait for them to bring it up. Ask how and when they want to be checked in with. Ask what forms of physical contact they are okay with *now*. Keep checking in *constantly*. If they do not want to be physical, figure out what will ensure that (i.e. *you* stop drinking, sleep with clothes on, reaffirm that decision aloud before bed, talk about and avoid touching body parts that turn either of you on).

If it's okay with them (ask!), tell everyone what you did. This takes responsibility, opens you up for help in changing/dealing, and breaks apart the silence around assault.

SEEK HELP (FOR THEIR NEEDS AND YOURS)

While you may feel like people will hate you, many will respect your owning up to your actions and your efforts to support another person. It is healing for many of us. Changing the attitudes you have is important because attitudes are key in assault (i.e. blame, entitlement, respect, denial...)

Ask a friend (try to ask the other person if it's okay to talk to the person – if mutually known – and what is okay to disclose). Try to find someone who has not also been called out. Find a go-between person whom you are both okay with to help navigate issues. Choose wisely.

Call an assault hotline. Seek professional therapy. Individual or couples counseling can be free in most cities. Even if you are the most radical person, abuse/boundary issues are omnipotent. Therapists can help, just find one who fits.

Think about it: this may be scary at first – or overwhelming – but your life *will* be better for addressing it. Feel honored to have the chance to change your behavior, whether you two remain close or not. *Thank them* for having the courage to call you out. Seize the chance to change.

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