

Sexual Assault in the Military, Part 3: Context and Causes

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I am a clinical psychologist who has evaluated and treated hundreds, if not over a thousand offenders. Through my clinical experiences and study of the research, what seems most relevant in this hearing is to convey an understanding of the motivations and means of how sexual assault happens from the offender's perspective.

It seems we have a basic familiarity with concept that sexual offending is driven by sexual deviance, like a sexual arousal to prepubescent children. Sexual deviance is one "pathway" or motivator for sexual assault. This "pathway" contributes to persistent pursuit of sexual gratification through the sexual victimization of others, whether children or adults. There is an alternative or additional pathway to sexual assault, however. This is the "character" pathway. The character pathway is that which motivates sexual assault or "allows" sexual assault through the offender's personality. This character pathway can be the sole motivator, or work in collaboration with sexual deviance to create a very dangerous offender.

The character pathway explains offense behavior that occurs in a particular context or opportunity. An offender who has a personality replete with criminality, egocentricity, callousness towards others, thrill-seeking, a lack of remorse or empathy, arrogance, or entitlement can act sexually assaultive or victimizing in the right environment and not be primarily motivated by sexual deviance. Instead, because the offender has certain traits and lacks internal barriers to offending, the risk of the offender becoming a rapist or sexual offender increases in a particular environment or with particular opportunities provided by circumstance, culture, or subculture.

An example of this would be a highly criminal, antisocial person who rapes in prison. This offender may not be sexually aroused to same sex partners or not be sexually aroused specifically by anger or power needs. However, due to the environment, the character pathology of the offender, and the issues that impact the victim, a particular type of person can engage in rape behavior for sexual gratification, domination, humiliation, or oppression (or all of the above) because he has a callous, entitled, remorseless character who has no reason (internally) not to rape. The environment or context contributes to an external environment that promotes or is not inhibitory towards rape. So, the offender with few internal barriers to sexual aggression,

placed into an environment that provides few external barriers to sexual aggression can contribute to a situation that enhances the risk of sexual assault.

The external environment and the factors it presents are multi-faceted. There is the structure of that environment or “subculture” itself, the values inherent in the subculture, the attitudes towards risk issues in assault, and the beliefs, values, and issues that impact the attitudes towards and protection of victims. Below is a table that outlines issues that impact sexual assault for the “right type” of personality.

Prison	Military/War Situation
Closed system	Closed system
Internal investigation	Internal investigation
Clear hierarchy	Clear hierarchy
Separation between inmates and staff	Separation between enlisted/officers
Male dominated	Male dominated
Attitude of "us" and "them" in/out of system	Attitude of "us" and "them" in/out of the system
Devaluation of weakness/vulnerability	Devaluation of weakness/vulnerability
Reliance of victim in the system	Reliance of victim on unit
Victims tend to be minority (gay, bitch)	Victims tend to be female/gay (minority)
Victims punished for reporting	Victims risk penalization for reporting
Return to assault environment	Return to assault environment
Group protection of/fear of offender	Group protection of offender
Consequented use of substances	Potential consequences for substances

Factors that effect investigation of sexual assault generally

- "He said/he said"
- Perceived secondary gain for reporting
- Little evidence
- Secrecy
- No witnesses
- Shame/blame/fear of reprisal
- Consensual myth

The structure of environment can protect the offender. The further the victim is from the “help,” the more the victim is reliant on his/her cohorts in the environment, the more the victim is perceived as benefitting from reporting, the more likely the offender is to prevail and succeed in the assault without a disclosure.

Additionally, some cultures contribute significantly to the offender’s entitlement, arrogance, devaluation of others, and elevation or justification of violence. One significant factor that exists in interpersonal violence is the devaluation of the victim. A victim can be devalued and isolated in many ways. The victim can be seen as “less than” through sexism, racism, or homophobia. These issues are magnified in environments where there is an “us” and “them” mentality. This mentality may be about the “enemy,” straights versus gays, “snitches,” or any label or roles

prescribed to another person that is seen as weaker, lesser, or otherwise pejorative to the victim. The narcissistic, arrogant, antisocial personality will exploit the group's ideas about the victim to further justify sexual aggression and exploitation and may, in fact, garner group support (or at least silence) in regards to the assault behavior. This process has clearly been illustrated in Abu Ghraib.

All of these factors contribute to the behavior of a character disordered offender, the victim, and the "witnesses," to cover, collude with, and hide sexual assault. Additionally, it is very important to understand the sexual assault in the context of the character and not evaluate it just in terms of the presence or absence of sexual deviance or other criminal "record." Sexual assault and the pre- and post-offense behavior is always reflective of the character before you.