**Epistemic harms of sexual violence**

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**Abstract**

In the article, I show that the epistemic harms—harms that undermine the subject’s capacity as a knower—linked to sexual violence go beyond affecting the victim’s understanding and testimony about such experiences. There are epistemic harms directly linked to the act of sexual violence itself, a facet notably neglected in the existing literature. My emphasis is particularly on the epistemic harms associated with the pathological fear, anxiety, and subsequent avoidance behavior that many victims of sexual violence experience. I distinguish between targeted epistemic harms, which are more or less specific, and structural epistemic harms, which entail a modification in the individual’s mental schemas, particularly core schemas about safety and trust.

**Keywords**

sexual violence; fear; anxiety; epistemic harms; mental schemas

Sexual violence, including sexual harassment and rape, has been linked in the literature to epistemic harms, that is, to damages that impair an individual’s capacity as a knower. A prominent example of such epistemic harm is testimonial injustice, as discussed by Fricker (2007), which is often the first epistec harm that comes to mind when reflecting on the experiences of sexual violence survivors. Many sexual violence survivors face minimization, scepticism and lack of credibility for their accounts, whether from their family, social circles, the police or the criminal justice system, if their cases even reach this stage (Hershkowitz, Lanes and Lamb, 2007; Ransom, 2021). They are epistemically harmed and wronged because they are unjustly treated in their role as knowers of their own past experiences, portrayed as exaggerating or, worse, as dishonest. Hermeneutical injustice can also be easily associated with sexual violence. Some victims, such as children, may lack the conceptual resources to recognize themselves as being sexually abused due to their age (Lo, 2023). Others may find themselves immersed in collectives with oppressive norms established by dominant groups, such as men, which regulate collective hermeneutical practices, leading the victims to internalize and believe that their experience was not a case of rape: “If I had not wanted it, I would have screamed” (MacKenzie, 2022). And others, despite having the relevant concepts, may exhibit a form of self-protective ignorance to avoid the cognitive and affective costs associated with acknowledging that they were indeed raped (Gardiner, this volume). In all cases, testimonial environments like courts, which offer potential material gains, can also impose epistemic burdens to the victims due to demanding accuracy standards, contributing to memory distortions. These conditions may compromise victims’ understanding of their experiences, accentuating hermeneutical injustice (Christoff, forthcoming; for a different approach, see: Jerade, 2023).

However, epistemic harms linked to sexual violence extend beyond the victim’s understanding or testifying about such experiences. There are other epistemic harms directly related to the act of sexual violence itself, which the literature has significantly overlooked. These harms emerge as consequences of the violence and are intricately connected to the psychological, affective, and practical harms experienced by individuals who have been subjected to sexual abuse or assault. In this article, my aim is to unveil *some* of the ‘hidden’ epistemic harms associated with sexual violence. But before engaging in this task, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the non-epistemic harms that are intertwined with these epistemic harms.

**Sexual violence, trauma and non-epistemic harms**

Previously perceived as merely “unwanted sex,” sexual assault and rape are life-threatening traumatic events that generally result in multiple severe, long-term scars for those who endure them—more severe than victims of other types of crimes. Perpetrators of sexual violence harm their victims psychologically, affectively, and practically. While the specific harms vary among individuals and cannot be neatly categorized into precise assault syndromes or diagnoses (Briere & Jordan, 2004), there are common and recurrent psychological and affective consequences extensively reported in the literature. Victims often experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, sexual dysfunctions, self-blame, low self-esteem, hopelessness, substance abuse, social adjustment problems, eating disorders, somatization, dissociation, among others (Resick, 1993; Briere & Jordan, 2004). Although some symptoms may improve over time for certain individuals, many persist strongly for several months or even become chronic, particularly fear and anxiety reactions (Resick, 1993). This may potentially expose individuals to new situations of sexual violence, as those with psychological disorders and addiction are often easier targets for predatory individuals than the general population (Briere & Jordan, 2004). Meta-analyses suggest that half of individuals who have experienced child sexual abuse undergo sexual revictimization in adulthood (Walker et al., 2019), and a history of sexual or physical assault prior to the recent rape is the strongest predictor of subsequent sexual or physical assault (Walsh et al., 2023), supporting the idea of a vicious circle between sexual violence and psychological and affective harms.

Compared to other potentially traumatic events, such as physical assault and natural disasters, rape and sexual assault carry a heightened risk of meeting criteria for PTSD. They are also more likely to exhibit higher levels of PTSD symptom severity (Dworkin et al., 2023). Many of the primary symptoms are memory-related and include flashbacks, nightmares linked to the traumatic event, psychological distress, and physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event. This leads to the suppression of thoughts and memories of the event, avoidance behavior of external reminders, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, and negative mood and beliefs about oneself, others, or the world (for more details about the symptoms and diagnosis of PTSD, see American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

These psychological and affective harms are closely intertwined with several practical harms, such as impairment in daily activities, loss of productivity or unemployment for several months, and sometimes years post-assault, significant medical costs, rape-related pregnancy, relationship difficulties with current partners, loss of intimacy, disturbances in sexual life, and even avoidance of sexual intercourse (Herman, 1992; van Wijk & Harrinson, 2014; Peterson et al., 2017). Victims may lose their jobs, homes, spouses, and even their families. Even their individual autonomy can be impaired and reduced, as many responses that were once under voluntary control become involuntary and uncontrollable reactions (Brison, 2002; Alcoff, 2018). As Alcoff herself testifies as a victim of rape, “I could not stand to be chased, so I could not play any sports that involved the sensation of being chased, even for a moment, without eliciting a somewhat hysterical reaction on my part. I would go for the person's face with my fingernails. I still cannot bear to be chased or stalked or watched from behind, and my reaction is so immediate and neurological it cannot be argued with or rationalized away” (Alcoff, 2018 p. 22).

It is difficult to deny the interconnected nature of psychological, affective, and practical harms. However, they are also intertwined with epistemic harms, which, though mentioned in empirical literature, are not often recognized as such in philosophical discourse. Similar to psychological, affective, and practical harms, the epistemic harms of sexual violence can be diverse and variable. For example, depression can hinder the revision of negative beliefs in response to novel positive information, leading to the persistence of negative beliefs that perpetuate chronically low mood (Kube, 2023). Given that pathological fear, anxiety and subsequent avoidance behavior are among the most common symptoms of rape and sexual assault (Resick, 1993), the next two sections focus on the epistemic harms related to these specific symptoms. This does not imply nevertheless that they are the sole epistemic harms experienced by those who were raped or sexually assaulted.

**Targeted epistemic harms related to fear and anxiety**

Rape and sexual assault are associated with a high risk of severe symptoms of PTSD, and one of these symptoms refers to psychological distress and physiological reactions to external cues that are similar to or somehow related to the traumatic event. The psychological distress and physiological reactions to present and imminent cues generally refer to the experience of fear, whereas when those states are anticipated in preparation for a potentially threatening cue, the experience refers to anxiety (Zoellner et al., 2020). Both fear and anxiety related to PTSD can be explained as a product of fear overgeneralization. Fear generalization refers to the extension of conditioned fear: whereas in classical fear conditioning, a neutral stimulus after being paired with an aversive experience signals danger, the generalization phenomenon spreads this danger signal to stimuli similar to the aversive experience. This phenomenon, which, if measured and appropriate to the context, is adaptive to interact with new stimuli not necessarily identical to the previous one, can become maladaptive and pathological when it spreads to stimuli that do not pose any threat and convey safety (Dunsmoor & Paz, 2015; Lis et al., 2020). A quote from a victim of rape in the wonderful book written by Patricia Easteal (1994), which contains several testimonies of victims of rape and sexual assault, constitutes an excellent example of this pathological generalization or overgeneralization:

“Years may go by—but you will never forget the horror (...) And till you die—if you survive, you will feel those feelings forever. This is what rape is all about. It is a fear that to me has not died as the years roll by but becomes more intense and fearful. A face in a crowd—a program on T.V.—something someone says—a smell—for me it’s rotten oranges—the way a stranger or a friend looks at you—holding my baby daughter—seeing my husband naked—going to the beach— talking to my best friend—a song—for me all these things and one more—the knife—cutting up vegies for my children’s dinner or just making a sandwich—makes me being raped [number] years ago an everyday nightmare.” (in Easteal, 1994, p. 167)

Whereas some new stimuli bear perceptual similarity to some aspect or element of the past trauma, such as a knife or a face, other elements are only contextually related, such as a particular smell, and others are only conceptually and symbolically related, such as a song or a TV program. Human fear generalization is complex and quite unpredictable due to the complexity and multiple dimensionality of real-world fear situations (Morey et al., 2020) and the symbolic nature of associative networks (Marks, 1987). But in all these cases, actual or potential stimuli that trigger fear and anxiety are more or less specific: although it is impossible to know and determine all stimuli, some of them are associated with danger, whereas others are not.

Considering the varying specificity of stimuli incorrectly associated with danger, it can be argued that the epistemic harms caused by sexual violence are also more or less specific or targeted. Primarily, it results in the formation of false, wrongful beliefs about people, places, situations, and other elements perceived as threatening when, in fact, they are safe. The belief in the dangerousness of these stimuli and contexts may not be explicit and conscious; individuals may act, react, feel, or simply be disposed to act, react and feel as if those stimuli were dangerous. However, given the behavior-guiding nature of these dispositions and adopting a dispositional account of beliefs (Schwitzgebel, 2002), it can be asserted that they hold those wrongful beliefs about the dangerousness of those stimuli, and that these wrongful beliefs are ultimately caused by the sexual violence inflicted upon them.

These false beliefs act as a cascade, producing even more epistemic harms, given that they lead to the avoidance of people and situations wrongfully believed to pose a threat. As extensively analyzed in a recent article published with Katherine Puddifoot (Puddifoot & Trakas, 2023), avoiding certain people and contexts restricts people’s epistemic horizons. These limitations of their epistemic horizons can be considered to be more or less targeted: the avoidance of certain people and situations prevents them from gaining the specific knowledge that could be acquired in these specific contexts. Although the specific knowledge lost varies according to the pattern of fear and avoidance behavior that is particular to each individual, some paradigmatic cases can be identified in the literature:

(a) Information exclusive to a specific group of people or context: Avoiding certain people may hinder access to information only accessible by engaging in those contexts and interacting with those individuals. Fear and avoidance of a particular ethnic group may deprive a person of the chance to learn extensively about that group through direct interaction. Fear and avoidance of those in positions of authority, such as at work, can impair communication: “Over the years, I have faced difficulties in relationships with men and authority figures” (in Easteal, 1994, p. 134). This can result in missed opportunities to obtain insider information and other essential information, ultimately affecting performance, and potentially leading to a lack of promotion or recognition for their work.

(b) Formal knowledge: Experiencing sexual harassment, abuse, or assault at school or college can have negative educational and academic implications (Duffy et al., 2004; Hill & Silva, 2005). This may manifest as avoiding the specific professor who assaulted them or avoiding all professors, steering clear of certain buildings and places on campus, skipping classes or dropping courses, absenteeism, and even dropping out of school or college. Ultimately, such experiences prevent individuals from accessing the basic education that is readily available to most in their society. However, sexual assault need not occur at school or college to impede the acquisition of formal knowledge. Recent review papers indicate that sexual violence, irrespective of where it happens, has a significantly negative impact on students’ achievements, potentially mediated by the psychological trauma resulting from the assault itself (Fry et al., 2017; Molstad et al., 2023).

(c) Knowledge about their own sexual subjectivity: Rape victims may have difficulties gaining information about their own sexual pleasure and desires: “I was a virgin when I was raped, and it was a shocking introduction to men and sexuality” (in Easteal, 1994, p. 165). Fear of sexual encounters and reminders of the traumatic event often lead them to avoid such encounters for an extended period (Herman, 1992; Resick, 1993), preventing them from gaining knowledge about their own sexual pleasure and sexual identity. This, in turn, hampers the development of their autonomy as sexual agents (Alcoff, 2018).

(d) Information that can reduce the pathological aspect of fear generalization: Much like exposure therapy, repeated exposure to corrective information—information that challenges negative expectations—has the potential to mitigate the pathological aspects of fear overgeneralization and behavioral avoidance (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Natural exposure to corrective information can allow for the disconfirmation of false and wrongful beliefs regarding the danger posed by people and places. This process weakens the fear memory or, alternatively, establishes a new, safe memory that competes with and may even replace the traumatic one. It facilitates a clearer differentiation between stimuli associated with past trauma and harmless, safe stimuli in the present environment, thereby reducing epistemic harms (Ehlers et al., 2004; Puddifoot & Trakas, 2023). However, avoidance behavior resulting from these wrongful beliefs limits opportunities for new experiences that could provide disconfirmatory information and help to overcome these false beliefs, diminish the pathological aspect of fear overgeneralization, and ultimately mitigate the impact of traumatic events (Herman, 1992). This negative loop amplifies the epistemic harms of sexual violence, among other harms, by maintaining and even exacerbating missed opportunities to acquire specific knowledge as outlined in points (a), (b), and (c).

**Schematic epistemic harms related to fear and anxiety**

The epistemic harms resulting from sexual violence previously analyzed are more or less specific or targeted. They ultimately originate from wrongful beliefs, considered as behavior-guiding dispositions, regarding the dangerousness of certain individuals and specific contexts. These wrongful beliefs are the result of a conditioned, automatic mechanism that generates the proliferation of fearful cues, triggered in response to particular events or potential occurrences. A victim of sexual violence might fear men with specific physical traits or men in particular settings, such as a dark street at night or a position of authority. However, sexual violence can also give rise to epistemic harms of a broader generality. The victim may not only fear men with particular physiognomies or ethnicities, or men in specific settings, but may extend their fear and distrust to all men and even all people in general. This may not only result in avoiding certain neighborhoods or night gatherings but can lead to an avoidance of leaving home altogether. To illustrate this point, consider the victim’s testimony quoted above in comparison with the following one:

I’m still afraid and will be for the rest of my life. It took me until last year to really learn to be alone. I never drive my car with the doors unlocked. There is always a feeling of terror when I have to get out of my car in an empty parking lot or walk into an empty house. And the first thing I do in a hotel is check every closet. I have so many alarms and locks at my home in New York that anyone who got in could never get out. And there are two special locks on my bedroom door. Every night I lock them all (in Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 73)

Unlike the initial testimony where fear and anxiety were linked to specific objects, people, attitudes, and sounds, the fear and anxiety conveyed in this example appear more pervasive: it extends to the entire world, encompassing even one’s supposed safest space—home, which is viewed as dangerous and threatening, with one’s survival far from guaranteed. This occurs because, in certain instances, sexual violence not only gives rise to a variety of false beliefs regarding the danger posed by specific individuals and contexts, or certain people in particular situations, which involves fear conditioning mechanisms as an explanation. In certain cases, sexual violence carries a broader epistemic impact by shattering fundamental assumptions about the world and one’s safety within it, including fundamental assumptions about the self and the relationships between the self and other individuals developed during our earliest years (McCann et al., 1988; Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Brison, 2002). These core assumptions undergoing disruption can be understood in terms of cognitive or mental schemas. In cognitive psychology, the concept of mental schema, primarily influenced by Kant and Piaget, refers to a mental structure representing organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus that serves as a framework for perceiving and interpreting new information and life experiences (McCann et al., 1988; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Carlston & Mae, 2001). Despite schema theory facing criticism and falling out of favor (Carlston & Mae, 2001), mental schemas, as a conceptual tool, can still be valuable for understanding how major life events like sexual assault and rape can be radically transformative from an epistemic perspective, altering not only fear networks but also our fundamental conceptions about the self, others, and our worldviews.

As Janoff-Bulman (1992) explains, many of us have built our lives on generally positively biased assumptions regarding safety and security in the world and with others; we typically do not overly concern ourselves with physical safety. Nevertheless, these existential schemas framing most of our experiences and interactions can undergo radical changes. Traumatic events like rape and sexual assault compel us to confront the biological aspect of human survival, acknowledging our vulnerability and fragility as physical beings. This awareness extends beyond recognizing the possibility that “bad things” like death or serious injury can happen to us; they become integrated into our inner world. To accept and give sense to the experience of physical threat and sexual violence, the victim may *overaccommodate* it, transforming positively biased core existential schemas into negatively biased ones: “The world is frightening,” “I am never safe,” “No men can be trusted,” “No one can be trusted” (Resick & Schnicke, 1992). This overaccommodation is exemplified by the testimony of a rape victim: “The night I awoke to discover a strange man in my bed, I completely lost my sense of security” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p.69). This shift can result in excessive precautionary behaviors, limitations on activities outside the home, increased social distance, and may even culminate in social withdrawal and isolation (McCann et al., 1988; Herman, 1992; Kappler, 2012). Core schemas about the unsafety in the world and the danger and untrustworthiness of people can persist for several years after the event and even become chronic. These changes, besides producing psychological, affective, and practical harms, might further reduce the victim’s epistemic horizons, as social withdrawal and isolation exert a more pronounced negative impact on our possibilities to acquire knowledge compared to avoiding specific people and contexts guided by certain wrongful beliefs about their dangerousness. In cases involving children enduring prolonged sexual violence and abuse perpetrated by family members, these structural epistemic harms may be more entrenched and damaging: negative core psychological schemas about the self, others, and the world are not changed but originally shaped by sexual violence and reinforced with each violent act, often leading to significant personality disorders (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In fact, similar outcomes can occur in other forms of interpersonal sexual violence, such as existing long-term partner relationships (Briere & Jordan, 2004).

In conclusion, structural epistemic harms represent a more extensive and detrimental form of epistemic harm resulting from sexual violence than targeted epistemic harms. Not everyone who undergoes rape and sexual assault will experience their core schemas about safety and trust shattered in this manner, as not all individuals experiencing such events will develop an extensive and enduring fear network involving various stimuli. The occurrence of these cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes depends on numerous factors related to the individual, the experience itself, and the context. However, this does not diminish its significance, given its substantial power to influence and alter many cognitions and to be profoundly epistemically damaging.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I aim to illustrate that instances of sexual violence, such as rape and sexual assault, result in more than just psychological, emotional, and practical harm to the victim. They also inflict profound epistemic damage that extends beyond hermeneutical and testimonial injustices and may prove challenging to reverse, and in some instances, even be irreversible. They contribute to the expansion of the fear network, generating erroneous beliefs about the danger posed by certain people and contexts that are, in reality, safe and exhibit no signs of threat, leading to avoidance. This avoidance narrows the victim’s epistemic horizons by limiting opportunities to acquire knowledge typically gained through interaction with the people and contexts being avoided. It also diminishes chances to encounter disconfirmatory information that could ultimately challenge these wrongful beliefs, reducing pathological fear generalization and behavioral avoidance. However, in certain cases, the epistemic harms become more pervasive, structurally affecting the individual and shattering essential and existential assumptions about the self, others, and the world. Core mental schemas that enable us to perceive and interpret experiences undergo radical changes: the entire world transforms into a dangerous place inhabited by untrustworthy individuals, where safety is no longer guaranteed. These structural epistemic harms run much deeper, negatively impacting how we perceive the world and interact with others, fundamentally changing our being-in-the-world.

These epistemic harms are not the only epistemic harms of rape and sexual assault. These traumatic experiences can also result in a loss of the meaningfulness of the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). They can foster self-alienation, giving rise to negative beliefs and schemas about oneself. Individuals may come to believe that they are incapable of self-soothing, finding comfort, or nurturing themselves, and that they are “empty” (McCann et al., 1998; Herman, 1992). This disconnection from themselves can impair authentic agency, limiting their understanding of who they are and what sort of life they want to lead (Maiese, forthcoming). These profound alterations to basic structures of the self give rise to other epistemic harms, which certainly need further examination. However, my focus here has been on the epistemic harms related to fear and anxiety due to their common occurrence as symptoms of rape and sexual assault, but also because of their potentially significant impact on others. Not only do they affect the direct victim of rape and sexual assault, but they also may cause, affective, practical, and epistemic harms to those who are unduly feared and those who are intimates of the victim of trauma, producing *mnemonic injustice* (Trakas & Puddifoot, 2024). Yet, this is a topic for another story.

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