

Adult sexual assault: Overview of research

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Abstract:

Models of sexual assault and rape have progressed from psychopathology models of perpetration and victimization to current sociocultural views. Sociocultural models focus on the factors that influence the likelihood that the label of rape will be applied and the behavior dealt with accordingly. The papers in this journal issue call for explicit attention to the historical, political, and sociocultural factors associated with the likelihood of coercive sexual incidents (including characteristics of the assailant and the victim). In addition to placing the occurrence of rape in an historical and sociocultural framework, the authors present research findings and theoretical formulations to further the understanding of rape.

Keywords: sexual assault | sociocultural model | rape

Article:

A decade ago, the *Journal of Social Issues* published a special issue entitled "Rape" (Cann, Calhoun, Selby, & King, 1981). While the circumstances under which sexual assaults occur have changed relatively little in the ensuing years, two things have changed: public awareness of sexual assault, in particular, date rape; and the quality and quantity of scientific research on sexual assault.

Sexual assault has moved increasingly into public acknowledgment and awareness, as evidenced by the popularity of books such as *I Never Called it Rape* (Warshaw, 1988) and movies such as *The Accused*. The past ten years have witnessed increased research on a basic pressing question: "How common is it?" Several large-scale epidemiologic studies have been conducted to estimate

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the lifetime prevalence and one-year incidence of rape (George, Winfield, & Blazer, this issue; Kilpatrick et al., 1985; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Russell, 1984; Sorenson et al., 1987; Wyatt, this issue). These studies typically interviewed women residents of specific communities regarding their experiences with coercive sexual experiences. This generation of research is a major leap forward from previous research, which relied on criminal justice statistics, data from women in psychotherapy, or other biased samples.

The past decade has also witnessed the wide-scale initiation of rape prevention curricula on college campuses. Prevention programs have been directed not just at women but also at men, for example, fraternity members on college campuses (Parrot, 1991). Even branches of the military, traditionally male bastions not known for their sensitivity to women, have begun rape prevention campaigns that include placards posted in barracks printed with statements such as "When she says no, stop."

As the public has become more aware, the number and sophistication of researchers interested in sexual violence and its sequelae have increased. Investigators have shifted from an almost exclusive focus on the incarcerated male rapist to a concentration on the experience of the victim. In the past decade, research has focused on the incidence and prevalence of rape in the general population, and theories of rape have expanded to include the "hidden" rapist. Formerly, rape was viewed as the crazed behavior of a relatively few deranged men. Now it is recognized that most sexual assaults occur between acquaintances rather than strangers, and most are not reported to the criminal justice system (Russell, 1984).

Theoretical Perspectives

The purpose of this journal issue is to increase awareness of the sociocultural roots of rape, and to present information about current research findings and thinking regarding rape. Although varied, many of the theories purporting to explain the existence of rape have been limited and incomplete.

A psychopathology model focusing on the personal characteristics of victims and offenders dominated much rape research several decades ago. Men convicted of the crime of rape, who constitute a minority of rapists, comprised the bulk of study subjects for these investigations. Not surprisingly, men incarcerated for rape scored differently than "normal" men on a variety of psychological indices. Motivational models (e.g., Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Rada, 1978) centered on the rapist's need for power, anger, revenge, and sadism. A psychopathology viewpoint also was applied to rape victims. Victim precipitation models, which examined personality measures, assailants' comments about victims' behaviors, and police reports of victim characteristics (e.g., Amir, 1971), often claimed the victim was responsible for her own victimization.

Sociobiological approaches, with a focus on factors such as brain function and hormone levels, suggested an evolutionary basis for rape (Shields & Shields, 1983; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1990). Social learning theories of rape (e.g., Kanin & Purcell, 1977) proposed that sex role socialization is central to rape: men are socialized to perpetrate violence and to view sexual exploitation as part of the masculine sex role, whereas women are socialized to accept rape-supportive beliefs

and to blame themselves for their victimization (e.g., Walker & Browne, 1985). Encompassing the social learning focus on sex role socialization, feminist/political theories (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980) concentrated on the overarching societal context of patriarchy. Central to feminist thinking was the structural purpose of both rape and women's fear of rape, i.e., to keep women subservient to men.

None of these approaches has fully addressed the complexity of the issue of rape. The relatively recent recognition of the widespread prevalence of acquaintance rape calls into question the belief that biological processes are primarily responsible for rape (Hall & Hirschman, 1991). If physiological mechanisms were central, the many "normal" men who perpetrate dating violence would be expected to harbor high levels of physiological sexual arousal, defective genetic structures, imbalanced endocrine systems, or brain dysfunctions. Likewise, psychopathological models would assert that these men are deviant in their psychological structures. However, data suggest a great deal of heterogeneity among rapists (Prentky & Knight, 1991), with only some rapists showing deviant physiological sexual arousal patterns and only some manifesting personality problems. On the other hand, given that many social experiences are generally similar for young men (e.g., heterosexual dating rituals in the United States), sex role socialization accounts of rape cannot explain why all men are not rapists. Thus, there was, and remains, a need to move beyond the unidimensional, intrapersonal accounts of rape.

A Sociocultural Approach

Recent theorists have responded by developing multifactor accounts of rape (Hall & Hirschman, 1991; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; White & Koss, 1991). Feminist theorists, in particular, have incorporated the social learning focus on sex role socialization into a social-political-historical account of rape (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980), which emphasizes the overarching construct of patriarchy. These theorists assumed that patriarchy shapes attitudes and beliefs, women's roles, men's roles, and their relationship to each other, ultimately determining all forms of violence against women. We cannot overestimate the influence of feminist theorists such as Brownmiller upon the thinking of current researchers. Many investigators, while not necessarily testing the assumption in their studies, presume that rape is a manifestation of male dominance over and control of women. This is apparent, for example, in researchers' frequent use of scales designed by Burt (1980) to measure cultural rape myths and their associated attitudes toward women. Even theories that reject feminist hypotheses have had to confront and account for feminist claims (Ellis, 1991). Feminist analyses, more than other approaches, suggest the necessity of considering sociocultural factors.

Focus of This Issue

Sexual violence is a continuum that ranges from verbal pressure for contact to homicide that includes physically forced sexual intercourse. The present volume focuses on, but is not limited to, rape-the acquisition of sexual intercourse without consent of the woman. Some state legislation (e.g., in Michigan) includes men as potential victims of sexual assault; however, most states limit their definition of a rape victim to women. Most research has been conducted on female victims, and the gender composition of study samples is specified clearly in each of the following articles. Further, this volume focuses on rapes in which the victim survived; while

most rapes do not end in death, it is important to note that, based on data gathered in one year for one state, 6.5% of all female homicide victims were also raped (calculations by the first author based on data published by the California Department of Justice, 1989).

As epidemiologic research has shown, most rape survivor-victims know their assailants. Thus, when rape is discussed, most of the incidents are acquaintance rapes. Persons closely connected to the victim (husbands, partners, stepfathers, and biological relatives) are known to perpetrate rape. Sexual abuse, which involves the dynamics of an ongoing relationship, is believed by some authors to be qualitatively different from rape between acquaintances or strangers. Although articles in this volume do not exclude these types of events, the volume does not focus on incest or marital rape. To adequately address sexual violence between intimates, a volume dedicated specifically to that issue is needed. Further, while sexual assault can and does occur within the context of other physical violence, this volume focuses primarily on sexual assault.

The important long-neglected topics of ethnic, regional, and urban/rural differences are highlighted in the present volume. Crucial social psychological processes such as attitude formation and maintenance underlie the research reported in this volume. Rather than directly testing these social psychological processes, however, the following papers draw from these principles and focus on definitional issues of sexual assault and rape. For example, if a certain definition of what constitutes rape is adopted, how does this influence the research findings—are prevalence estimates likely to under- or overestimate the "true" magnitude of rape? Or, if certain behaviors are not considered to constitute an act of rape, how will the policies and legal protections offered victims be changed? In its focus on the implications of specific social contexts (e.g., residing in the rural South), the present volume has a strong applied emphasis while at the same time providing basic data about the phenomenon of rape.

The strength of this journal issue resides in its concentration on the influence of sociocultural factors, on the definition of sexual assault, and on how research findings are obtained and interpreted. It contains a variety of papers that reflect contemporary thinking in the field, including methodological reviews, reports of original findings, and integrative conceptual frameworks.

Contributions of Individual Papers

The initial paper, by Donat and D'Emilio, reviews the history of rape in the United States and provides an historical context for the subsequent papers.

The next major section of this volume focuses on current methodological issues in adult sexual assault research. Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, and Giusti begin with an overview of definitions in sexual assault research, and how these definitions shape both methods and findings. They also examine various theoretical assumptions in research, specifically rape as women's responsibility, rape as individual male psychopathology, and rape as a consequence of traditional gender roles. White and Farmer review traditional correlational and experimental research approaches, and identify their strengths and weaknesses in the study of rape. Urging researchers to assess their own assumptions, these authors argue for a multiple-strategy approach to create a more complete view of sexual assault and rape. Next, Koss reviews the methods used to estimate prevalence and

incidence in large-scale epidemiologic studies of rape. Crime statistics and epidemiologic research data attest to the existence of substantial levels of rape in the United States, but Koss asserts that compelling social forces and potent methodological obstacles prevent measurement of the true scope of rape.

Sociocultural influences on the prevalence of rape are the focus of the next section, which presents research findings from three of the rare large-scale community-based studies. These articles focus on geographic and racial/ethnic group differences in the risk of sexual assault. First, Wyatt reports the prevalence of adult sexual assault from a community sample of 248 randomly selected African-American and White women in Los Angeles. She also reviews the historical and social context of sexual violence against African-American women and how it prevents full acknowledgment of rape in the African-American community. Sorenson and Siegel review their research with over 3000 community residents of Los Angeles, and summarize the findings related to ethnicity (for Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites) and gender. They report that, although rates of sexual assault are higher for women and non-Hispanics compared to men and Hispanics, patterns of service use and mental disorder following the assault differ relatively little by ethnicity or gender. George, Winfield, and Blazer report their findings from in-person interviews with 1157 randomly selected 18- to 64-yearold North Carolina women. In addition to estimating the prevalence of sexual assault, the authors describe the demographic correlates, characteristics, and effects of sexual assault.

Research in the past decade has found that most rape victims know their assailants (e.g., Russell, 1984) and that few such assaults are reported to police (e.g., Williams, 1984). Thus, traditional research, focusing on the incarcerated rapist, has probably provided a very biased view of the perpetrators of sexual assault. The next article addresses the man who is not likely ever to have been charged with sexual assault nor ever to have labeled his aggressive sexual behaviors as rape. Integrating social, situational, and personal factors, Shotland reviews the current literature and presents a theory concerning the causes of rape in a dating context. He proposes five distinct types of courtship rape based on the developmental stage of the interpersonal relationship.

Various facets of rape are important on a community or societal level. Beyond victim services, many other social systems are affected by or related to rape and sexual violence (e.g., Koss, Woodruff, & Koss, 1990). Legal reforms not only affect definitions of evidence and eventual decisions regarding guilt or innocence, but also have implications for victims' experiences with the judicial system. Moreover, rape prevention efforts have been extended beyond specific rape prevention curricula. For example, the current public outcry against explicit sexually violent lyrics of popular music raises the question of the association between mass media exposure to violence and individuals' subsequent actions and attitudes.

Drawing from the findings of social science research on the topic of media violence, Linz, Wilson, and Donnerstein conclude that, under some circumstances, depictions of sexual violence in the media promote certain antisocial attitudes and behavior. Addressing the legal policy implications of this research, they discuss the pros and cons of three possible approaches for confronting the problem of sexual violence and rape in the mass media: (a) legal restrictions, (b) informational labeling in which viewers are advised of media content, and (c) formal educational interventions to counter the effects of exposure to sexual violence in the media.

Finally, the article by Goldberg-Ambrose focuses on the relationship between social and legal definitions of rape. Recent research on rape law reform suggests only limited improvements in prosecution and conviction rates, sentence length, and the attitudes of law enforcement personnel. The author discusses reasons for the circumscribed changes and offers a unique contribution to the field by including the intersection of race and gender in her discussion of the legal aspects of rape.

Conclusion

The articles in this journal issue elucidate ethnic, regional, and urban/rural differences in the prevalence of rape (and also perhaps in what is defined as rape). The study of these important and neglected factors occurs within the overarching context of patriarchy, and consequently various papers focus on the social, contextual, and personal factors of the rapist, and on the implications for society.

While the legal definition of rape has remained consistent since colonial times, the social perceptions of raped women have changed. The women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s cast a spotlight on the issue of rape, and in the process of bringing sexual assault into public awareness, provided a forum for changes in the legal system. The articles in this journal issue show that sociocultural factors affect what behaviors are recognized as rape, and consequently influence the measurement of the incidence and prevalence of rape.

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