



the
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OPINION...

Hoaxes no joke

First of all, I am not a journalist and this is not a book, although it could easily become one. This is, as the headline suggests, an opinion and as space is limited, it must necessarily be one of limited scope. On learning that two of four reported sexual assaults on campus women in past weeks have turned out to be hoaxes fabricated by the so-called victims and, subsequent to police questioning, have been admitted to by means of written statements, I was temporarily dumbstruck. Although the faculty of speech has since returned, my initial feelings of disbelief have been replaced with feelings of dismay, despair, and a bitter anger too deep for words. Surely other women and men on this campus feel similarly frustrated by this turn in events. Surely, in some way, this incident has touched us all.

Rape is a serious allegation with serious consequences for both victim and perpetrator; men occasionally go to prison for it; women must live with the memory of it for the duration of their lives. Ditto for sexual assault. Even in cases where formal charges are not laid nor conviction obtained, both memory and potential consequence linger. A deliberate and false accusation of rape, sexual assault, or any other crime is malicious and injurious; to cry "wolf" is unforgivable. Such a charge bears serious ramifications for the individuals involved as well as for those around them. Drop a stone into a pond and watch the ripples gain momentum as they spread in concentric circles over the surface to see what I mean. Rumours and gossip operate on similar premises. Careers, family life, personal relationships and reputations can be irreparably damaged. Fortunately, in this case, no arrests were made, although, without doubt, an undisclosed number of innocent men were subjected to unnecessary and embarrassing questioning by local police. Happily, in this case anyway, the only "real" damage was of a social nature, sustained by the victims themselves and effectively self-inflicted. To the nameless women involved, this may sound as if I wish you had been raped or sexually assaulted. Far from it -- I am grateful (probably more than you) that at no time was your physical safety threatened and that your residual memories of the event are purely imaginative. Individual credibility can be rebuilt with effort over time and social embarrassments may be lived down, but the horror and humiliation of a rape or sexual assault exceeds the imagination; it must be relived over and over again.

While indeed one should feel only pity for such confused and narcissistic individuals as must resort to concocting rape tales in order to "get attention" or to "get back at a boyfriend"; pity for such individuals should not preclude the need for social criticism. Whether or not the individuals engaged in such a flight of fancy to salve an overlarge ego or to build an undersized one seems immaterial; a lie is a lie is a lie, and so on. The issue is sexual violence. Sexual violence is a real threat in our society and is something which requires attention; however, the kind of attention elicited by falsified reports is exactly the wrong kind.

Beyond affecting the national reputation of this university, incidents such as this must necessarily touch students of both sexes to some extent. One need only observe the late night procession of taxis bearing lone female occupants away from campus, or monitor lunch time conversations to sense the canopy of fear and suspicion that has descended on campus in recent weeks. For women and men truly concerned with the issue of sexual violence and especially for those untold number of women who have, in fact, been the victims of rape or suffered a sexual assault at some point in their lives, for those who have publically faced their aggressor and the judicial system successfully or unsuccessfully, or for those of us who, for whatever reasons, choose silence and wrestle privately with the pain and humiliation, the whole subject has dredged up much unpleasantness.

It is common knowledge that most cases of sexual violence go unreported; that 2 of 4 reported cases turn out to be hoaxes does little for the cause and nothing at all in effecting social change. I am disappointed that the nameless women involved in the false accusations will not be charged with public mischief; however to formally charge the individuals involved may discourage real victims from coming forward and reporting real incidents of sexual violence.

While I offer no prescription for the world's ills, I have a feeling that the solution to sexual violence lies in *honest* communication between and within the sexes. While two of the four reported cases are closed, two cases are *not* closed. The need for caution still exists.

KAREN BRAUN