

empirically-informed activism

understanding the science of the mind to fight  
sexual violence on college campuses

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National Sexual Assault Conference 2015

## I. How Do Perpetrators Commit Sexual Violence with Relative Impunity?

## II. Why Might Campus Activism Be Especially Difficult?

### I. How Do Perpetrators Commit with Impunity?

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- A. Widespread sexual objectification\*
- B. Knowing that sexually violent behavior might be regarded as normative or even excusable\*
- C. Knowing that people probably won't intervene right in the moment
- D. Knowing that survivors won't be trusted to accurately recall their experience
- E. Knowing that they'll probably even be blamed for what happened to them

# Neural Correlates of Sexual Objectification

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literally what is wrong with sexists' brains?

## Ambivalent Sexism Theory

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- Hostile sexism: Blatantly negative attitudes and stereotypes of women
  - Women are bad at math, always let their emotions get the best of them, primarily exist as sex objects, etc.
- Benevolent sexism: Attitudes and stereotypes of women that might appear subjectively positive, but are actually damaging to women and gender equity as a whole
  - Women are delicate, pure, belong on a pedestal, etc.

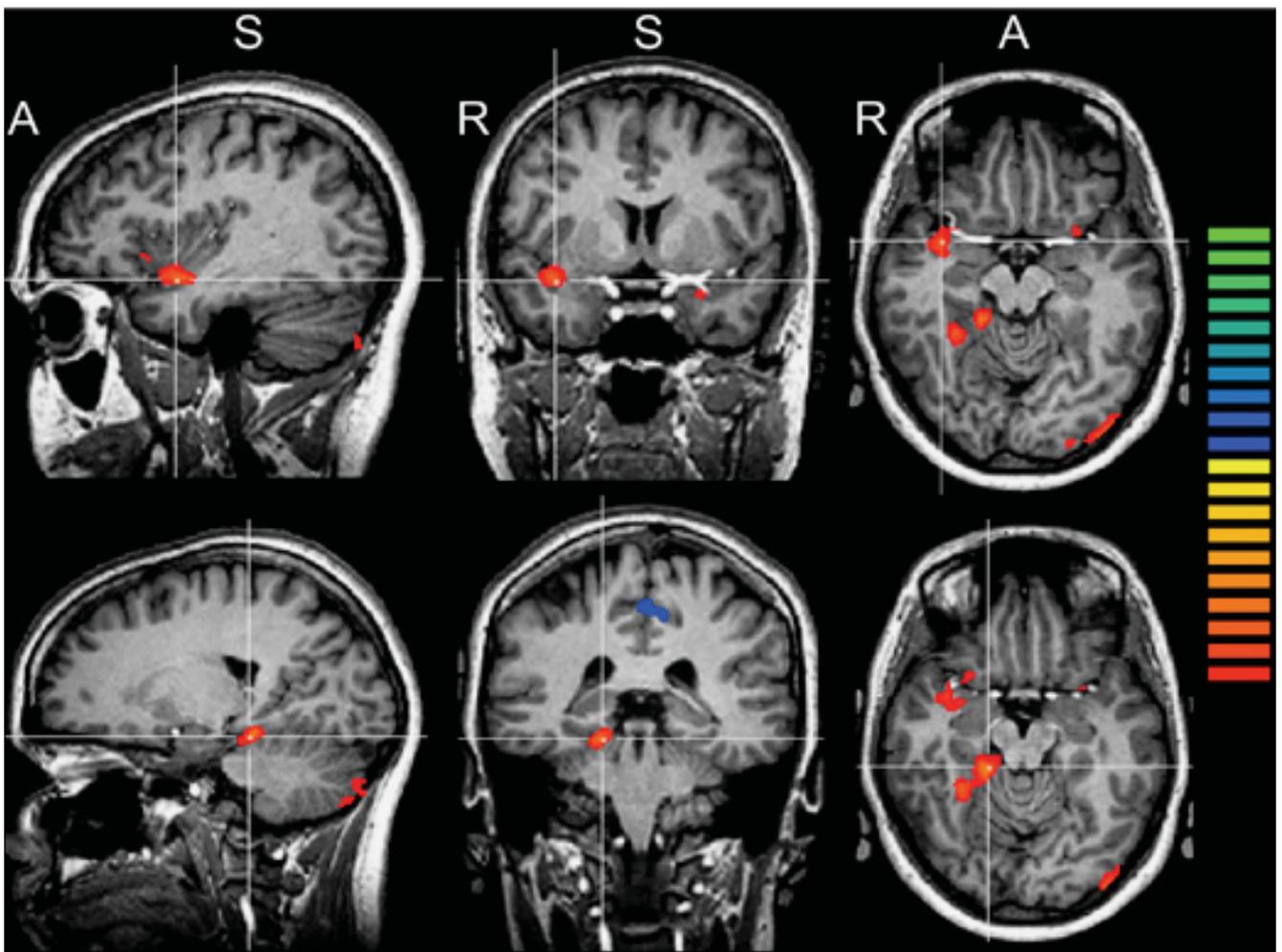
## Example ASI Items: Hostile Sexism

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- Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for “equality”
- Women exaggerate problems they have at work
- When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against
- Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist
- Feminists are seeking for women to have more power than men

Glick & Fiske, 1996



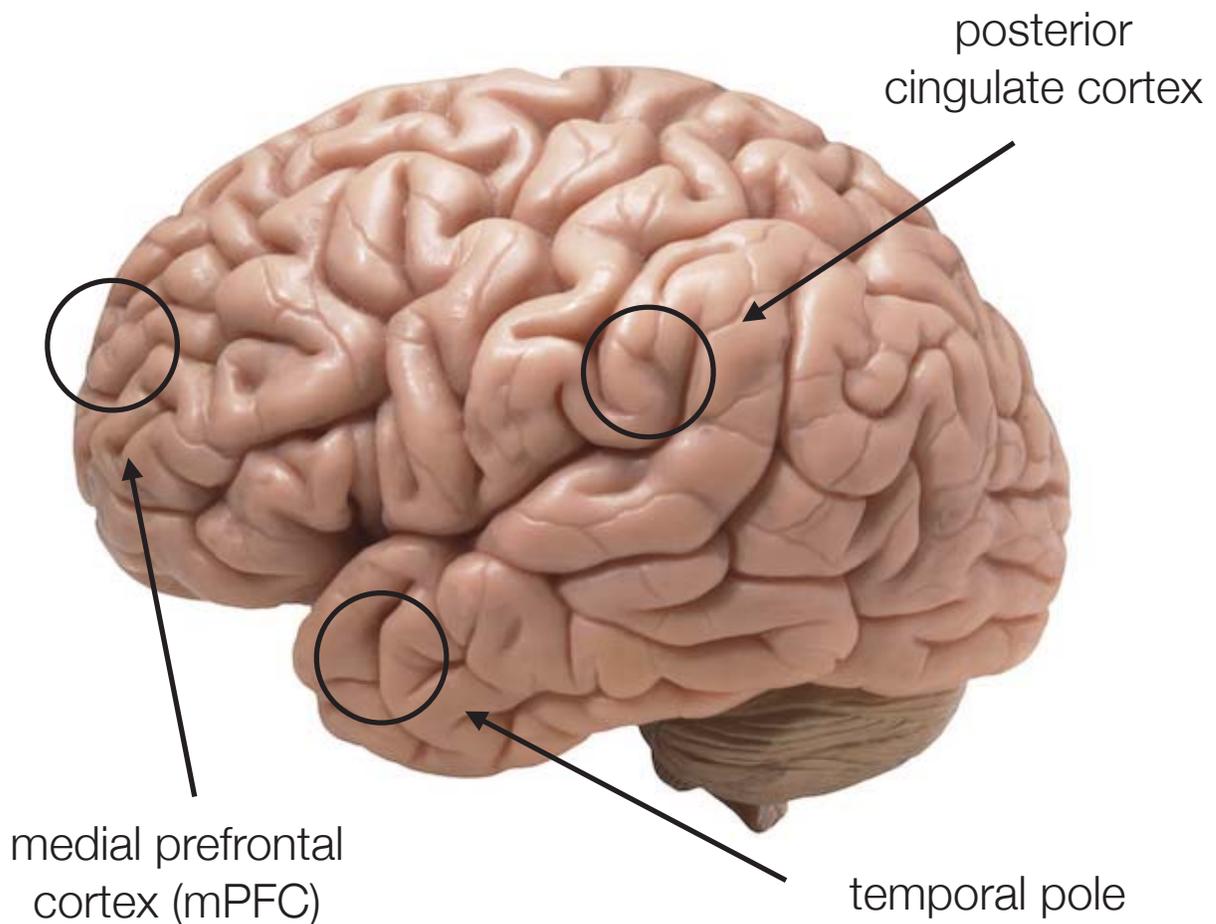


## From Agents to Objects

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- 19 straight male college students administered the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory
- fMRI data collected while they viewed four different kinds of pictures: Clothed men, clothed women, sexualized men, and sexualized women
- What does their brain activity look like when viewing those different kinds of pictures? Do people with certain scores on the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory show unique patterns of brain activity?

Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011



## Making Sense of the Findings

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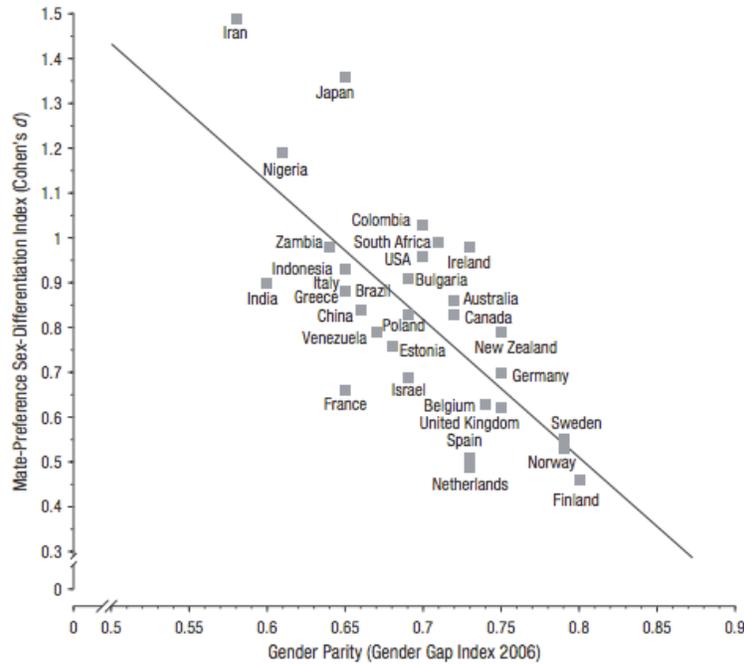
- Two possible explanations
  - Sexist men are born with different (i.e., deficient) brains
  - Over time, endorsing sexist attitudes changes how your brain works in certain contexts
- These findings just address the relationship—not the underlying reason why it exists
- The brain is inherently plastic—capable of changing its structure and function in response to experience

Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011

How Can I Use This?



# Gender Parity vs. Mate Preferences



Zetner & Mitura, 2012

## TAKE HOME MESSAGE:

The more equal men and women are in a given country, the less true the assumptions of evolutionary psychology become.

Zetner & Mitura, 2012

# Myths About Sex & Gender: Busted

Supposed Difference	Explanation
Men and women have gender-specific preferences for qualities in partners	Not in real-world contexts, which are presumably more valid than hypothetical musings
Women desire and actually have fewer sexual partners than men	No, gender differences in reported sexual partners stem less from sexual appetites and more from inappropriate statistics and social desirability
Men think about sex more than women	Yes, but they also think more about their own physical needs, overall
Women orgasm less frequently than men	Yes, but this gap diminishes greatly when considering sexual encounters in committed relationships and may disappear entirely when considering varieties of sexual practices performed within those relationships
Men like casual sex more than women do	Yes, but those differences can be explained by the proposers' sexual capabilities and women's anticipation of being stigmatized for accepting the offer
Women are "choosier" than men	Yes, but potentially only because they are approached more than men are

Conley et al., 2011

“Within psychology, perspectives that draw upon **adaptively evolved mechanisms** are typically utilized to explain **gender differences in sexuality**. That is, the behaviors we see today are presumed to be **relics of our evolutionary past**. The research reviewed suggests that these gender differences are, in fact, **rooted in much more mundane causes: stigma** against women for expressing sexual desires; women’s **socialization** to attend to others’ needs rather than their own; and, more broadly, a **double standard** that dictates (different sets of) appropriate sexual behaviors for men and women.”

Conley et al., 2011



### Context and Variation

Human behavior, evolutionary medicine... and ladybusiness.

Context and Variation Home

### 5 Ways to Make Progress in Evolutionary Psychology: Smash, Not Match, Stereotypes

By Kate Clancy | February 11, 2013 | 30

### More from Scientific American



### Blog Network Highlights

1. Operationalize your variables.
2. Remember that undergrads only teach us about undergrads.
3. It's not true that everything happens for a reason.
4. There's more than one way to attract a mate.
5. Just because it works today doesn't mean it worked back in the day.

How Can I Use This?

# Antecedents of Bystander Non-Intervention

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when and why do people fail to help? and how can we fix it?



## Vanderbilt Rape Trial Evidence: Several People Failed To Intervene For Unconscious Woman

AP | By SHEILA BURKE & TRAVIS LOLLER

Posted: 01/24/2015 3:43 pm EST | Updated: 01/24/2015 3:59 pm EST



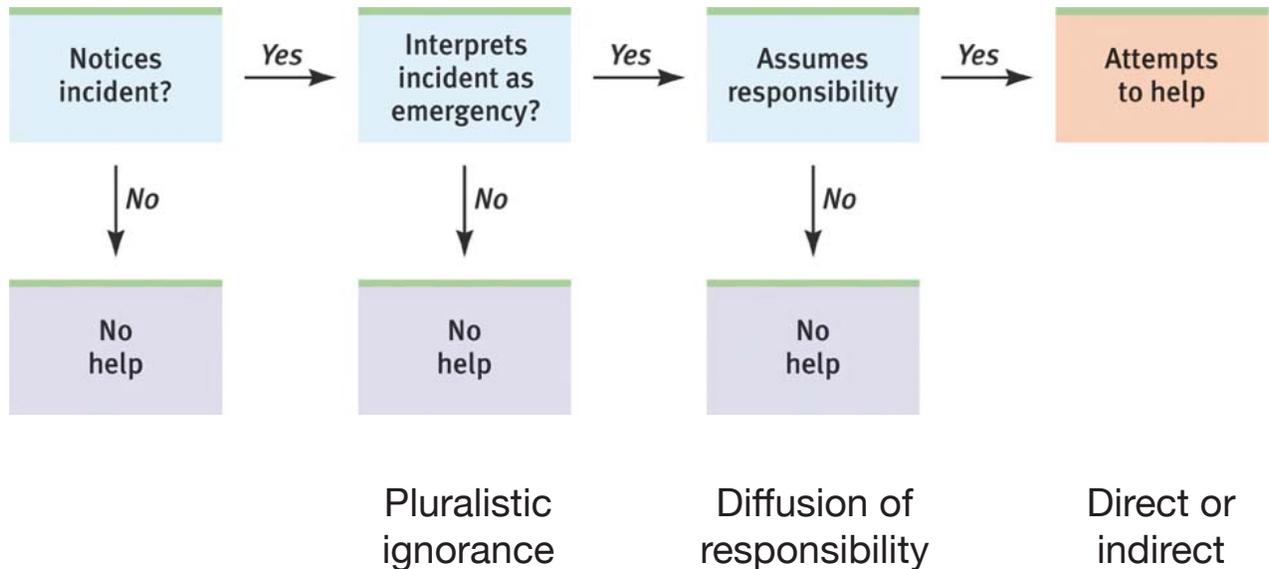
### Early Research on Bystander Intervention

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- The classic paradigm: Research participants (in one of two conditions) witness a staged emergency while completing what they believe to be the actual study
  1. The sole witness
  2. Among confederates who do nothing
- How is helping behavior affected by the presence of others?
  - Lessened in multiple instances: Injuries, asthma attacks, illnesses, picking up spilled pencils, opening a door

# Bystander Intervention Decision Tree

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Latané & Darley, 1970

## Barriers to Helping

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- Pluralistic ignorance: Why people often fail to interpret emergencies as actual emergencies
  - “No one else is helping, so nothing must be wrong.”
- Diffusion of responsibility: Why people often fail to offer help even when they know help is needed
  - “So many other people here could help. Why me?”

Latané & Darley, 1970

# Attempting to Help

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- Helping behavior can be either direct or indirect
  - Direct help: Assistance that is personally and actively rendered
    - Giving CPR to someone who isn't breathing
  - Indirect (detour) help: Sought when you are not personally able to render/comfortable rendering the assistance that a particular situation requires
    - Finding someone who knows how to give CPR if you are not personally certified

Latané & Darley, 1970

# Bystander Intervention: A Meta-Analysis

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- Synthesized the results of 105 studies of over 7,700 participants from 1960 to 2010
- **Key finding:** Overall, the more bystanders are present, the less likely any one person will be to step in and help
- But, bystanders were more likely to intervene when...
  - The situation was dangerous (vs. non-dangerous)
  - Perpetrators were present (vs. absent)
  - The costs of intervention were physical (vs. non-physical)
- Consistent with the arousal-cost-reward model of helping behavior

Fischer et al., 2011

# A Note on External Validity

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- Laboratory studies can only tell you so much about how people will behave in real-world scenarios
  - Moral conduct vs. moral behavior
    - “Should I help?” vs. “Will I help?”
- **BUT:** Introductory psychology students who learn about bystander non-intervention are more likely to spontaneously help in real life situations (vs. students who don't)
  - 43% vs. 25%

Beaman et al., 1978



“There are two kinds of evil people: people who do evil stuff and people who see evil stuff being done and don't try to stop it.”

—Janis Ian, *Mean Girls*

How Can I Use This?

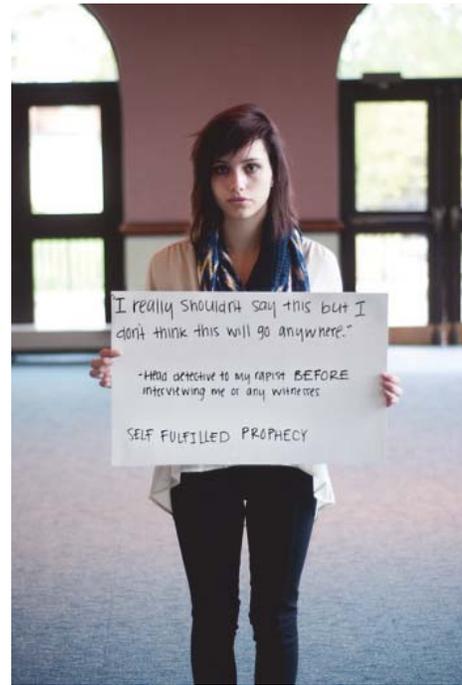
## Neurobiology of Traumatic Memories

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how reliable are recollections of assault, really? why might they seem otherwise?

# How Might Survivors Tell Their Stories?

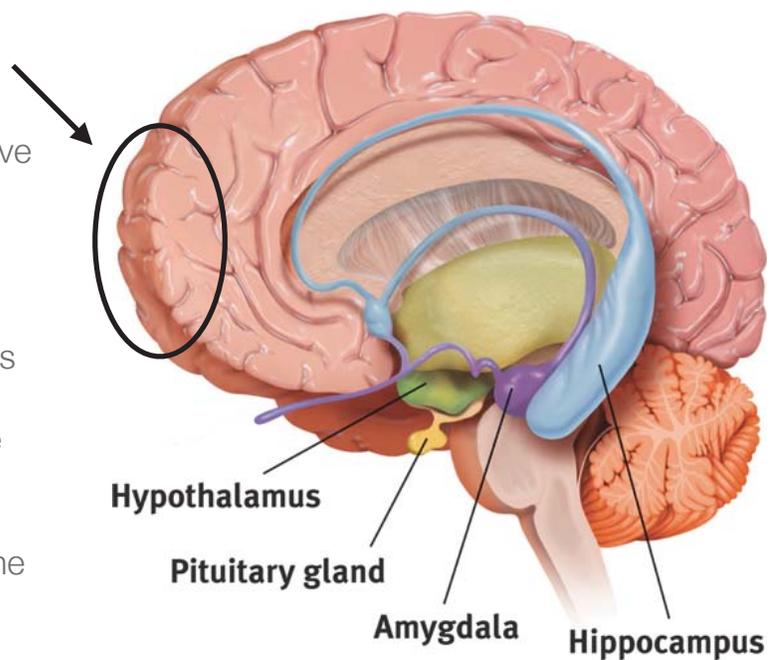
- As a non-linear narrative
- With increased focus on seemingly irrelevant details
- With flat or inappropriate affect
- Might mention full-body paralysis



Campbell, 2012; Ruiz, 2013

## Key Neural Regions at Play

- Prefrontal cortex (PFC): The brain's "rational CEO"
- Amygdala: Processes positive and negative emotions, especially fear
- Hypothalamus: Regulates basic motivational processes and helps govern the endocrine system (hormone release)
- Hippocampus: Implicated the formation of new long-term memories



Myers, 2014

## The Brain During a Traumatic Event

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- Amygdala detects threat and signals the hypothalamus
- Hypothalamus signals the pituitary gland to release stress hormones
  - Catecholamines, cortisol, opioids
- Hormonal fluctuations impair the function of the prefrontal cortex and its connections to the amygdala/hippocampus
  - In some cases, they might even induce full-body paralysis (i.e., tonic immobility)

Campbell, 2012; Ruiz, 2013

## Explaining How Survivors Might Tell Their Stories

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- As a non-linear narrative with increased focus on seemingly irrelevant details
  - Converted to long-term memory in a fragmented manner
- With flat or inappropriate affect
  - Opioids relieve pain but also blunt emotional responding
- Might mention full-body paralysis
  - Tonic immobility induced by a surge of stress hormones

Campbell, 2012; Ruiz, 2013

How Can I Use This?

Belief in a Just World

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why on earth would anyone blame a survivor?

## Belief in a Just World

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- The world is a fundamentally good and just place
- People get what they deserve and deserve what they get
- Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people
- If a bad thing happens to you, then...



Lerner, 1980

## Belief in a Just World

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- How do people cope with threats to their belief in a just world?
  - Derogate and/or blame the victim
  - Make excuses for the perpetrator



## How Can I Use This?

### II. Why Might Campus Activism Be Especially Difficult?

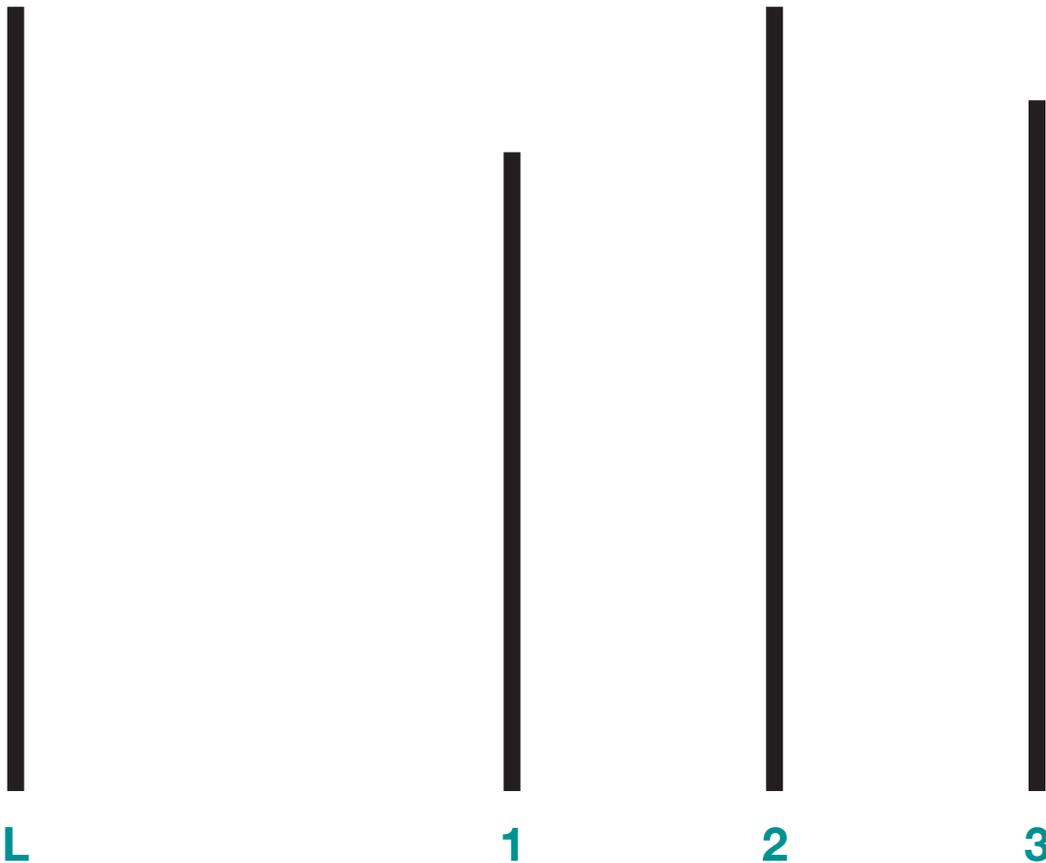
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- A. The power of conformity
- B. The power of identity
- C. The power of self-persuasion
- D. The power of stereotypes

# The Power of Conformity

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when and why do people go along with a group, even if it's for the worse?

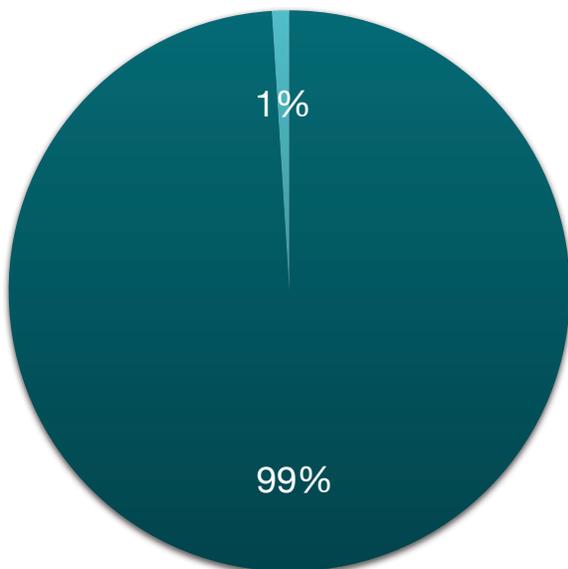


# Solomon Asch's Classic Study

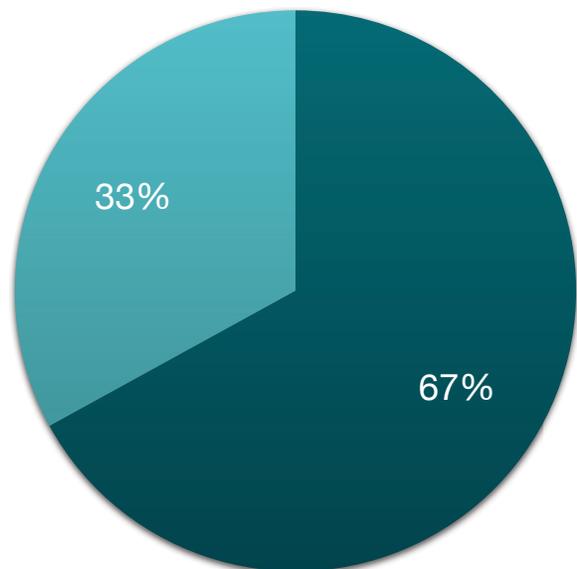


Which Line is Just as Long as the Target Line?

Answering Alone



Answering Last in a Group



● Correct

● Incorrect

# Science's Sexual Assault Problem

By A. HOPE JAHREN SEPT. 18, 2014



Rachell Sumpter

AS, Norway

I AM a scientist who studies plants. I like plants. I think about plants almost every hour of the day, and several hours of the night as well. I respect plants and I know there's more to them than meets the eye, because I've been measuring their responses for 20 years. But it is rocks that were my first love and that continue to hold my heart captive. I love rocks with the unconditional love that you lavish upon a newborn baby.



## JEZEBEL

# Colleges Silence and Fire Faculty Who Speak Out About Rape



Callie Beusman

Filed to: EXCLUSIVE 6/13/14 11:40am

32,317 🔥 41 ☆



your health

# The Power Of The Peer Group In Preventing Campus Rape

by LAURA STARECHESKI

August 18, 2014 3:51 AM ET

 **Listen to the Story**  
Morning Edition

 8 min 14 sec

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## Factors That Influence Conformity

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- We are in a group with at least three people
- We are in a group in which everyone else agrees
- We admire the group's status and attractiveness
- We have not made a prior commitment to any response
- We know that others in the group will observe our behavior
- We are from a culture that strongly encourages respect for social standards
- We share a common identity with the group members

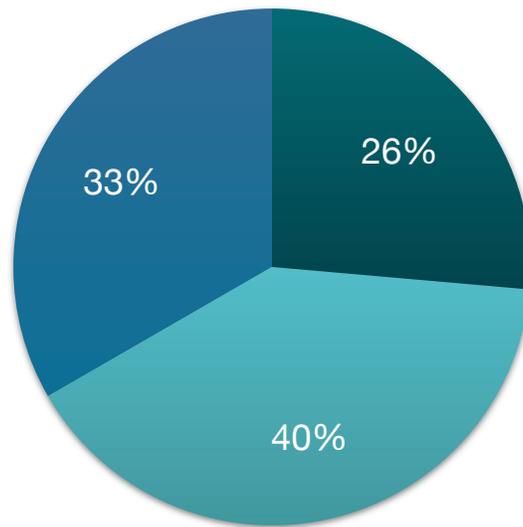
# The Power of Identity

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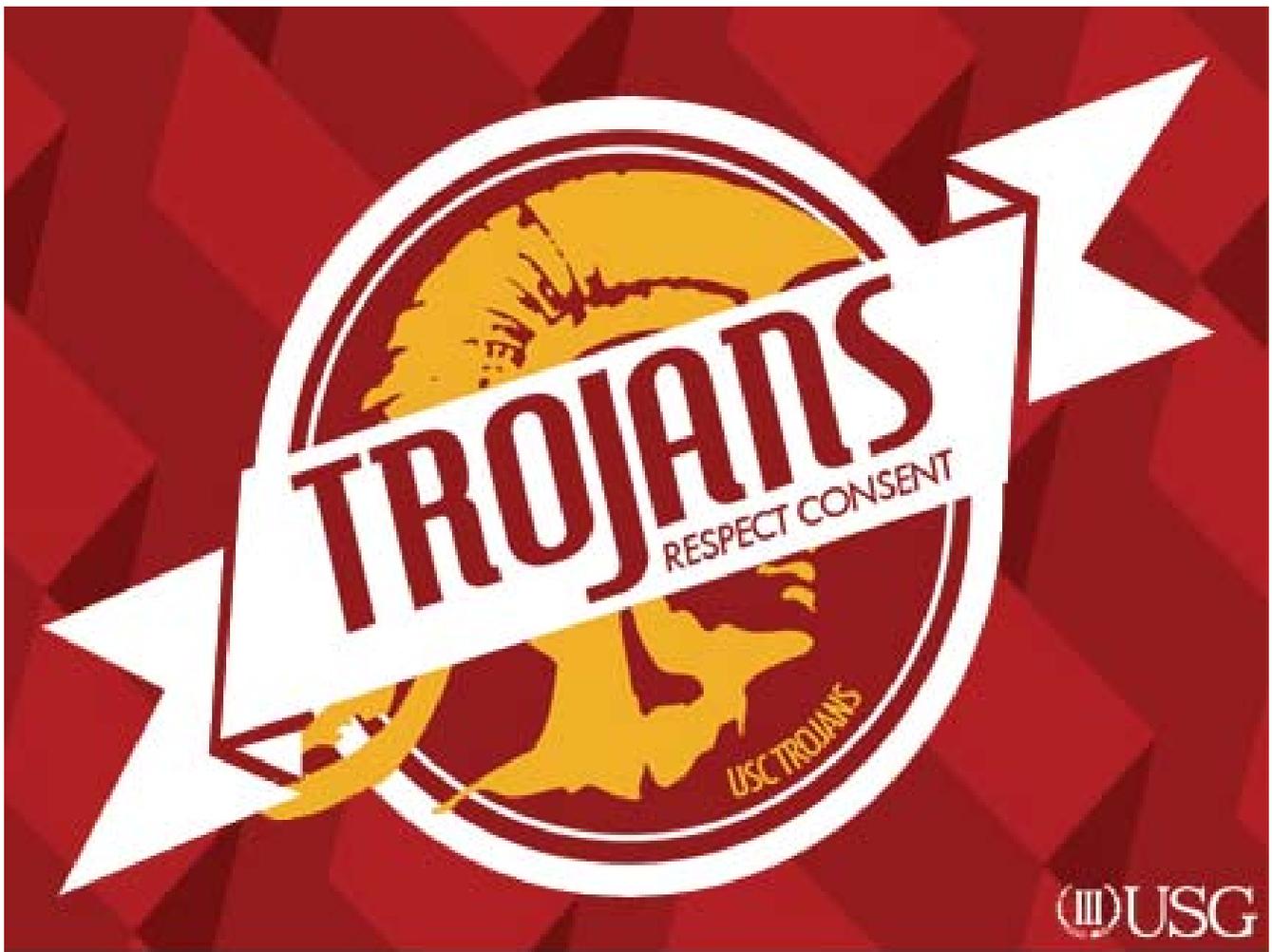
what I am is what I am. are you what you are, or what?

## Identity Salience Among USC Students

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● Religion      ● Equally Important      ● Being a Trojan



## The Power of Self-Persuasion

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how do we deal with hypocrisy when we're the hypocrites?

# The Power of Self-Persuasion

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- Cognitive dissonance: The unpleasant feeling that arises when our attitudes and our actions are inconsistent with each other
  - “I think sexual violence is bad, but I attend/take pride in a university that excuses/condones it”
- When faced with cognitive dissonance, people are more likely to change their attitudes to fit their actions than the other way around
  - “I haven’t been bothered enough to switch schools, so maybe my school doesn’t have \*that\* huge of a problem. Maybe people are making a bigger deal out of this than it actually is.”

# The Power of Stereotypes

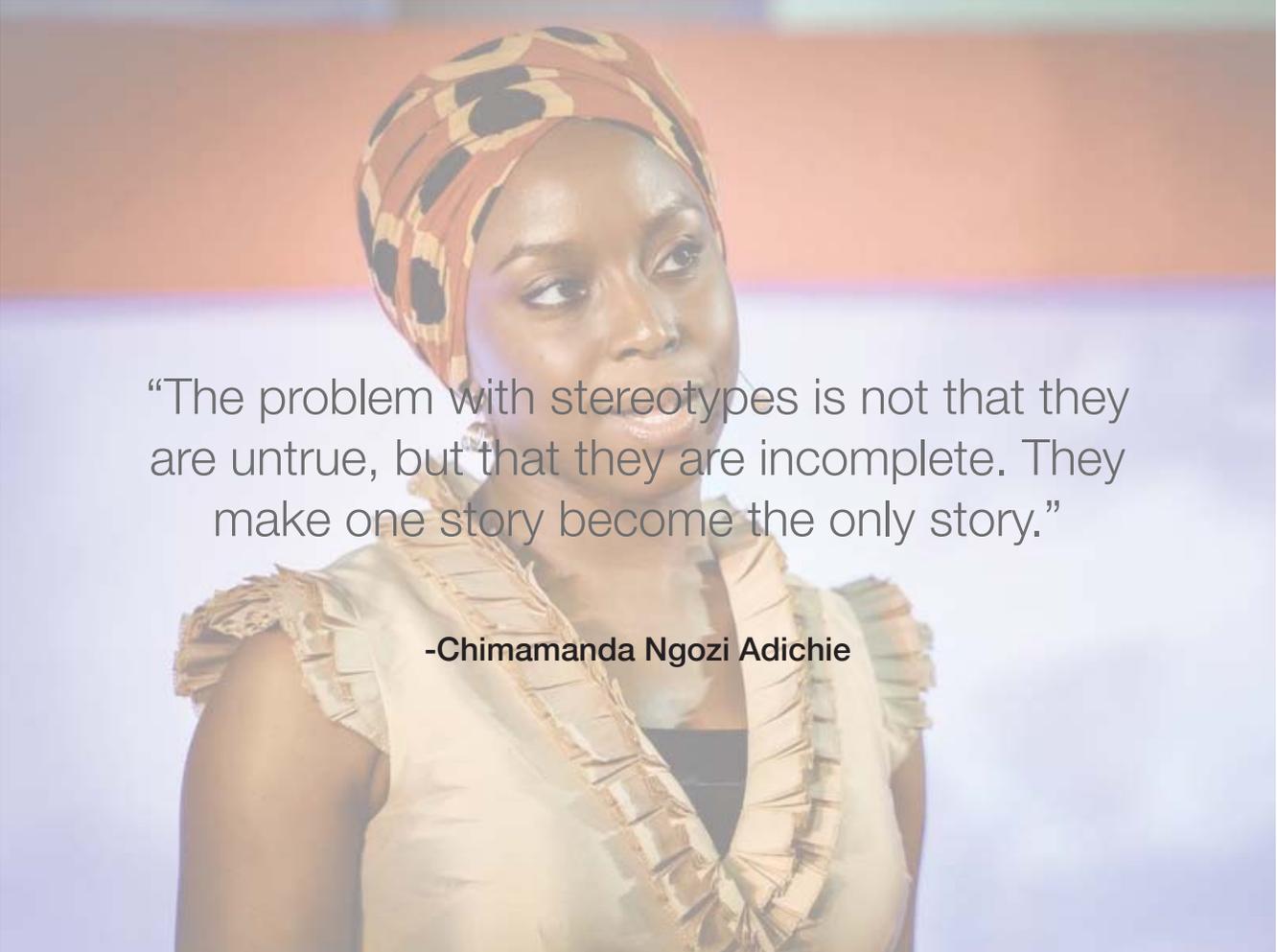
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what are some of the consequences of a single story?

## Stereotypes About Sexual Violence

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- What constitutes sexual violence, from the breadth of the term (i.e., different kinds) to what it exactly looks like (e.g., “legitimate rape”)
- The kind of people who experience sexual violence
- How “real victims” act in the aftermath of such violence
- The kind of people who engage in campus activism



“The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

**-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

## Recap: What We've Learned

### I. How Do Perpetrators Commit with Impunity?

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## II. Why Might Campus Activism Be Especially Difficult?

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Communication is key.