

## **In sexual assault, experience matters**

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Hands up if you think that calling a kiss on the cheek “sexual assault” is an indefensible exaggeration.

When CBC reporter Megan Batchelor was hijacked in the middle of a live news report earlier this month by a young music fan inexplicably overcome by his own charisma, lively media debates erupted between those who denounced the act, and those who dismissed the denouncers as over-reacting. Considering the severity of what else “sexual assault” covers, applying it to a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it peck was seen by some as excessive.

But how we talk about non-consensual sexual behaviour matters. And research shows that people who merely witness or hear about unwanted sexual touching, aren’t remotely equipped to judge its actual impact.

It’s presumptuous for bystanders to imagine that their detached observation of an incident they deem to have been done “in good humour” in any way reflects the victim’s actual experience, let alone its potentially lasting impact. And even if one person is unfazed by being unexpectedly manhandled from behind while trying to do her job in a public place, doesn’t mean another won’t be left shaken by a similar event.

University of Windsor psychology professor, Charlene Senn, who has spent decades studying the impact and prevention of sexual assault, notes that “Frequent, seemingly minor — to outsiders — indignities can accumulate to exacerbate fear, anxiety, depression, and stress.”

Context also matters. The public nature of Batchelor’s experience, far from making it less threatening, is the kind of thing that reinforces the common fear many women already share of being threatened by strangers and having to adopt precautionary strategies to protect themselves — strategies that include limiting their leisure and work options in ways that most men never have to consider.

Moreover, says Senn, treating a woman in a sexual way in her work setting makes it harder for others to see her as competent and credible. Being objectified publicly can undermine her self-confidence, reduce her enjoyment on the job, and increase her anxiety about

work.

“This is why sexual harassment laws and policies recognize verbal, as well as physical, behaviours. Actions that create a ‘poisoned work environment’ fundamentally undermine workers’ human rights.”

When Canada changed its sexual assault law in the 1980s to broaden the definition, it did so after a great deal of debate. As a result, the phrase “sexual assault” now applies not only to rape, but also to the kinds of actions performed by the 17-year-old photo-bomber: He grabbed (assaulted) and kissed (sexualized) the reporter. Changing the words to call it what it is, says Senn, makes it easier for everyone to appreciate the harm victims often experience.

The language we use to describe behaviour has social consequences: labels shape how serious we judge an act to be, and how harshly it’s punished. Let’s say a newscaster reports that a football player “has a misunderstanding” with his girlfriend, and she’s now sporting sunglasses. Described that way, the scenario sounds relatively benign or accidental. You’re likely to be much more tolerant of the athlete’s actions than if the reporter describes him as delivering a knockout punch and then dragging the woman, unconscious, off an elevator.

Similarly, we interpret the term “sexual assault” as condemning widely unacceptable and physically and emotionally abusive behaviour. The kiss planted by the B.C. music fan on Batchelor’s cheek may not have caused her bodily harm, but it was a violation – and the apology the teenager subsequently offered explicitly acknowledged that.

He was wrong to do what he did; she had every right to file a complaint; and we all benefit from the reminder.

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