

Op-ed: Double standard minimizes the sexual abuse of males

BY JIM STRUVE AND CHRIS ANDERSON

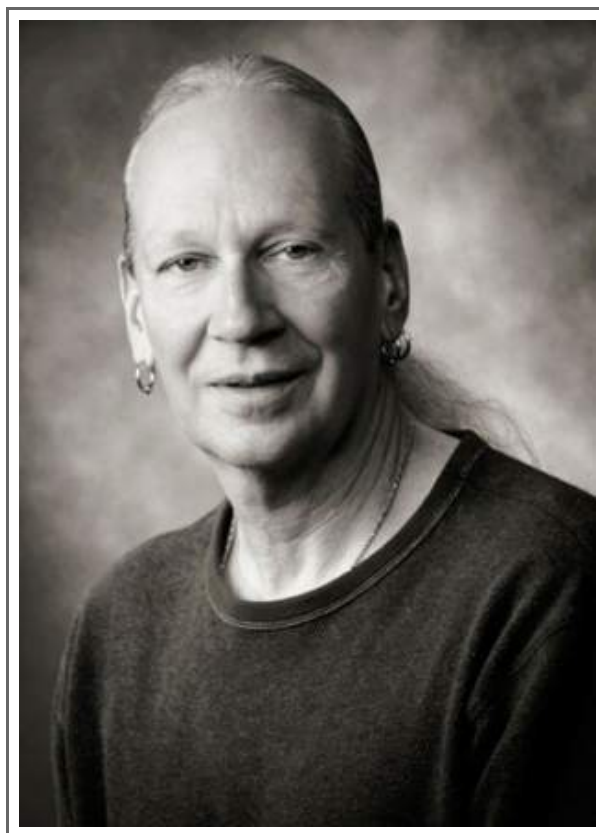
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Recent reporting about allegations that Brianne Altice, a teacher at a Davis County School, had sex with 3 students has exposed a shadow side of biases when sexual assault involves male victims. Similar to news reports from other media outlets, an article in the March 30th edition of the Salt Lake Tribune illustrates a common misperception by stating that Ms. Altice “... is accused of having sexual relationships with three students ...”

We challenge the use of the word “relationship” in this reporting about incidents of sex between adults and children. Unfortunately, this is an especially frequent descriptor when the alleged offender is an adult female and the victim is an adolescent male. Sexual assaults involving male victims generally remain invisible or underreported. Female on male sexual “abuse” or “rape” is minimized even more when couched in terms of “relationship.” Whether intended or not, such language expresses a prejudicial double-standard that causes real harm.

Language influences our responses to trauma such as sexual assault. It is important that the news media pay particular attention to their role in perpetuating myths that continue to minimize or disguise the prevalence of male sexual victimization. Using terms that imply a “romantic” relationship to describe abusive, potentially criminal behavior, makes it far more difficult for us to educate, and therefore protect, our communities from the high levels of sexual abuse that exist.



Jim Struve

In reality, 1 in 4.5 males will experience some form of sexual victimization during their lifetime, often during the span of childhood. Too often, the impact of sexual abuse is minimized when a female sexually victimizes a male. In Utah there is an abundance of news reports that cite alleged sexual assaults involving a female offender and a male — often an adolescent — victim.

While it is commonly presumed that a teenage male who engages in sexual contact with an older female is lucky, the fact is that situations like this usually lead to a great deal of harm — although oftentimes disguised — for the male victim. When the abuser has a position of authority and/or influence in the community, consent becomes impossible. While it may seem difficult to apply the label of child to a teen in high school, legally and developmentally they are still defined as children.

According to the 2010 CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, there are estimated to be more than 25 million male victims of sexual violence of all forms in the United States. Millions of those men never come forward to disclose the abuse they experienced. One of the major contributing factors to the silence around male victimization is the repeated use in our culture of language that minimizes and dismisses boys and men who are raped and sexually assaulted.

An accused person should always be afforded the presumption of innocence. However, that does not require using language that minimizes and marginalizes the harm experienced by the alleged victim. Sexual abuse is abuse, not a “relationship.” Terminology that minimizes, or blatantly avoids, referencing the harm that can befall survivors of abuse and assault makes it much more menacing for a young person who has been sexually assaulted to feel safe enough to disclose their trauma and trust that they will be believed. This is especially pertinent for male victims of sexual assault.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. This provides an excellent opportunity for each of us to increase our awareness of sexual assault. We invite you to seek out resources to expand your knowledge about male sexual victimization. We also challenge you to commit to using language that decreases minimization and shame about sexual assault when a male victim is involved. If each of us individually commit to using accurate language, we will make a collectively larger contribution to creating an environment of safety for all victims — male and female — to speak truthfully about their experiences of sexual assault. We invite the media to join us in this commitment by refraining from using the term “relationship” when describing situations of sexual assault.

Jim Struve is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Salt Lake City. He is co-chair of the MaleSurvivor.org Weekends of Recovery program. Chris Anderson is executive director of MaleSurvivor.org

