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One or the Other

Hirsch and Khan's *Sexual Citizens: Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus* was my first introduction to the conversation surrounding sexual assault. And it was eye opening: the stories they told and the knowledge they shared painted a vivid picture of an important issue I had never really considered before. The way they presented information allowed me to connect with the issue on a thoroughly emotional level. The same could not have been accomplished with a purely statistical and analytical approach to sexual assault, and I'm thoroughly grateful to have had the chance to read and digest this book as a whole.

There was one concept, however, that stuck out to me as particularly interesting, and it had to do with the redefinition of assault from a predator-focused model to a societally-focused one. About halfway through the book, Hirsch and Khan offer a powerful commentary on our society's current view of sexual assault, "The moral approbrium in the language and ideas used to talk about sexual assault make it impossible to imagine that those who commit it could be our sons and daughters, or our friends and peers" (152). They call this issue the "good guy/predator dichotomy". From our society's perspective, sexual predators only take the form of innately terrible people. It is their inherent disposition that drives them to assault others. Not only do Hirsch and Khan refute this notion, but they argue that this idea makes healing our communities much more difficult. No one wants to be "bad" and so if assaulting someone makes us irreversibly "bad", who would ever be open to admitting that they might have committed assault? When considering this dichotomy in the context of college campus social life -- as Hirsch and Khan do quite effectively -- it's no wonder that so many cases of sexual assault go unmentioned and unresolved.

Redefining sexual assault as a societal issue sparked two immediate connections within my mind: one related to social psychology and the other related to a book called *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. In social psychology, there's a term called the *fundamental attribution error*. It refers to the tendency in humans to explain a person's actions through the lens of their disposition (personality) rather than their particular situation. For example, when someone cuts us off on the road, many of us are quick to assume that the person driving is just a "bad driver" when there could be any number of situational explanations for their behavior. The same principle goes for those who commit crimes, those who drop out of school, and, to connect it to *Sexual Citizens*, those who commit sexual assault. We're very quick to assume that these faults are due to deficiencies in personality, that the people who do these things are just "bad people". But there's a reason why it's called the *fundamental attribution ERROR*. We overemphasize a person's disposition as the reason for an action, and nowhere is that more true than in the case of sexual assault. As Hirsch and Khan point out, location (sexual geographies), socioeconomic status, power dynamics, and other situational attributes play an incredibly important role in determining who assaults and who gets assaulted. It is not, as we may be inclined to think, purely a result of the respective individual's disposition.

But redefining sexual assault as a societal issue connects to another hugely important concept as well, this time stemming from the study of racial injustice. In the book *White Fragility*, author Robin DiAngelo introduces the concept of the "good/bad binary" when referring to racism. To paraphrase her work, this "good/bad binary" reflects the idea that people can only be one or the other. They can only be "good" or "bad". Racism, as we understand it in our modern society through the lens of the "good/bad binary", is supposed to only be something that "bad" people exhibit. DiAngelo argues, however, that all of us have some tendency for

racism within us. Each of us have work to do when it comes to being anti-racist. The traditional “good/bad binary” of racism not only runs entirely contrary to this idea, but actively discourages individuals from improvement. If racism is purely the mark of a “bad” person, who would ever want to recognize and grapple with their own racism? As a result of the “good/bad binary,” active discussions of implicit biases and unintentional racism are few and far between.

The same idea applies to sexual assault. As long as our concept of an assaulter stays limited to the predator, active and honest discussions about our own unhealthy sexual practices suffer. As long as our concept of racism stays limited to the good/bad binary, the discussion of our own biases falls short. And finally, as long as we continue to narrowly focus on the dispositional shortcomings of individuals whose actions reflect something less than the best of humanity, we continue to do a disservice to all who want to create a better and more accommodating society.