

Survivors Are So Sensitive

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[Edited for length]

Most critics of rape jokes object on one of two bases, neither of which are "your rape joke will directly cause someone to go out and commit a rape." (That idea **is** absurd—which is why it's so appealing to defenders of rape jokes to deliberately misrepresent critics' arguments in such a fashion.) One criticism is that rape jokes are triggers for survivors of sexual violence. The other is that rape jokes contribute to a rape culture in which rape is normalized.

It's that second objection that tends to get repackaged as "your rape joke will directly cause someone to go out and commit a rape," which is, of course, a willful and dishonest simplification of a complex argument. **Rape culture** is a collection of narratives and beliefs that service the existence of endemic sexual violence in myriad ways, from overt exhortations to commit sexual violence to subtle discouragements against prosecution and conviction for crimes of sexual violence. The rape joke, by virtue of its ubiquity, prominently serves as a tool of normalization and diminishment.

No, one rape joke does not "cause" someone to go out and commit a rape. A single rape joke does not exist in a void. It exists in a culture rife with jokes that treat as a punch line a heinous, terrifying crime that leaves most of its survivors forever changed in some material way. It exists in a culture in which millions and millions of women, men, and children will be victimized by perpetrators of sexual violence, many of them **multiple times**. It exists in a culture in which rape not being treated as seriously as it ought means that vanishingly few survivors of sexual violence see real justice, leaving their assaulters free to create even more survivors. It exists in a culture in which rape is not primarily committed by strangers lurking in dark alleyways and jumping out of bushes, but primarily by people one knows, who nonetheless fail, as a result of some combination of innate corruption and socialization in a culture that disdains consent and autonomy, to view their victims as human beings deserving of basic dignity.

That is the environment into which a rape joke is unleashed—and one cannot argue "it isn't **my** rape joke that facilitates rape" any more than a single raindrop in an ocean could claim never to have drowned anyone. But let us pretend for a moment that rape jokes do not convey and sustain the rape culture. That still leaves us with the other criticism on which critics' objections are based: That rape jokes trigger (some) survivors of sexual violence.

Being triggered does not mean "being upset" or "being offended" or "being angry," or any other euphemism people who **roll** their **eyes** long-sufferingly in the direction of trigger warnings tend to imagine it to mean. Being triggered has a very specific meaning that relates to evoking a physical and/or emotional response to a survived trauma.

To say, "I was triggered" is not to say, "I got my delicate fee-fees hurt." It is to say, "I had a significantly mood-altering experience of anxiety." Someone who is triggered may experience anything from a brief moment of dizziness, to a shortness of breath and a racing pulse, to a full-blown panic attack.

A survivor of sexual violence who experiences a trigger is experiencing the same thing as a soldier who experiences a trigger, potentially even including flashbacks. Like many soldiers who return from war, many survivors of sexual violence are left with post-traumatic stress disorder. Unlike soldiers, however, they are not likely to receive much sympathy, or benefit from attempts to understand, when they are triggered. Instead, triggered survivors of sexual violence are dismissed as oversensitive, as hysterics, as humorless, as weak.

Trivializing the concerns of a person whose traumatic experience of sexual violence has been triggered is a legitimate response. But it's not a very kind or decent one. I will never understand why anyone wants to be the total jerk who evokes someone's memories of being assaulted by blindsiding them with a rape joke (or image, or metaphor, or whatever), in the guise of "humor." No "joke" is worth triggering someone. Not if you understand what triggering someone really means.

Quite honestly, my objection to rape jokes is not even because I particularly find the jokes personally triggering anymore. While I'm bothered by the fact that the jokes normalize and effectively minimize the severity of rape and thus perpetuate the rape culture, I'm more bothered by the thought of a woman who's recently been raped, who's just experienced what may be the worst thing that will ever happen to her, and turns on the telly, or goes to the cinema, or a comedy club, to have a much-needed laugh—only to see that horrible, life-changing thing used as the butt of a joke.

I don't understand—and I don't believe I ever will—why anyone wants to be the person who sends that shiver down her spine, who makes her eyes burn hot with tears at an unwanted memory while everyone else laughs and laughs.

And I won't understand as long as I live why people who are told by survivors the damage their rape jokes do—on an individual, intimate level—respond by dismissing survivors as oversensitive, instead of considering the possibility that maybe being desensitized to the abject horror of rape isn't really rather worse. That maybe it is not survivors who are too sensitive, but they who are simply not sensitive enough.

I'd like to see them at least be honest enough to admit that their critics are not accusing them of "creating" rapists or "causing" rape—and have the courage not to hide behind mendacious misrepresentations of why people object to their continued use of rape jokes, and the honesty to admit they just don't give a fuck about survivors.