Reference Groups, Mob Mentality, and Bystander Intervention: A Sociological Analysis of the Lara Logan Case

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Despite that it involves mobs, bystanders, and political theater—three classic concepts in social psychology—academics have neglected analyzing the Lara Logan sexual assault case through these lenses. I explore how the case has been discussed in the media and suggest that analysis of the mob and bystanders has been, oddly, lacking. I argue that the best reference group to use when discussing this case is not other journalists or even other women who have survived assaults, but is instead enemy women who have survived politically motivated wartime gang sexual assaults. Most observers have overlooked the relevant reference group due to focusing on the traits of the victim, rather than on the context of the event itself. I argue that the case conforms to important dimensions: (1) the sociological norm that gang violence involves premeditation, (2) an agreement of values among perpetrators, and (3) that the violence itself lacked cultural and social legitimacy. Logan was likely targeted because she was a “stranger”; she was saved, in part, for the same reason. The case illustrates known patterns of mob mentalities and bystander intervention, yet it is unlike most cases of both nonwartime gender violence and violence against journalists.

KEY WORDS: gender; media; mobs; politics; reference groups; violence.

INTRODUCTION

Initially, precious little official public information existed about the February 11, 2011 sexual assault on CBS foreign news correspondent Lara Logan. Still, the case inspired a flood of articles and blog posts. Some of these blamed the victim (for her beauty, career choice, attire, or mere presence). Others blamed Arab culture or Islam. Still others blamed the media for placing journalists in harm’s way or simply saw the attack as another indicator of pervasive gender violence. Due to the abundance of opinions about the case, the easiest sociological analysis is the one focused on reactions to it—what they
tell us about religious and cultural biases or the pervasive tendency to blame victims. Yet sociologists can also look at the case itself through the lenses of reference groups, mob mentality, and bystander intervention. These three concepts are clearly inherent in the story itself, yet have been only cursorily examined in coverage so far.

On February 15, 2011, CBS released the following information about Logan’s assault.

On February 11, 2011, the night that Egypt’s President Mubarak stepped down, Logan was swept up by a mob of roughly 200 men, separated from her crew and endured a “brutal and sustained sexual assault and beating,” lasting roughly 30 minutes. She was rescued by Egyptian women and approximately 20 Egyptian soldiers. She returned to the US the next day and recuperated in a hospital. (CBS News, 2011a)

In both an April 27, 2011 New York Times article and a May 1, 2011 60 Minutes interview, Logan gave considerably more detail about her ordeal. She also confirmed rumors that the crowd had chanted anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli slurs during her attack and that it was only when she fell into the lap of—and was embraced by—a woman covered in a chador, did she suspect she might have a chance of surviving “because then it wasn’t just about me anymore. It was about their women ….”

These accounts of the assault—even without knowledge of exactly who the mob was or who the women were who surrounded her at the end—are sufficient to allow for a sociological analysis of a case that has, to date, primarily been treated either as an event “typical” of the Middle East or as one so unique as to be almost immune to sociological analysis. Neither is true.

Other Analyses Thus Far

Analyses of the case have discussed the region’s culture and religion, the dangers inherent in journalism, and the pervasiveness of all types of gender violence. None of the analyses in the mainstream media have included an accompanying serious analysis of the mob and bystanders, a fact that renders them incomplete as explanations for the attack itself.

Blaming the Culture and the Religion

The general argument in these articles is that Arabs and Muslims have such low respect for women (Western women in particular) that something like Logan’s assault was bound to happen, especially in a time of social upheaval. The writers of such posts go to great lengths to show stories of similar assaults at the hands of Arab or Muslim men and cite either Koranic passages or Sharia law as explanations for why such things happen. These people feel

3 Quotes from the 60 Minutes interview, May 1, 2011.
that Logan’s case is just like other atrocities that happen in the Middle East; in their minds, what happened to her does not happen in the United States or is not committed by U.S. men. It is rather inconvenient for them that gang rapes do happen here, even among bystanders, and definitely by U.S. men, as evidenced, for instance, by the alleged Jamie Leigh Jones KBR/Halliburton gang rape in Iraq by U.S. contractors, the Puerto Rico festival gang assaults in New York City in 2000, or those at the 1999 Woodstock anniversary celebration.

**Blaming the Media**

CBS sent a pretty blonde female reporter into a war zone?! Never mind that Logan has 19 years’ experience covering wars or that she has won numerous broadcasting awards; writers of these posts accuse CBS (and other networks) of unnecessarily risking reporters’ lives. To them, the blame for Logan’s assault lies at the feet of her employers. Still others blame the media for a different reason: they say CBS’s four-day “delay” of information indicates that CBS intended to hide the story in order to whitewash the revolution and not expose the ugly underbelly of Egyptian (or, more broadly, Islamic) society (e.g., Cohen, 2011b; Graham, 2011; West, 2011); that in doing this they would protect Logan’s identity and this story would never see the light of day (e.g., Cohen, 2011b). This media criticism indirectly advocates the blame-the-culture and blame-the-religion arguments for her assault.

**It’s All About Gender**

These writers essentially held that sexual harassment and assault are everywhere and thus all women, at all times, are potential victims (Doucette, 2011; Hauser, 2011; Schall, 2011). Such analyses lump together disparate stories—of military attacks, assaults on journalists, child rape, and street harassment—and make it seem as if Logan’s case is not unique, but just another data point of universal and abhorrent misogyny. To a certain extent, this is true, but there are key reasons to stop short of saying her case is “just like” most cases of violence against women.

Rather quickly, the arguments blaming the attack on Arab culture, Islam, the media, or Logan herself were soundly criticized (see, e.g., Shephard, 2011; Walsh, 2011; Williams, 2011). The comparison of Logan’s case to all other cases of gender violence has, however, remained largely unchallenged. It is understandable that she may identify with other women who have endured similar crimes (as they clearly do with her, as evidenced by comments left on articles, blogs, and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter). Yet her case is not like “all other” cases of violence against women. What are the reference groups we sociologists should use when thinking about her case?
Mona Eltahawy, a columnist and speaker on Arab and Muslim issues, appeared on CNN on February 17, 2011, just two days after the CBS statement was issued, to discuss sexual harassment in Egypt, in particular to publicize the findings of a 2008 study conducted by the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) (CBS News, 2011b; Kearl, 2011; Lally, 2011; Topol, 2011). The Washington Post, slate.com, and the BBC were among the many news outlets that also covered this study. The suggestion in all these articles was that of course Logan was assaulted because sexual harassment is so common in Egypt to begin with. Indeed, that study found that 98% of foreign women and 83% of Egyptian women had experienced sexual harassment in Egypt; 62% of Egyptian men admitted to sexually harassing women and 53% of Egyptian men blamed women for “bringing it on” (Shoukry et al., 2008).

Though an article by Richard Leiby (Leiby, 2011) in the Washington Post described other mob assaults on women in Egypt, those were accounts of vicious groping, but not of serious injuries. “Egyptian women,” Leiby wrote, “say they grow up expecting to be fondled publicly by men with impunity.” Other sources also confirm the prevalence of sexual violence in Egypt, particularly during uprisings, and often at the hands of government-hired thugs (see, e.g., Amnesty International, 2011; harassmap.org, 2011; Hart, 2011; Hiel, 2005; Johnson, 2011; Schemm, 2005; Torchia and El Deeb, 2011; Williams, 2005). Yet, in none of these other reports is a gang rape mentioned. Is it just that gang rape cases are not reported—a fact that would be consistent with a culture that greatly stigmatizes rape? While this is a possibility, there is also the possibility that Logan’s experience is atypical of “everyday” Egyptian sexual harassment, as well as atypical of harassment usually inflicted on protesters by government-hired thugs. The degree of violence that Logan experienced goes beyond what has been publicly documented. It is therefore inaccurate to say that Logan’s case is “just like” most cases of sexual violence in Egypt, at least it appears unlike known cases.

If both women who have sustained assault (of any kind, anywhere) and women in Egypt who have sustained less severe forms of gang violence are not the right reference groups to use when thinking of Logan’s case, what are? Assaults on journalists are one logical reference group. However, the details of Logan’s assault make it more similar to assaults on foreign women during times of war than to most assaults on journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists has uncovered only three other cases of gang sexual violence against journalists (Wolfe, 2011b); despite that many journalists are now coming forward to report stories of sexual harassment, violence, and threats (some quite extensive), Logan’s case stands out for its relative rarity among known cases of violence against journalists. The comparison to other journalists may, from a sociological point of view, be too narrow a reference group, for there are too few similar cases. Instead, two other reference groups that seem more appropriate, considering Logan’s career as a foreign news correspondent and
the details she gave of the assault itself, are those of soldiers of either gender and female victims of wartime assaults.

Soldiers, particularly those captured by the enemy, surely know the hell of surviving violence directed at you for a political reason. The fact that the crowd shouted “Jew Jew” during Logan’s attack makes it interpretable as a politically-motivated assault. Thus, it is quite different from that of most women who have also experienced rape and assault. It certainly makes it different from the appalling “everyday” harassment that Egyptian women and foreign tourists described in ECWR’s 2008 study.

It is absolutely reasonable to suspect that Logan’s attack may have been directed at her, in part, for political reasons. Given the anti-Semitic shouts by the mob assaulting her and her detainment just a week prior (about which she said on the Charlie Rose show that she and her team had been accused of being spies), it is a rather measured guess that she may have been targeted.

The Most Relevant Reference Group: Female Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence

Logan’s case fits with well-known patterns of women—particularly “enemy” women—being targeted for severe sexual assaults during times of war and conflict (Cohen, 2011a; Leatherman, 2011). For example, stories of rape and assault were widely reported during the wars in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, Pakistan, and Liberia. Libya is currently being blamed for using sexual assault—including gang assaults—as an intimidation tactic. Sexual assault is also common in South Africa (Logan’s home country). The U.S. military has been accused not only of raping women in their own military, but also of raping women in countries in which they work. U.S. soldiers raped women in Vietnam and in Korea. George Patton reportedly said that rape was just “unquestionably expected” during World War II.

Many consider rape (particularly of “enemy” women) to be simply part of war. The relevance to Logan’s case is this: the accounts of wartime sexual assaults are timeless and know no geographic, national, religious, or ethnic limits. This reality also includes rapes of men, as evidenced in an April 3, 2011 Newsweek article describing the until-now largely hidden reality of gang sexual violence against both women and men in the U.S. military (Ellison, 2011).

Logan’s assault is not typical of Arab culture or Islam or even of assaults on journalists. It is typical of events that happen during war. Of particular relevance is the sad fact that public rape, as sociologist Victoria Canning has argued, is common in times of conflict; Logan’s assault in Tahrir Square was certainly public. Since, as Canning has also pointed out, the number of survivors of such assaults runs well into the millions (Canning, 2010), other women who have experienced public assaults during wartime are easily the most appropriate reference group to use when discussing Logan’s case. Logan’s case
is more like those that happen during wartime, but it is not “just like” those that happen during date rapes, stranger assaults and rapes, street harassment, or domestic violence. Nor is it really “just like” most reports of journalists’ mistreatment.

MOB MENTALITY

Although the term “mob” was, for obvious reasons, widely used in articles about Logan, the sociological concept mob mentality was used only in one article about the case: Foster Kamer (2011), in his Esquire article about Nir Rosen (the former NYU scholar who issued offensive Tweets about Logan’s attack), argued that the concept applied equally to the mob Logan encountered as to the mob that Rosen found on Twitter. Among official news of the event, a Washington Post article described the “crush of the mob” and the CBS statement mentioned a “mob of 200, whipped into a frenzy.” Curiously, in none of the official news or in blogs that I read was a mob mentality actually discussed in a truly sociological way.

Ironic because the story is perfect for such an analysis.

Unquestionably, some sort of mob mentality is at work whenever multiple perpetrators pursue one victim. All sociologists know that the social psychological explanation is straightforward: it is cognitively easier to act grossly inappropriately if others (particularly if there are many others) are doing the same. Such behavior becomes even more cognitively comfortable if there is some sort of public pronouncement for doing so: the anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli slurs being shouted at Logan during the attack would have given the perpetrators their own form of rationale for action as well as the bystanders their own reason for not intervening.

Canning (2010) has convincingly argued that when an individual person decides to harm or maim another, we can rather easily see that person as deviant, yet when a group decides to do so we cannot so easily dismiss them all as psychopaths. Group assaults do tell us something about underlying social, political, or cultural beliefs in a society. While the severity of Logan’s assault is not “typical” of the Middle East or of Islam, it does tell us much about gender imbalance in Egypt and the widely perceived “dangers” of (perceived) Jews, journalists, or spies in that society, at least particularly in the final days of Mubarak’s regime.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss Egypt’s long-standing disagreements with Israel. It is enough to say that an Egyptian mob who believes they have isolated a Jewish Israeli journalist would likely think they have plenty of historic justification for retribution. The clear presence of a mob mentality that presumed a right to “punish” goes a long way to make other explanations for the attack—Islam, Arab culture, Logan’s appearance, even the inherent danger of war reporting—less convincing as sufficient explanations for the attack itself. Putting Logan’s case in this context makes it easily
fit a well-known pattern of mob violence during times of social upheaval in all societies and thus makes it appear (sadly) less unique or culturally specific than originally reported. But it does not make it equivalent to all types of cases of violence against women or against journalists. Not that that is any consolation.

BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

Implicitly, we know many people saw the attack and did nothing. Yet, in none of the official reports were bystanders mentioned. The classic article on bystander effect, by Latane and Darley (1969), referenced the Kitty Genovese murder case, where reputedly 38 New Yorkers simply watched as Genovese was beaten and murdered. While the story of the Genovese bystanders was later discredited, it spawned a series of experiments that led to a theory of bystander intervention.

When Do People Intervene?

Latane and Darley showed people intervene when they first notice the event, correctly interpret that there is a problem, assume personal responsibility, feel competent to help, and then help. In a crowd the size of the one in Tahrir Square (reputedly hundreds of thousands), there would have been many people who did not even notice Logan’s attack. Perhaps the majority who did were unwilling to assume responsibility or felt incompetent to do so. A 2008 study by Levine and Crowther (2008) showed that increasing group size can both encourage and inhibit helping behavior, and that when people are seen as strangers, increased group size usually—but not always—inhibits helping. Given the size of the mob immediately around Logan (reportedly 200–300), the size of the overall crowd, the brutality, and the fact that Logan was a “stranger” in Egypt, what is remarkable is not that many did not intervene but that some did.

Indeed, even without a crowd and without a clear indication of “stranger,” there are times when people witness events where they could rather easily intervene and yet they do not. One of the most infamous is that of the 1993 London murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year-old boys. Sociologists were made to ask: Why did 37 adults who saw the boys together (in many cases with the baby crying and his head bleeding) not intervene? The quick answer, according to Levine (1999), is that nearly all assumed the boys were brothers; people will often not intervene if they think the group they are witnessing is a family unit. This underscores our culture’s—probably most Western cultures’—primacy on privacy within the family. Although many often assume people are less likely to intervene in cases involving strangers, that is not always true. For example, Shotland and Straw’s 1976 study showed
that a stranger in a crowd is more likely to be identified as needing assistance than is someone receiving an assault at the hands of people perceived to be family.

Despite that Logan was likely targeted because she was a "stranger," she was likely, in part, saved for the same reason. The Egyptian soldiers and women who saved Logan likely felt compelled to do so not only due to pressure from Logan’s crew and security, but because the violence lacked cultural and social legitimacy that might have been granted had it been soldiers attacking enemy combatants or even a man hitting his wife or a parent striking a child. In addition, the fact that so many Egyptian women have experienced sexual harassment may have increased their likelihood of seeing her as one of them. In sociological terms, they likely converted Logan from the far category of "stranger" to the near one of "sister." As Logan herself said, once she was surrounded by those women, the attack wasn’t just about her anymore, it was also about "[the Egyptian] women." From a social psychology perspective, the othering the mob engaged in during the assault was harder to maintain once it risked harm to their own.

Perhaps the most fortuitous moment in Logan’s life was literally when she fell into the lap of a stranger.

CONCLUSION

Mob mentality and bystander intervention are strong explanations for Logan’s assault and rescue, making it possible to analyze sociologically what has been largely discussed in three inaccurate ways: one, as an event attributable only to a particular culture and religion; two, as a unique, unusual event; or three, as just another instance of violence against women. All these positions are unnecessarily extreme; her case is (sadly) not unusual, particularly during times of social upheaval in any country or culture, but is also different from most instances of violence against women and/or against journalists. Careful attention to well-documented patterns of mob-fueled gender violence in times of social upheaval reminds us that it is the context of an event that should define the reference group, rather than the individual traits of the victim.

Our most poignant stories of mob violence and bystander ambivalence take place in urban settings; Logan’s assault and Bulgar and Genovese’s murders show this. There is a paradox here between public space and strangers: the public space provides perpetrators like Logan’s mob with both a stage and an audience, which likely serve as an incentive rather than as a usual deterrent for such deviance. Logan’s experience also reminds us that journalists in war zones do not occupy the ideal-type neutral “middle ground” but are instead often seen as the enemy or the “other,” making them particularly vulnerable.

4 From 60 Minutes interview, May 1, 2011.
to public attacks unless one side (in this case, the Egyptian women) explicitly redefines and extends their conflict identities to include them.

REFERENCES


