

# Theorising The Phenomenon of Rape

## Abstract

Rape is a violent sexual crime against women that have plagued the societies world over across all division. The consequences of rape may carry over generations, influencing the development and progress of individual, families, communities, societies and countries over time. Objective of the present study is to theorise the phenomenon on the basis of the findings of different studies carried out by different individuals, groups, and organizations .Findings of different studies reveal various facts. Evolutionary theorists claim that men are born with predispositions towards committing rape. Feminist theorists explain that the culture of male domination is responsible for the occurrence of rape. Social disorganization theory holds that the rape rate increases in proportion to the level of social disorganization. According to Self control theory a man commits rape because his sex drive is uncontrollable. Cultural spillover theory maintains that cultural norms which favour violence for socially legitimate purposes tend to be generalized to other social contexts and increase the likelihood of rape.

**Keywords:** Women, Rape, Violence, Domination, Culture, Disorganization, Sex.

## Introduction

Increasing incidences of rape have plagued the societies world over across all division. Inconsistent definitions of rape, different rates of reporting, recording, prosecution and conviction for rape create controversial statistical disparities, and lead to accusation that many rape statistics are unreliable or misleading. A United Nations statistical report compiled from government sources showed that more than 2,50,000 cases of rape or attempted rape were recorded by police annually. The reported data covered 65 countries<sup>1</sup>. In many parts of the world, rape is very rarely reported, due to the extreme social stigma cast on women who have been raped, or the fear of being disowned by their families, or subjected to violence, including honour killings.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in countries where adultery and/or premarital sex are illegal, victims of rape can face prosecution under these laws, if there isn't sufficient evidence to prove a rape in the court. Even if they can prove their rape case, evidence during investigation may surface showing that they were not virgins at the time of rape, which, if they are unmarried, opens the door for prosecution.<sup>3</sup> The attitude of the police in many countries often discourages victims from reporting rape. One study in Turkey found that 33% of police officers agreed with the assertion that "some women deserve rape" and 66% agreed that "the physical appearance and behaviours of women tempt man to rape."<sup>4</sup> Countries may or may not criminalize marital rape. However, even in many countries which do criminalize it, prosecutions for it are exceptionally rare, due to prevailing social views; in many parts of the world, the concept is very poorly understood, because sex in marriage is considered an absolute right of the husband, that can be taken with or without the consent of his wife. The very act of a woman refusing to have sex with her husband is considered unthinkable, in one survey 74% of women in Mali said that a husband is justified to beat his wife if she refuses to have sex with him.<sup>5</sup> According to the American Medical Association[1995], sexual violence, and rape in particular, is considered the most under-reported violent crime.<sup>6</sup> The most common reasons given by victims for not reporting rapes are the belief that it is a personal or private matter, and that they fear reprisal from the assailant. A 2007 British government report says "Estimates from research suggest that between 75 and 95% of rape crimes are never reported to the police."<sup>7</sup> The Consequences of rape may carry over generations, influencing the development and progress of individuals, families, communities, societies and countries over time.

The objective of the present study is to critically analyse the phenomenon through major theoretical lenses. It may also be helpful to outline many different rape prevention strategies. The current paper is based on the findings of different studies carried out by different



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individuals, groups and organizations. Most of these studies were conducted for testing various theoretical models of rape.

### Theories of Rape

A rape theory cannot simply explain why men commit rape; it must also explain why men do not commit rape. The theory should also explain why violence against women takes a sexual form and not a purely violent one. Some theories that may help explain why an individual commits rape are evolutionary theory, feminist theory, social disorganization theory, self control theory, and cultural spillover theory.

#### Evolutionary Theory

Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer (2000)<sup>8</sup> has given a biological explanation of rape. They hypothesized that rape is homologous to similar behaviour in other animals including close human relatives like chimpanzees and orangutans. "Human rape appears not an aberration but as an alternative gene promotion strategy that is most likely to be adopted by the 'loser' in competitive, harem-building struggle. If the means of access to legitimate, consenting sex is not available, then a male may be faced with the choice between force or genetic extinction. Thornhill and Palmer write that 'in short ,a man can have many children, with little inconvenience to himself; a woman can have only a few, and with great effort.'" Females therefore tend to be more choosy with partners. Rape is seen as one potential strategy for males for achieving reproductive success. The point to several other factors indicating that rape may be a reproductive strategy. It is during the potentially childbearing years that women most often are rape victims. But, Edward H. Hagen states that there is no clear evidence for the hypothesis that rape is adaptive .He believes the adaptivity of rape is possible, but claims there is not enough evidence to be certain one way or the other. Siegert and Ward (2002)<sup>9</sup> also dispute Thornhill and Palmer's claim that men commit rape for the sole purpose of obtaining sex. Instead, they say that "rapists are an extremely heterogeneous population motivated by quite distinct issues and characterized by different clusters of psychological characteristic," thus making such a generalized statement impossible.

#### Feminist Theory

Another theory that could help to explain rape is Feminist Theory. Feminist theorists assert that rape is only one symptom of the larger problem of a male dominated society (Cahill, 2001)<sup>10</sup>. Feminist theorists see rape as more of a violent act than a sexual act, and purport that rape is inspired by political motivations to dominate and degrade. Feminist theorists also deny that rape has an individualistic nature, but claim that rape is "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear".(Cahill, 2001, p.16, emphasis original). Feminists see rape as serving the function of "ensure[ing] the continued and necessary protection of women by men" (Cahill, 2001,p .17). Feminists argue that, as a result of women's fears of being raped, they become dependent on men to protect them (Cahill, 2001). Feminists also argue that the representation of women, the social construction of femininity, the

socialization of men and the social construction of masculinity can explain rape. For example, often those men who see women as sex objects and as inherently inferior to men are more likely to commit to rape (Polaschek & Ward). Men who hold these beliefs think that they are "entitled to control women's sexuality, and to determine what a woman really wants." (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p.14)<sup>11</sup>. Such men also think they "are entitled to shape women's sexual and nonsexual behaviour, and to decide what is acceptable or unacceptable" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002,p.14). Therefore, women should meet male needs on demand, men are entitled to rape women. Martin, Vieraitis, and Britto's (2006)<sup>12</sup> study supports the feminist claim that rape is only one symptom of a male dominated society. In their study, areas of greater gender equality tended to have higher rape rates. They state that the 'results indicate[d] a backlash effect for gender equality measures [because] men may perceive as threatening their hold on socioeconomic status" (Martin et al.,2006,p.334). This seems to support the feminist claim; since some males may perceive greater gender equality as a threat, they may resort to rape to feel that they are still dominant.

#### Social Disorganization Theory

Proponents of social disorganization theory argue that crime and deviance reflect conditions that disrupt the integrity of local communities and weaken the regulatory power of social norms. Such disorganizing factors as migration, marital disruption, and cultural heterogeneity have been linked to criminal activities (Blau and Golden, 1986; Faris, 1955; Kornhauser, 1978; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Stark et al., 1983). Moreover, studies show that rape rates are higher in areas where a disproportionate number of divorced and separated persons reside (Baron and Straus, 1987); Blau, and Blau, 1982; Blau and Golden, 1986; Simpson, 1985; Smith and Bennett, 1985). Other research shows that geographical mobility is associated with rape (Crutchfield et al., 1982; Stark et al.,1983). To the extent that marital disruption and migration are disorganizing factors, such conditions may reduce social constraints against rape.

#### Self Control Theory

This theory premise that the male sex drive is uncontrollable (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). Men with this belief say that their sexual urges cannot be controlled and they are not responsible for their actions. Proponents of this theory "[propose] both that men's sexual energy is difficult to control and that women have a key role in its loss of control," since women deny sex to men who have to relieve their sexual drive" (Polaschek & Ward, 2002, p.13). This theory can be tied to Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990)<sup>13</sup> low self- control theory. Low self-control theorists posit that, since criminal acts provide immediate gratification, criminals will engage in them because they are not able to defer gratification. In addition, theorists claim that crime is easy, exciting, requires little skill, and may result in pain to others. Since individuals with low self-control will be more impulsive, adventurous, self-centered, and have fewer skills, they will be more likely to engage in crime because of its perceived benefits (Gottfredson &

Hirschi, 1990). Studies show that lifestyle impulsivity may be a predictor of sexual aggression (e.g., Prentky & Knight, 1991)<sup>14</sup>. Having poor social and interpersonal skills can also be a predictor of sexual aggression (Prentky & Knight, 1991). Studies also show that rapists tend to have “lower empathy, lower adult attachment...[and] stronger sexual dominance motives” compared to the average citizen (Abbey et al., 2007, p. 1574)<sup>15</sup>. Thus, men, who have low self-control and are not able to control their sex drive, may obtain “sex without courtship” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 89). They are more likely to commit rape.

#### Cultural Spillover Theory

Cultural spillover theory introduced by L. Baron, M. Straus, and D. Jaffe (1987)<sup>16</sup> hypothesizes that a society which endorses the use of physical force in approved areas such as crime control, child control, and military power, will also show a higher incidence of violence in socially non-approved areas. The findings of several studies of preindustrial societies are consistent with the central tenets of cultural spillover theory. For example Lamert et al (1959) found a positive relationship between the use of corporal punishment in child rearing and the worship of punitive deities in non-literate societies. Sanday's (1981) analysis of 158 tribal societies showed an association between an emphasis on machismo, the level of non-sexual violence, and rape. Most recently, Reiss (1986) used path analysis to investigate the cross-cultural antecedents of rape and found that societies with a macho culture pattern were likely to have high rates of rape. Additional support for cultural spillover theory comes from studies of modern nations which show that the implicit cultural support for killing inherent in war tends to be reflected in higher rates of homicide (Archer and Gartner, 1984; Jensen and Baxter, 1985), higher rates of child abuse (Shwed and Straus, 1979), and greater violence in children's book (Huggins and Straus, 1980). Finally, a natural experiment of mass media violence showed a short term increase in the incidence of homicide following several widely-publicized heavy weight boxing matches (Phillips, 1983). These studies suggest that high rates of rape may reflect a spill-over from culture that permit and condone violence.

#### Conclusion & Suggestions

Rapists are of several different types (McKibbin et al.; 2008) and their behaviour cannot be explained by a single theory. However, almost every theory has varying degrees of empirical support. Prentky and Knight (1991) claim that “rape is a multidetermined behaviour that will ultimately be explained only by models incorporating a multitude of dimensions” (p.657). Evolutionary, feminist, social-disorganization, self-control and cultural spillover theory can all be used to help explain why rape occurs. Evolutionary theorists claim that men are born with predispositions towards committing rape. Feminist theorists explain that the culture of male domination is responsible for the occurrence of rape. Social disorganisation theory holds that the rape rate increases in proportion to the level of social disorganization. According to Self control theory a man commits rape because his sex drive is uncontrollable. Cultural spillover theory maintains that cultural norms which favour violence for socially

legitimate purposes tend to be generalized to other social contexts and increase the likelihood of rape. Educating high school students on what constitutes rape, educating college students on how to prevent rape, lobbying for Alternative to Violence Programs for rapists, and educating women on how to defend themselves may help to reduce rape and the effects of rape.

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