Rape and Victim-Blaming: A Critical Examination of the Tendency to Blame Victims and Exonerate Perpetrators in Cases of Rape

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *I chose this subject because I have found that even the most educated people tend to be ignorant of the reality of rape in America. My goal was to provide an abundance of information to try to help people see the whole picture. It was very difficult to write on this topic because of my personal experience, but it is too important to ignore. I had trouble keeping the length down because there is so much to be said on the topic of rape. In the end, I had to narrow my topic down to victim-blaming. Eliminating victim-blaming is the best way to help rape victims and to reduce the rate of victimization. The primary cause of victim-blaming is acceptance of popular myths about rape, so teaching people about the reality of rape is imperative to eliminating rape.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *In UWP 102: Writing in Sociology, my students were asked to pick a topic they felt strongly about and develop the topic throughout the quarter by writing a problem statement, a critical analysis, and a literature review, leading to an in-depth discussion of the subject in their final paper: a long report. Sonnen accomplished this task admirably in the paper she submitted, and I congratulate her on being able to sustain her intellectual energy and develop her ideas clearly on a topic she felt invested in. It was a pleasure to work with Sonnen.*

—Poonam Sachdev, University Writing Program

INTRODUCTION

Rape is a puzzling crime because most Americans consider it to be heinous in the abstract, but in specific incidents of rape, it is often the victim rather than the perpetrator who gets blamed and shamed by society. There is a sharp disjuncture between the populace's conception of rape and the reality of rape.

The shift of the blame onto the victim is largely a result of people's preconceived notions about rape. People are less likely to believe a victim and less likely to hold her assailant accountable when she reports being assaulted in a manner that is not consistent with stereotypes. Most people are unaware of the frequency of rape in America and have expectations about victims and perpetrators that do not match reality. The expectations are based on rape myths that are perpetuated by the media, the criminal justice system, and "rape prevention" tips. The acceptance and perpetuation of rape myths and the lack of real knowledge about rape result in widespread denial of the problem of rape.

My study focuses on the rape of adult women because this is the most prevalent form of rape in our society. I do not use the legal definition of "adult." I focus on rapes wherein the victim and perpetrator are either both legal adults, are in adult situations (such as drinking alcohol), or are of similar age. Thus, I may consider the rape of a 16 year old girl by a 17 year old boy, but not the rape of an 8 year old child by a 14 year old boy.

THEORY

I am primarily drawing on theories of Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and victim-blaming. Researchers measure participants' levels of RMA using a variety of surveys that ask questions designed to assess the individual's acceptance of rape stereotypes. Rape Myth Acceptance has been linked to higher rates of victim-blaming in numerous studies (Basow and Minieri 2011, Belknap 2010, Bieneck and Krahe 2011, Dellinger 2010). I address the connection between RMA and victim-blaming, as well as some of the causes for RMA, in the body of the paper. Victim-blaming refers to the tendency to hold rape victims accountable for their actions and coincides with perpetrator exoneration. People are less likely to hold a perpetrator accountable for his actions if they believe that the victim is responsible for preventing the rape.

METHODS

I draw on both primary and secondary research. This includes scholarly articles on the subject of rape and victim-blaming, articles and books on gender violence, Stanley Cohen's theories on denial (2001), and the National Crime Victimization Survey. I also draw on personal experience and anecdotal evidence gathered from my own research on this subject. I use my research and experience to supplement the existing work on the subject and to describe the victim's experience in more detail than is possible when using only statistics.

I am writing on this topic because I have experienced victim-blaming firsthand. I had to drop out of high school because of the burden of victim-blaming following a rape by a friend. I later worked for a police department and saw how male officers regarded women in general and rape victims in particular (I lost my job after reporting an assault by one of those officers). I have been studying rape and victim-blaming from a scholarly standpoint for the past six years. I have been privy to the stories of dozens of women who were willing to share their experiences with me. I draw on those anecdotes in my explanations of the victim's experience of rape.

WHAT CONSTITUTES VICTIM-BLAMING?

Victim-blaming is a term used to describe the tendency to hold rape victims rather than perpetrators accountable for an incident of rape. When a woman reports a rape she will likely be questioned about her actions and her choices, revealing the assumption that women somehow invite or precipitate rape. Questions such as "What were you doing out that late at night?" or "How much did you have to drink?" can seem innocent but serve to shift the focus from the perpetrator's actions onto the victim. Victims also face denial and disbelief from third parties, which results in the woman being publicly shamed and humiliated. The phenomenon of victim-blaming is unique to crimes involving sexual violence (Bieneck and Krahe 2011).

Many people question the victim's choices when she reports a rape. Even if the assailant is a trusted friend, the victim is questioned for choosing to be alone with him. Third parties, such as friends, family, police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and juries, focus on what the victim was wearing, whether or not she was drinking alcohol or using drugs, whether or not she was sexually active prior to the incident, if she has made any allegations of rape before, etc. These questions reflect the

beliefs that a woman puts herself at risk and that her choices have caused the incident.

Women are especially at risk of victim-blaming when they delay reporting. It is widely believed that a "real" rape will leave significant physical evidence (Dellinger 2010). Women are expected to be beaten and bruised. This is not the case for the majority of rapes. The only physical evidence they may have been able to provide is DNA from seminal fluid; however, even this is not present in all cases. When a woman delays reporting, any physical evidence will be gone before law enforcement gets involved. This gives law enforcement and other third parties the ability to deny that any wrongdoing even occurred. The belief that a woman who has been raped will immediately call police also fuels the assumption that delayed reporting is because the accusation is false.

Even in cases where there is physical evidence—but especially in cases with no physical evidence—third parties and perpetrators can deny that a rape ever occurred. There is a mistaken belief in this society that women frequently claim to have been raped when they have not been. People believe that women will claim to have been raped as an act of vengeance against a man. Research shows that only 0.005% of rapes are false allegations, but many people believe that women are more likely to lie about rape than to have actually been raped (Belknap 2010). To deny the incident requires disbelieving the victim. The victim gets labeled a liar and a whore, worsening the feelings of guilt and depression that rape causes (Brown 2004). People who believe that false allegations are easy to make severely underestimate the psychological and social costs to a woman for admitting victimization (Belknap 2010).

THE REALITY OF RAPE IN AMERICA

The Frequency of Rape

Exact figures on rape in America are unknown due to the massive underreporting of this crime. The government estimates that actual incidents of rape may be as much as ten times what are reported to police. Some sources project even higher numbers. One national survey estimates that about 22% of women report a man forcing them to have sex at some point in their lives (Laumann 335). Some women experience forced sex multiple times throughout their lives. Yet only a fraction of these crimes is reported to police and successfully prosecuted. This leaves

rape relatively invisible, keeping most people from realizing its prevalence in society. Due to underreporting, rape appears to be a relatively rare crime rather than a commonplace form of violence.

Defining Rape

The perception and awareness of rape is hindered by the varying definitions of rape (Laumann 333). Some conceptions of rape include penetration of any orifice of the body while some only include vaginal penetration. Broader definitions also allow for penetration by any foreign object, while more narrow definitions only allow for penetration by the penis. The use of force in defining rape is also controversial: some scholars include any type of coercion that results in a person having any sex against his/her will, while many legal definitions are restricted to the use of physical force or use of a weapon. Because of these disagreements, many women may not realize that an incident is considered rape and often perpetrators do not realize that their actions constitute rape. This adds to the perpetrator's denial of wrongdoing and decreases the likelihood of the crime being reported to law enforcement.

Victims

Other than domestic violence, rape is the only violent crime whose victims are predominantly female (Jackman 1999). About 95% of rape victims are female. Males are most at risk for sexual crimes as children, but female children are still victimized at about three times the rate of male children (Laumann et al. 1994). Adult males are extremely unlikely to be victims of sexual violence.

Women are most at risk between the ages of 16-25 (Laumann et al. 1994). These are the high-risk behavior years, when women are most likely to be going on dates and drinking alcohol. Women are extremely at risk in college, especially those involved in social activities on campus. Rapes are frequent at parties involving alcohol, such as fraternity "keggers" (Campbell-Ruggard and Van Ryswyk 2001). One out of every four female college students will be raped at least once during her time in school. High school students are also at risk, especially those who attend alcohol-fueled parties.

One of the most at-risk groups is women in the military. Various studies have found that as many as two out of every three women in the military are victimized. This number could be higher due to non-reporting.

While men tend to fear that our female soldiers will be raped by enemy troops—it is often used as a reason for keeping women out of combat—it is our own soldiers who are raping our female soldiers. Women who report sexual harassment or sexual violence to their commanding officers are frequently given dishonorable psychological discharges or transferred to different units (Martin 2012). This punishment of the victim rather than of the perpetrator, combined with the extremely male-dominated misogynistic culture of the military, puts women serving in the military at extremely high-risk of rape and victim-blaming.

Another extremely at-risk group is women with mental or physical disabilities who rely on others for their physical care (Jackman 1999). Women who are physically dependent, including women in nursing homes and those with mental illnesses, are extremely likely to be raped or sexually abused because they are either unable to report the crime, depend on the person who committed it and cannot afford to lose their caretaker, or are not believed by third parties if they do report it (this is especially true when the victim has a mental disability, such as autism, down's syndrome, schizophrenia, etc.). The primary mode of victim-blaming that these women face is denial of the crime; people do not believe that someone who is considered "crazy" could really understand rape, or that someone would want to have sex with a "crazy" person.

One of the causes of such denial is the hyper-sexualization of rape victims. Rape victims are expected to be physically attractive and rapes are often portrayed as erotic. Movies and T.V. shows tend to film rape scenes and sex scenes with the same techniques, making rape seem like another form of sex (Gruner 1994). Thus people expect that rape victims will be physically attractive and tend to disbelieve women who are not. Women who meet society's standards of beauty and thinness are significantly more likely to be believed by third parties than are socially awkward women, physically unattractive women, or overweight women.

While most rape myths posit white women as the victims of rape, white women are among the least likely to be victimized. Women of color, especially African American women and Native American women have the highest rates of victimization (NCVS 2008). This is primarily because of their lower status in American society. The risk of victimization is greater within relationships, familial settings, and employment settings. African-American women tend to be in the lowest-status jobs and at the lowest-paid positions, which puts them at the most risk of being raped by an employer or coworker. Native American women are nearly invisible

in our society and have even lower status than African American women. Indian reservations are governed by tribal law, but men who are not members of the tribe are not subject to sanction by the tribal law. This makes Native American women especially vulnerable to white men who are nearly immune to the law. Still, all women, regardless of age, race, socioeconomic status, level of disability, etc. are at risk simply because they are women.

Perpetrators

Almost all perpetrators of rape are male. Men tend to victimize women of lower status. Men are automatically given higher status because we live in a patriarchal society. But there is a limit to this. A poor black man cannot easily get away with raping a middle-class white woman, for example, but a middle-class white man can easily get away with raping a poor black woman. Many women exhibit signs of mental illness following victimization, such as depression, thoughts of suicide, and self-mutilation, which lowers their social status and believability. Women are unlikely to be believed when accusing a man of higher status, but most perpetrators are of higher status than the victims.

The most important thing to know about perpetrators is that they are not insane. They often are not otherwise criminally inclined. As a society, we want to believe that actions are representative of the character of the person committing them. Thus, if someone were to commit rape, we would know he is not a good person because he would not be good in any other aspect of life. The fact is, most rapists are not mentally insane or unstable. They often have no criminal record and are seen as normal members of society. Men who have committed rape typically believe that they have done nothing wrong. Men tend to believe that women desire sexual interaction when the women do not (Basow and Minieri 2011). Thus, many men who commit rape believe that they were simply having sex with a willing partner. There is no psychological or moral difference between men who force sex and those who do not. The rapist is the guy next door, the business owner, the police officer, the father and husband, etc. We want to believe that there is an easy-to-distinguish line between good people and bad people, but there isn't. Most people do not believe rape victims simply because they cannot imagine that their friend, brother, coworker, or neighbor is capable of committing rape.

RAPE MYTHS

Rape Myth Acceptance

Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) is used to describe the adherence to inaccurate beliefs about rape. Many studies have linked high rates of RMA to high rates of victim-blaming, suggesting that it is not only victims who are unable to recognize their experience as rape (Maurer and Robinson 2007, Basow and Minieri 2011). Police officers, judges, juries, and other third parties are much less likely to perceive an incident as a "real rape" if it does not involve physical injury, if the rapist and victim were intimately involved prior to the rape, if the victim was willingly alone with the perpetrator, etc. (Dellinger 2010, Temkin and Krahe 2008). Additionally, third parties are much more likely to justify the perpetrator's actions and to blame the victim when the rape does not match stereotypes.

The prevalence of rape myths prevents victims, perpetrators, and third parties from recognizing most incidents as rape. RMA leads to higher rates of rape in the population, causes victims to be blamed for the crime, and keeps perpetrators from facing punishment. Rape myths are prevalent in movies and television shows, rape prevention tips, and are even exacerbated by news stories and crime statistics. Thus, it is not only victims who should be educated on the reality of rape, but society as a whole.

Physical Injury

People tend to judge the severity of rape based on the severity of physical injuries, although the primary injuries of rape are typically psychological. According to Mary R. Jackman, psychological injuries from rape can be long-term and include "fear, anxiety, loss of control, betrayal of trust, self-blame, low self-esteem, embarrassment, humiliation, shame, depression, and alcoholism" (1999). The damage multiplies when friends and family begin blaming the victim by questioning her motivations and choices rather than the actions of the perpetrator. The focus on the physical impact of rape rather than the psychological impact is also damaging if the victim tries to report the crime.

Police have been telling women for decades that if they are sexually assaulted they should avoid resisting physically to minimize physical injury. However, many conceptions of rape, such as that proposed

in recent abortion legislation by Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, require physical evidence of use of force to qualify as a rape (Baumann). This means that any time the victim does not resist, even if it is because of fear of injury, much of society will not consider the incident to be rape, or may not consider it to be severe enough to merit prosecution. Victims who do not resist physically tend to face even greater amounts of guilt, loss of autonomy, and self-blame.

Without physical injuries, police and third parties claim that there is less evidence to substantiate a claim of rape. Rather than accepting that a traumatizing act of violence took place, people begin to see things as a subject of gossip, a sort of "he said, she said," which reduces the perceived severity of the violence and converts it to an argument or a source of drama rather than a heinous crime. This disparity between what police advise potential victims to do and what they expect from actual victims, the focus on physical rather than psychological damage, and the tendency to blame victims who cannot offer physical evidence of injuries to substantiate allegations of rape causes more trauma to the victim, reduces the likelihood of legal and social repercussions for the perpetrator, and causes the public's expectations of rape to vary significantly from the reality of most cases of rape.

Stranger Danger Myth

The major disjuncture between abstract conceptions of rape and the reality of rape is the relationship between the victim and perpetrator prior to the rape. The stereotype of rape usually involves a woman being accosted by a stranger late at night, either because of a home invasion or because the woman is walking by herself after dark. The reality is that about 96% of incidents of coerced sex are committed by someone the victim knows (Laumann et al. 1994), often someone who is known intimately, such as a close friend, partner, or family member (Jackman 288). Rape prevention tips focus on protecting yourself from rape by a stranger, feeding the public's belief that stranger-rape is the norm.

The relationship of perpetrator to victim has serious consequences for the victim. When the perpetrator and victim know each other prior to the incident, they tend to travel in the same social circles. The perpetrator is typically well known to the victim's friends and/or family. In almost all cases, the perpetrator will deny any wrongdoing, leaving family and friends with the burden of deciding whose story to believe. It becomes easier to

believe that nothing happened or that the victim encouraged or provoked the incident somehow than to hold the perpetrator accountable. This leaves the victim without the support of friends and family. She is often discouraged from seeking legal action. This exacerbates the psychological damage to the victim, increasing feelings of despair and guilt. It also reinforces the stereotype of the stranger-rapist because rapes that are not committed by a stranger are much less likely to be reported to the police.

The myth that rape is committed by strangers leaves women unprepared for the reality. Women are taught to check the backseat before getting into their car when the true danger is the person opening the car door for them. They do not recognize the danger in drinking alcohol with friends because the rape prevention tips focus on protecting your drink from strangers with date-rape drugs. Women are significantly more likely to be raped when they are with someone they trust than when they are alone or with strangers. Most people are not aware of this. Thus, when an intimate partner continues trying to convince a woman to have sex after she has turned him down, she does not expect him to force sex. Women who face this type of rape are often unaware that what they have experienced even qualifies as rape. Most will refer to the incident as "something bad" or will say that "*something* happened" but find themselves unable to use the word "rape" to describe the situation.

DENIAL

It is obvious that perpetrators have a motive for denying rape, but victims and third parties also tend to deny rape. Third parties caught between two people that they know will tend to deny rape because the burden of choosing between the two stories is too great (Cohen 2001). Victims of intimate partner rape tend to deny the severity of the incident because recognizing it as rape will cause dramatic change in their social lives and relationships. Denial of rape allows all parties to maintain life as it was prior to the incident. However, this strategy tends to fail for victims, who eventually succumb to the psychological effects of rape.

Denial by Society

Just world theory can be used to understand motivation for denial as well. People want to believe that we live in a just world wherein good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Bal and Van Den Bos 2010). This causes people to try to blame the

victim and not the perpetrator. People want to believe that the victim did something to precipitate the rape or that she somehow deserved it. This enables them to feel as if they can prevent themselves from becoming victims.

Similarity to the victim or perpetrator can also motivate denial (Bal and Van Den Bos 2010). If a person feels that he is similar to the perpetrator, he will want to exonerate the perpetrator. He wants to believe that he is incapable of committing such a crime; therefore people similar to him must also be incapable of it. When people are similar to the victim, they tend to blame her because they want to believe that they are not at risk, therefore the victim must have done something to put herself at risk.

Denial by Victims: Self-blame

Victims tend to deny the incident and blame themselves for the same reason. Rape causes victims to feel a significant—if not total—loss of control over their lives. Many victims try to understand what they did wrong to believe that they can prevent such incidents from happening again. To believe that they did nothing wrong and thus could not have prevented this rape would be to accept that they cannot prevent another rape.

CONCLUSION

Victim-blaming is a serious social problem. It not only causes significant harm to victims of rape and sexual assault, it also creates a culture wherein rape can be committed without consequences for the perpetrator. The prevalence of myths about rape increases victim-blaming and prevents perpetrators, victims, and third parties from understanding this type of violence. American society should be educated about the reality of rape to reduce the acceptance of rape myths and thus reduce victim-blaming. Special efforts should be made to educate men about what constitutes rape. Perhaps most importantly, the media and police must stop focusing on stranger-rapes and be more realistic in their depictions of rape. If such efforts are made, change will still be slow and hard-won. As long as the majority of society is unaware of the reality of rape, no change can occur.

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