

## A Personal Statement from Michael Shermer

Over the past few years there has been a growing movement—at conferences, college campuses, and businesses—to clarify or even to redefine the rules of sexual encounters. As this movement has grown, a number of prominent people have been targeted on Internet gossip sites with complaints of sexual misconduct. Some of these allegations are appropriate protests from the growing numbers of women in formerly male-dominated groups, who are eager to overcome the legacy of misogyny and exclusion women have had to cope with for years. But all revolutions, however welcome, bring unwarranted excesses and moral panics. As a public intellectual who interacts with tens of thousands of people every year, I have been targeted as well. And once a panic gets rolling, the anonymity of the Internet encourages others to start jumping on the bandwagon—“Yes! He did something similar to me...I think!”—and reinterpreting perfectly normal acts as evidence of misogyny, malice, or seduction.

Instead of due process, judicial fairness, and an assumption of innocence—as practiced in the legal system—these panics lead to drumhead trials by rumor and gossip, starting with an assumption of guilt. Allegations of victimization are rewarded with sympathy for the claimant, outrage against the accused, and in some cases revenue for the blogger for page hits. Many of the claims are so wildly implausible that even the most enthusiastic of the Internet gossips dismiss them: e.g., a rumor circulated last year from a *guy* who said he had nonconsensual sex with me—determined by the gossip bloggers to be a hoax.

Until now I have maintained my silence on the subject summarized, in part, by Mark Oppenheimer in his BuzzFeed article, because I find the entire matter unseemly and suitable for tabloid trash—published as it is on a click-bait site that features such articles as “Butt Facts That Will Surprise You” and “Can We Guess Your Favorite Sex Position?” And, since it is all untrue, it is not worthy of a reply as it only associates my name with such indecorous accusations. But in our society mere association has a way of morphing into an assumption of guilt, and being put in a position of having to make such a statement I have no problem emphatically denying the claims.

I will begin with three examples of the kind of misperceptions that can feed false and inflated allegations. The first, from one of these bloggers named PZ Myers, whose post on August 8, 2013 included this story from a woman who said I flirted with her and “got her drunk” at a 2006 reception after my talk (included by Myers as “evidence” that I seduce women with alcohol):

Michael Shermer was the guest of honor at an atheist event I attended in Fall 2006; I was on the Board of the group who hosted it. It’s a very short story: I got my book signed, then at the post-speech party, Shermer chatted with me at great length while refilling my wine glass repeatedly. I lost count of how many drinks I had. He was flirting with me and I am non-confrontational and unwilling to be rude, so I just laughed it off. He made sure my wine glass stayed full. And that’s the entirety of my story: Michael Shermer helped get me drunker than I normally get, and was a bit flirty. I can’t recall the details because I was intoxicated. I don’t

remember how I left, but I am told that a friend took me away from the situation and home from the party. Note, I'd never gotten drunk at any atheist event before; I was humiliated by having gotten so drunk and even more ashamed that my friends had to cart me off before anything happened to me.

Here is an eyewitness account of what actually happened from someone standing there in the group (who wishes to remain anonymous out of fear that he might be targeted):

I am 99% sure I know the woman who wrote about Mr. Shermer refilling her glass at an event. If I'm correct, I was there that night, and what she wrote has no connection to what actually happened. She tried to make it look like it was just her and Mr. Shermer, but there were several other people gathered around him too. And he was not the one pouring wine. It was a server, and all he did was suggest to that person that the glasses be refilled. That was it! As for his flirtation, I didn't see anything that went further than regular friendly chitchat. Mr. Shermer was witty and charming with everyone. But maybe if you have drunk delusions, you might think he was flirting specifically with you. But that was not the case.

Second, there was an Orange County conference in 2010 at which I spoke and did a public book signing. Oppenheimer quotes a woman who says that while I was sitting at a book table signing books and talking to her (in her view, "hitting on me") I started "playing with my crotch" to get her to look at it, and apparently I did this for *three or four minutes*. Have you any idea how long that is? Would any man do such a preposterous thing at a public event with many people standing around, in a line to get signed books, where each exchange lasts perhaps 30 seconds at most? Whatever I might have been doing (adjusting my belt?, reaching for a pen in my pocket?)—if I was doing anything at all—rest assured that I think anyone who would behave this way is repulsive, and I am truly sorry if that is what she thinks I was doing. I can give her the benefit of the doubt that she is not just making this up, but in return she has to give me the benefit of the doubt that I would never do such a thing. This is obviously a misunderstanding along the lines of the wine glass-filling incident.

Third, consider Pamela Gay's claim that I almost touched her in the wrong place (she says breast) when we were introduced at a conference. What can that possibly mean? She reached out to shake my hand and I did what? Reached out to shake her breast (but missed)? In front of a bunch of people—including friends and colleagues—in the middle of the day in a hotel lobby? Again, who behaves in such a gross way? Not me. In any case, if I did do something that childish and revolting, why was Pamela so friendly with me the rest of the weekend at that conference? Interested readers can see pictures of Pamela (in the leaf-pattern dress) taken after I had allegedly assaulted her by my greeting, in which she is as friendly with me as everyone else, posted by someone (I do not know who) here: <http://i.imgur.com/xloWwSs.jpg>

One claim involves a real interaction that happened six years ago, one that I remember as sober and consensual. So, apparently, did the woman in question whom Oppenheimer identifies as Alison Smith, as her subsequent behavior with me for years afterward was

warm and amiable.

Late one night, at the June 2008 TAM, around 10 or 11, I wandered over to someone's suite at the hotel where there was a party going on. It was jammed with people. Everyone was drinking and having fun. I talked to lots of people, including Alison, whom I knew reasonably well. We were talking and flirting, and after some time she took me by the hand and led me to the bathroom and closed the door behind us, where she proceeded to proposition me in a very direct, assertive, and physical fashion. I was taken aback. Sex in a hotel bathroom isn't my idea of a romantic evening, plus I could tell she'd been drinking, so I encouraged her to put herself back together and rejoin the party. We went back to mingling with the crowd and a short while after that we went outside to get some fresh air and we ended up walking and talking for a couple hours out on the Las Vegas strip. We did not drink for the several hours we walked together after the suite incident. She was sober. I was sober. I invited her back to my room and she willingly accepted my invitation.

As far as I knew then and for all these years after, we both had a good time. In fact, the next day I saw Alison and she was pleasant and polite. I saw her at a couple of conferences after that, where she was unfailingly affable and friendly to me. Two years later, for example, for the 2010 TAM she invited me by email, warmly and affectionately, to be on a panel she was organizing on "myths about sex and sexuality." (I declined.) Here is her email:

**From:** Alison Smith <alison@randi.org>  
**Subject:** **Sex workshop?**  
**Date:** May 24, 2010 12:16:40 PM PDT  
**To:** Michael Shermer <email deleted>

Hi, Michael!

I'm working on some TAM things, including the workshop I'm running on Skepticism and Sexuality. The workshop takes place on Sunday from 2pm until 4pm. The first hour will be a lecture where I discuss myths about sex and sexuality. There will then be a short intermission, and at around 3pm, a panel discussion will begin. I'll be moderating the discussion, and will hold a Q&A session between the panelists and the workshopers.

So far, the panel consists of:

Liz Cornwell, sexologist

Heidi Anderson, rape crisis counselor and author of erotic fiction

Brandon Thorp, gay rights activist and researcher into reparative therapy

I was wondering if you'd like to be the fourth panelist. I think that your knowledge of psychology would make you a great addition, and that you'll bring interesting viewpoints into the discussion.

Will you still be in Vegas at that time? And would you like to participate? (Please say yes!! ;))

Thanks so much!

-- Alison

If Alison was unhappy with our sexual encounter, let alone if she believed she had been raped, why would she ask a rapist to be on her sex panel, and throw in a smiley face for fun? *Why didn't she tell me back in 2008, or years later, or even now, how she really felt?* I don't know. But I do know this: at the time, Alison definitely wanted to have sex with me, she was not intoxicated when we did have sex, it was consensual the entire time, and by her actions before, during and after she seemed to have no reservations or misgivings. Had Alison changed her mind and decided she wanted to stop, I would have stopped. And I would never have sex with a woman so intoxicated she could not consent.

No doubt this statement will be poured over, analyzed, and deconstructed sentence by sentence in the days and weeks to come. I will not participate in any of the "he said/she said" battles that play out on the pages of Internet gossip sites. But I will freely respond to Alison or any other woman who communicates with me directly and privately who believes I have insulted or mistreated her. Let's try honest person to person—and most of all timely—communication as a way of dealing with such issues.