

The White Knight Disconnect and the realities of rape culture

This is a guest post from Nina Funnell, an Australian sexual assault prevention advocate and educator. You might remember Nina from [her Feministing Five interview](#) last year.

Trigger warning: This post may be triggering for survivors of sexual assault and their supporters.

Recently the internet was outraged by [a deeply disturbing clip](#) featuring a young man at a comedy performance who tries to regale his audience with an account of what can only be described as a sexual assault. According to his version, he turns up to a drunk woman's hotel room as a supposed substitute for the male friend she was expecting, he invites himself in, and after she repeatedly asks him to leave he has sex with her. This is all meant to be funny. You can see the clip and read about the story [here](#).

It took me a while to recover from watching this. As a sexual assault survivor and anti-violence advocate, this triggered many emotions not the least of which was grave concern for the current wellbeing of the woman. But when the emotions settled and I was able to take a step back I realised that what this piece of footage does is document and provide us with a very valuable, firsthand insight into how sexual predators justify their actions, and the cultural work that goes on around them to normalise, reinforce and excuse that behaviour. When it comes to understanding the mechanics of rape culture, this is one of the most illustrative texts I've come across.

To begin with the young man, now identified as Eric D Angell, uses a number of excuses to justify his behaviour; her age, her inebriation, the fact that his friends encouraged him to go over, her sexual interest in a co-worker, the fact she left the door open, the fact that she was supposedly stronger, the fact that she didn't resist.

Except that she did.

Repeatedly.

All up (according to his version) she asked him to leave no fewer than five times. A couple things are clear from this:

- 1) Firstly, at no point has he listened to what she is saying or stopped to think about how intimidating and scary it would be as a woman to have a strange man turn up to your hotel

room, let himself in uninvited, ignore your requests for him to leave, and pressure you for sex. There is a complete lack of empathy in him.

2) Secondly, while Angell has used many strategies to justify his actions it is also clear that he genuinely has no idea that what he has described would legally meet the definition of rape. None. Zero. Zip. After all, there is no way he would talk about it publicly, let alone brag about it while being recorded if he did.

So what's going on here?

In my work with elite male athletes and college students in Australia this is something I have seen a lot of. Men who openly admit to having raped a woman who have absolutely no idea that what they are confessing to is an assault. I have spoken to many men who will outwardly profess to oppose rape, who then go on in the very next breath to admit to having committed an act which would legally meet the definition of sexual violence. I call this the White Knight Disconnect: men who claim they are appalled by rape (and even imagine themselves as a "white knight" who would defend women against rape) who are in fact committing acts of sexual violence in their private lives.

Like all of us, these men have been schooled in some pretty pervasive rape myths. They think that rape is something that happens down a dark alley involving a knife wielding man and a balaclava. They assume rape involves physical force and violence. They believe it must involve direct death threats. They imagine screaming women. The result of this highly violent, stranger danger stereotype is that as a community we often have difficulty labelling and addressing acts of sexual violence which do not marry up with the cliché. And rapists themselves either fail to identify that their actions constitute rape or they do, but they find ways to justify their behaviour as legitimate.

And it's not that difficult for them to do that justification-work when their mates are there to back them up. One aspect of this story which I think warrants particular attention is the role of Angell's friends before, during and after the assault:

Before it they encourage him to go over to her apartment, even giving him the cab-fare. No one tried to dissuade him.

During the assault they are silent.

After the assault they seem to applaud him.

In his account Angell says "when I tell this story to my friends..." It is clear he has practised this 'material' on friends. And been celebrated for it. So much so, that he has no problem now sharing it with the world. In that sense, these friends have been complicit in this rape scenario as they have helped facilitate it and have actively normalised and diminished the seriousness of it afterwards. Through their actions his actions became socially condoned.

Sexual story telling that goes on in homosocial male spaces like pubs and locker rooms is one means by which men go about establishing a group-agreed upon set of norms, values and rules about sex. This is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly these spaces are socially designed in such a way to exclude female participation. These spaces are also often overlaid with other tropes associated with heterosexual alpha-male culture including heavy drinking, sports and sometimes female nudity (such as in strip clubs or posters of nude women in car-shops etc). In these spaces stories about women (as sexual exploits) become the focal point and means through which men achieve heightened homosocial bonding, but integral to this process is the assumed absence of all female subjects and female viewpoints. This silencing of the female perspective is one of the ways in which rape narratives become normalised.

If we are ever to address rape culture we need to not only look at the actions and tactics that perpetrators use but we must also continue to address how cultural arrangements excuse and normalise that behaviour.

<http://feministing.com/2011/09/09/guest-post-the-white-knight-disconnect-and-the-realities-of-rape-culture>