

Institutional Rape Culture:  
Engaging Self-Reflexiveness

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After deleting my Facebook account, a few people messaged me to ask why I was not a part of the “discussion,” which led to countless conversations over a period of weeks with women in the debate community. I will admit all of these conversations were dominated by me venting about how frustrated I was by the methods of the “Women in Debate” group. However, as my frustration subsided, I recognized that disagreeing with methods without a solution is a cop out for not participating in dismantling rape culture. I noticed the subtle symptoms of rape culture in our community, yet I never tried to change it despite having years of training and knowledge that I used to raise awareness on my campus. My lack of action made me a passive bystander. This “eureka” moment became the major point for the talk I gave before NPDA this year.

Too often in our community, we talk about rape culture as if it is some nebulous faction of *another* group we do not belong to or a *few men* in our community who make up rape culture, and these excuses allow us to ignore how we *all* participate in rape culture. Despite being an “expert” in feminist literature about rape culture, I mishandled issues by not speaking out in support of victims/survivors because I was friends with their perpetrators and used “plausible deniability” as an excuse to shield myself from responsibility in resisting rape culture in every instance. Much like I often need to remind myself, I hope you all remember that rapists are not strangers lurking in the dark; they are our friends, brothers, intimate partners, debate partners, and debate coaches. When you witness sexism, do you defend the perpetrator because they are

someone you know, someone who “isn’t like that,” who “didn’t mean it that way?” If you defend sexism in the most subtle of instances, you are a passive bystander accepting the culture, and you are not encouraging a community where victims/survivors of sexual assault can feel safe reporting their experience. Always ask yourself, “How do I participate in rape culture?” and never stop asking, even if you think the answer is no. I asked myself this question before deciding how to explain my reaction to the forum.

After the forum, I felt like the community was becoming one whose members cared about the topics we all debate about. As time went on, I caught wind of some issues I was not comfortable ignoring; issues that drastically changed how I felt about the forum. We are a progressive community, but we are all still prone to fall into the patterns of our raising, into the American culture of protecting rapists and persecuting victims/survivors—and that includes those in our community who hold the most power.

Before I discuss this let me say, this is not an indictment of any one individual, they did not create rape culture, but just like you and I, they participate in the culture. I am not making truth claims or taking sides. The “us against them” mentality is a part of the system in many ways largely because it divides and conquers. Part of the system is also fear—fear of isolation, loss of reputation, ruining friendships, being shamed, causing conflict—which works to keep us silent when we recognize an issue with the system, and often leaves many of us hoping that someone else will say what we are too afraid to say. I have all these fears, but my fear of perpetuating the system and allowing it to continue finally outweighs. So, let me say that this is not an easy conversation for me to start, but it is also not easy for me to ignore.

As most of us know, a member of the NPTE board was removed this year in light of complaints brought against him in a Facebook post. Despite being removed, he was at the

tournament, which sends an unclear message. So, I asked him about the removal, and he asked that I make it clear he maintains his innocence. Interestingly, he also informed me he was compensated for travel and tabbing the tournament. In debate speak all of this information presents a double bind—either he is a dangerous predator and should not be allowed at the tournament or the board does not think he is a predator and publicly “removed” him from responsibility in fear of reprisal. This conversation would be remiss without pointing out that at this year’s national tournament, at least one board member from the NPTE and NPDA boards were accused of sexual harassment or assault and the mishandling of sexual harassment, which again further blurs the position of the board’s decision. If we want to end rape culture in our community, all parts of our community need to take a united front against the culture. Those in power, who make our rules about responses to sexual assault in relatively undemocratic ways, cannot be active bystanders only when it is publicly convenient.

Again, this is not meant to single out individuals, but to construct a clearer picture of the entire system of rape culture that exists in our community. I am not calling for the removal of anyone, but rather for the boards to be reflexive about their decisions and the messages they send. The purpose of my response is not to create more division, but to point out that despite improvements we have a long way to go. Find ways to rebuild our community that do not allow rape culture to continue its insidious death grip. Holding the board accountable is possible, while still encouraging “community” in our community. I appreciate everyone who attended the forum, and all those who resist systems of oppression in our community. If no one brings light to the myriad layers of rape culture, how can we prevent it from infiltrating our community? Self-reflexivity is also recognizing when we are passive bystanders, and choosing not to call out rape culture in every instance, even when it is difficult and threatening, is how the system persists.