

Theories of Rape

Inquiries into the
Causes of
Sexual Aggression

Lee Ellis



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To the memory of my father

THEORIES OF RAPE: Inquiries into the Causes of Sexual Aggression

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Foreword

Rape is one of those deeply emotional terms denoting a criminal act that is particularly abhorrent to the vast majority of human beings. Effective action to combat this offense calls for a better understanding of who commits rape and why. Such an understanding can almost certainly be attained by arranging what we know into a unified theoretical scheme.

This book shows that rape (excluding statutory rape) includes a wide variety of acts, ranging from those in which a male known to, and often liked by, a female uses force to go beyond the sexual limits she sets to highly predatory acts in which strangers threaten grievous bodily harm, often with a lethal weapon, and violate every sense of personal privacy that we recognize and normally respect. The research reviewed pertaining to incidence rates shows that the problem of rape is all too pervasive in most human societies, including all those rooted in the traditions of Western civilization.

As Professor Ellis' review suggests, these different forms of rape may not be committed by exactly the same types of individuals. Supporting this view, my own research on personality suggests that acquaintance rapists are more likely to be extroverts, whereas the more violent rapists are mostly introverts. Both types do appear to have personalities characterized by lack of empathy, strong aggressive impulses, and other psychopathic tendencies.

Professor Ellis has brought to bear many modern research and theoretical

developments from a wide diversity of disciplines and perspectives to better understand rape. His book has succeeded in combining a great deal of evidence to indicate that, while we are fundamentally biological creatures, our biological nature in no way diminishes either our social nature or our capacity and propensity to learn. Instead, his analysis and synthesis of diverse ideas suggest how utterly inseparable biological variables and social learning variables really are and how so much of what we learn about biology helps us to better understand social influences and vice versa. Whether or not each of his specific proposals, on how rape is learned and on why some people are more disposed to the requisite learning than others, is correct will take many years to determine. Nevertheless, this book has almost certainly helped advance our understanding of rape simply because it draws together and organizes our current knowledge so well.

Many social scientists may question Professor Ellis' decision to deal forthrightly and in considerable depth with several controversial issues relevant to rape, such as race, social class, pornography, and even social reactions to rape victimization. I, personally, think that although he climbs out on several precarious limbs, he does not do so recklessly or for no reason. The controversial issues he confronts are simply too important not to receive the scrutiny of the scientific method, no matter what the eventual outcome.

By clearly outlining the different theories presently available, by looking at the evidence supporting and faulting these theories, and by trying to combine the most positive features of each one into a more broadly ranging theory, this book makes a very important contribution to our understanding of rape, and perhaps even significantly expands our more general comprehension of human behavior. At the very least, this book provides a basis for furthering scientific research into the causes of rape and, ultimately, hastens the day when rape risks are substantially lower than they are now.

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Preface

Reducing and eventually eliminating the threat of rape is an objective toward which social science knowledge may someday make significant progress. The theoretical and research work required to accomplish this goal is formidable, however, and only within the last 12 years or so have large numbers of social scientists committed themselves to the task. Much of the impetus seems to have come from the publication of a book by Susan Brownmiller, entitled *Against Our Will* (1975), although arguments similar to hers were made a few years earlier (e.g., Betries, 1972; Mehrhof & Kearson, 1972). Brownmiller essentially formulated what has come to be called the *feminist theory of rape*, which has since emerged as probably the leading theory of rape. In any case, since the mid 1970s hundreds of social science articles and books have appeared to help identify the causes of rape and to propose remedies for rape.

In the same year that Brownmiller's book was published, Edward O. Wilson (1975) published *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, a book that provided important groundwork for the development of a second contemporary theory of rape called the *evolutionary* (or *sociobiology*) *theory*. I began this book in 1985 with the expectation that it would be a 30-page article providing a condensed review of the empirical evidence for and against the two existing theories of rape. By 1986, when I presented a verbal summary of a 50-page version of the manuscript at the American Society of Criminology's meeting in Atlanta, not

only had its length already exceeded what I had intended, but considerable evidence regarding a third recognizable theory had been brought to my attention—a theory of rape largely working out of Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning perspective (although it also contained some elements of feminist theory) (see Malamuth, 1984).

Although I knew that the paper exceeded the maximum length for a journal article, in early 1987 I submitted a 90-page version of the manuscript to *Deviant Behavior*. This resulted in contacts with representatives of the journal's publisher, Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, who suggested that I expand the manuscript into a book. Given the rapid pace at which research on rape was still being published, and the opportunity a book gave to synthesize all that had been learned into a new unified theory of rape, I took the suggestion.

A major goal throughout this project was to provide a picture of the progress being made in identifying the causes of rape that was as current, comprehensive, and objective as possible. The second major goal was to make the coverage as easy to read as possible—not always a simple task given the complexity of some of the research designs that a number of researchers have employed to resolve some of the hypothetical questions posed. Basically, to accomplish these two major goals, the research studies (except those dealing strictly with the prevalence of rape) have all been organized around the theories of rape to which they seem most relevant. Thus, this book offers a “bird’s-eye view” of where the scientific research now stands regarding knowledge of what causes rape. Because this, and any other aerial view, will obscure many important details, however, readers wishing to contribute to the future developments in this field of study should not rely on this text as a substitute for the original articles and books cited.

Also, despite attempts to be objective, some of the interpretations and proposed conclusions are bound to strike many readers as not justified by the evidence. In anticipating these reactions, let me simply say that all of the proposals have been made in the spirit of free inquiry and with the understanding that every error in fact and in logic is fair game for criticism. Those who take issue with my interpretations and conclusions are invited to identify the errors and are challenged to propose alternative ideas and provide additional evidence. Doing so should facilitate accumulation of the knowledge required to reduce rape.

To help readers quickly locate evidence and arguments that are cited in the text references, specific pages are often indicated. These page references should direct attention to where the most pertinent passages can be found (or, if the passages are lengthy, the page on which they begin). Doing this has become the exception rather than the rule in behavioral and social science publications in recent years, even when documenting very specific points in a lengthy book. I have sometimes spent over an hour trying in vain to verify the relevance of a citation. While citing page numbers is still no guarantee against citation errors,

it at least should save readers considerable time in verifying the relevance of a reference.

Over the course of writing this book, I sought advice from many people to whom I am most grateful for reading and commenting on various drafts. They are John Briere, Jim Check, Edward Donnerstein, Hans J. Eysenck, William Fisher, John Gray, David Huff, Rhonda Kostenko, Daniel Linz, Neil Malamuth, Lori Olson, J. Philippe Rushton, Joseph Scott, and Dolf Zillmann. While the importance of their collective advice and criticisms would be hard to exaggerate, they bear no responsibility for the final product, or for any errors the book may contain. I also thank Heather Ellis, Penny Hamilton, and Lori Monger for their help in assembling and verifying the references.

L. Ellis

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THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF RAPE

RAPE AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Even though rape is widely recognized as a significant social problem in many human societies, only the past 15 years or so have witnessed a serious scientific effort to understand and, ultimately, help curb the prevalence of this crime (Gibbons, 1987:266). This book will review and attempt to synthesize those efforts, especially as they help to formulate a basic theoretical understanding of rape. However, before such a review, it is important to delineate the nature and extent of this crime.

Rape refers to a physically forceful attempt at sexual intimacy when one of the individuals involved chooses not to become sexually intimate (no attention will be given to *statutory rape* in this book) (Amir, 1971; Media & Thompson, 1974:12; Russell, 1982). While rapes by women and male rape victimization have been documented (Groth, 1979; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Quinsey, 1984:90; Russell, 1984:67; Struckman-Johnson, 1986), by and large, the victims of rape are female, and the offenders are male (Kagan, 1964:143; Murstein, 1970:475; Smith, 1974:188; Metzger, 1976; Marcus, 1977:44).

Since the word *rape* is usually considered a legal term, one can argue that it should only be used to refer to whatever criminal behavior happens to be legally

defined as *rape* in a given society at a given point in time. However, because of variations in the inclusiveness of rape statutes from one society to another, and within them over time (see Tobach & Sunday, 1985:136), such an approach would severely hamper attempts to study rape as a cross-cultural phenomenon. Examples of how legal definitions substantially alter what is objectively considered rape are these:

1. While rape, however it has been defined, has always been found to be predominantly a male offense against women, in some political jurisdictions rape has been defined so that it can *only* involve male offenders and female victims (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1975:33; Cann, Calhoun, Selby, & King, 1981; Shaalan, El-Akabaoui, & El-Kott, 1983:277; Carter, 1986:83; Conklin, 1986:43).
2. In most states, one cannot technically commit the crime of rape if under the age of 18 because such persons are exempt from criminal statutes.
3. In many states, forced sex between spouses remains exempt from rape statutes (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1982:477; Russell, 1982).
4. In many states, the definition of rape requires some degree of vaginal penetration, thus technically excluding a variety of other forced sex acts from constituting rape, no matter how much force may have been involved (Carrow, 1980:17; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987:168).
5. Finally, since *rape* is technically a legal term, one could even argue that rape is impossible among persons living in preliterate societies where no formal (i.e., written) laws are in force (see Goldschmidt, 1976:210).

In light of the above points, one can understand why some have suggested that, at least for scientific purposes, it might be better to substitute the terms *forced sex* or *sexual assault* for *rape* (Finkelhor & Yllo, 1982:462; Crawford & Galdikas, 1986). For the purposes of this book, the term rape will be essentially stripped of its "legal baggage," and thus used to refer to a collection of behavior patterns involving forceful attempts at sexual intimacy, regardless of whether those behavior patterns happen to conform to all of the legal statutes in the jurisdiction where the act took place or not. Therefore, regardless of nuances in legal issues surrounding what is and is not considered rape, the term will be used throughout this book to refer to all forms of physical sexual intimacies in which significant physical force is used or threatened by one of the parties involved contrary to the will of the other. Such factors as the age and sex of the offender and the victim, and whether or not the act happened to violate a particular criminal statute in a particular society at a given point in time will not be at issue. Such terms as *forced sex* and *sexual assault*, thus, may be considered synonymous with the concept of *rape* as the terms will be used in the text (see also Malamuth & Check, 1985:300).

THE PREVALENCE OF RAPE

In recent years, the *Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)*, which derives its statistics from citizen reports to police in the United States, has estimated the annual rate of rape (including attempted rape) to be about 70 per 100,000 women per year (U. S. Bureau of Justice, Statistics, 1985), up substantially from about 25 per 100,000 women reported in the 1950s (U. S. Department of Justice, 1975:55), and almost four times the rate reported in the 1940s (Bowker, 1979; Nelson, 1982:211; see also Russell, 1984:53 for evidence that U. S. rape statistics are increasing). In contrast, crime victimization surveys in the United States (conducted annually since 1973 among representative sample of households) have found the prevalence of completed or attempted rape to be 3 to 4 times higher than the *UCR* estimates—that is, about 200 per 100,000 women (over the age of 12) each year (Ennis, 1967:8; Bowker, 1979; U.S. Bureau of Justice, Statistics, 1982). But, unlike the official statistics, these estimates of the rape rate in the United States have risen much less dramatically over the past 12 years (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1986). While there are certainly other possibilities, this suggests that much of the increase in *UCR* rape rate estimates is due to increases in the probability of reporting rape to the police.

More in-depth surveys specific to rape victimization have concluded that even the federally sponsored crime victimization surveys underestimate the risk of rape by more than half. For example, a survey conducted by Russell (1984:35) in San Francisco found that, over a lifetime, approximately 24% of women will be raped, and another 20% will experience an attempted rape. While it is impossible to precisely compare total lifetime risks with annual risks, Russell's (1982:43) survey indicates that the real risk of rape was at least 13 times greater than *UCR* estimates. Thus, it appears that only about 1 out of 12 of the women who indicated (on the Russell survey) having experienced rape or a rape attempt said they reported the incident to police (Russell, 1984:35). Added to these estimates, Russell (1982) found that 14% of ever-married women said they had been sexually assaulted by their husbands (defined as sex via the use of force, or at least without consent, as when drunk or under the influence of other drugs). Overall, Russell (1984:51) concluded that approximately 46% of women in San Francisco will experience rape or an attempted rape in their lifetime, and that about half of them will experience more than one rape incident. Russell's definition of *rape*, however, should be understood to have been somewhat broader than most criminal statutes at the present time. She defined *rape* as vaginal, anal, and oral sexual contact involving force or threat of injury, or when the victim was asleep, unconscious, severely drugged, or otherwise physically helpless. According to a recent survey, such a definition also may be broader than what most persons in the general population would define as *rape* (Howard, 1988:112).

Among college women, Koss (1985) found that 38% reported sexual vic-

timization that met most state definitions of *rape* or *attempted rape*. In a more extensive nationwide college survey—and using a somewhat stricter legal definition of *rape*—Koss, Gidycz and Wisniewski (1987), found that 28% of women reported having experienced a rape or rape attempt since age 14, and that 8% of college males admitted to having committed rape at least once. A study by Muehlenhard and Linton (1987:193) found that 15% of females had experienced at least one date rape and 7% of males had committed this offense in their lifetime. However, with regard to sexual aggression in a much broader sense (tantamount to any unwelcomed sexual initiatives in a dating situation), the figures were 78% for females and 57% for males. Yegidis (1986) reported that 22% of college females reported date rape victimization and 11% of college males admitted date rape on at least one occasion. Overall, such evidence supports the view of Reynolds (1984:149) that rape is probably the most frequently committed serious violent crime in the United States.

While the overwhelming majority of rape victims are females, especially in regard to predatory rapes by strangers, when one considers sexual assault in broad terms, significant percentages of males report being victimized. Lott, Reilly, and Howard (1982) found that 6% of college males reported having been sexually assaulted (most often by female offenders) at least once (see also Sarrel & Masters, 1982). More will be said about sex differences in rape victimization probabilities in Chapter 7.

Before considering any explanations for rape, it is important to understand why estimates of its prevalence vary so greatly. Obviously, the estimates are far too varied to be dismissed as resulting from sampling error. Instead, they appear to reflect major differences in the criteria used to identify rape (see Williams, 1984; Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987). Figure 1 illustrates the wide spectrum of intimate sexual acts involving a significant degree of force. As the degree of force and threat of injury increase, the perceived seriousness of an act of rape increases, and so too does its probability of being reported to police (Lawson & Hillix, 1985). However, of all rapes reported to police, 10% to 15% fail to meet one or more of the legal criteria for rape in the particular political jurisdiction in which the incident occurred (McCahill, Meyer, & Fischman, 1979; Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980:36; Gove, Hughes, & Geerken, 1985:487).

From the evidence thus far reviewed, one may say that rape exists along a continuum in terms of the amount of force, risk of injury, and degree of non-consent involved (Eysenck, 1984:315; Malamuth, 1986:960). Because the majority of rapes and rape attempts occur among persons who are acquainted and romantically involved to some degree and are not highly predatory or violent in nature (Rabkin, 1979; Ageton, 1982:130; Koss, 1985), they have a low probability of being reported to police (Gove, Hughes, & Geerken, 1985:487). While the degree of force in rapes involving acquaintances is often substantial, these rapes (herein called *date rapes*) do not usually involve the degree of risk of

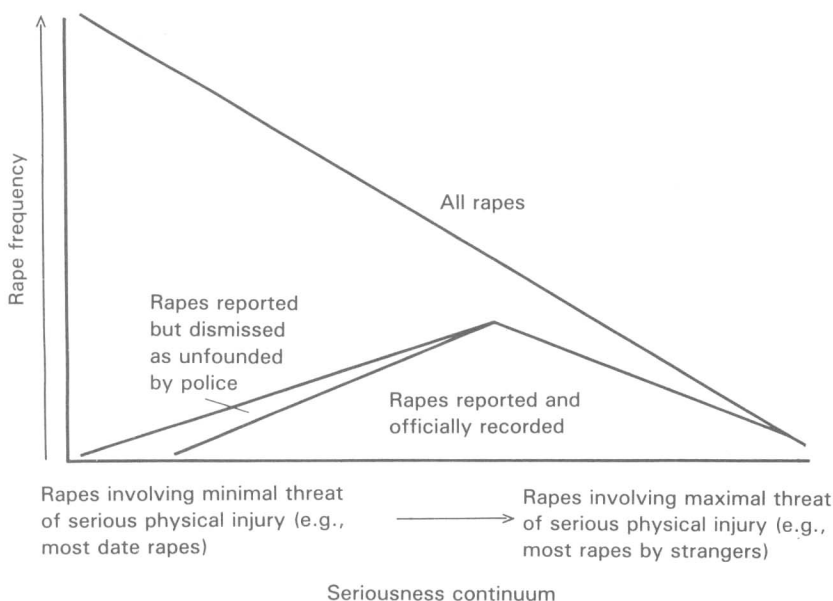


FIGURE 1

serious physical injury as rapes by strangers (President's Commission, 1967:40; Curtis, 1974; McDermott, 1979; Katz & Mazur, 1979; E. M. Ellis, Atkeson, & Calhoun, 1981; Yegidis, 1986). Rapes with the greatest probability of being reported to police are those which involve attacks by strangers (Smith & Bennett, 1985),—those termed *classic* or *predatory rape* (Williams, 1984). Rapes by strangers are also more likely to be taken seriously by police, courts, and jurors than rapes by acquaintances (Russell, 1982:247).

Overall, most victimization studies have indicated that between 20% and 30% of women in the United States will experience at least one rape or rape attempt, (Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957; Russell & Miller, 1979; Johnson, 1980; Korman & Lester, 1982; Koss & Oros, 1982; Story, 1982; Wilson & Durenberger, 1982; Bernard & Bernard, 1983; Brickman & Briere, 1984; Di Vasto, et al., 1984; Hall & Flannery, 1984; Meyer, 1984; Yegidis, 1986; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987:193), but that only about one-fourth of these incidences will involve the infliction of substantial pain or serious threat of injury (Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957). Thus, as indicated in Figure 1, the majority of rapes are among persons who are romantically involved (Seligmann, et al., 1984), and have the lowest probability of being reported to police (Russell, 1984:96). The percentage of women who report being victimized by acquaintances (or date rape) is fairly comparable to survey results from men regarding their committing such rapes. On anonymous questionnaires, 20% to 25% admit to having used some degree of physical force at least once to make some kinds of sexual advances

beyond their dates' wishes (Kanin, 1967b; Kanin & Parcell, 1977; Koss & Oros, 1982). More specific to rape, 10% to 15% of college males have reported having actually forced a date to have sex against her will (Guinzburg, 1983; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984; Koss & Leonard, 1984:216). In the Koss and Leonard study, an additional 22% of males said they had used verbal coercion and deception (e.g., threats to end a relationship or false pledges of love) in order to pressure dates into sexual intercourse. To account for why greater percentages of females report having been victimized by rape than males report having committed the offense, obviously some males may be denying or down-playing the degree of force that they used, and a few females may have exaggerated the degree of force involved. However, a far more important consideration appears to be the fact that many rapists victimize fairly large numbers of women (Muehlenhard, Friedman & Thomas, 1985:297).

Possibly the most disturbing of all recent surveys are ones conducted in the United States which have posed some hypothetical questions to male respondents. Results indicated that close to half of the males sampled said that, under some circumstances, they would have at least "some likelihood" of committing rape if somehow assured of never being caught or punished for doing so (Malamuth, Haber, & Feshback, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1983). Similarly, an unpublished study (see Deisher, Wenet, Paperny, Clark, and Fehrenbach, 1982:285) and one reported by Check and Malamuth (1985:416) found that between 40% and 50% of all high school boys in Los Angeles expressed the view that it would be acceptable to force a girl to have sex if she repeatedly sexually teased her date, or if she agreed to have sex but changed her mind at the last minute (also see Giarrusso, Johnson, Goodchilds, & Zellman, 1979).

Rape is, of course, far from being a uniquely American phenomenon. Accounts of rape have appeared throughout recorded history (Zillmann, 1984:3). Extensive ethnographic studies of preliterate societies indicate that only about 10% to 30% of these societies appear to be rape free, or virtually so (Brown, 1952; Minturn, Grosse, & Haider, 1969; Broude & Greene, 1976:417; Sanday, 1981). In stating this, it should be added that many of these societies are inadequate in size and in reporting procedures for making reliable statistical estimates. In West Sumatra, one of the reputed "rape-free" societies that was large enough for making accurate estimates, Sanday (1986:84) found the actual rape rate was about 19 per 1 million females, low by most Western standards, but not entirely "rape-free." Also, Samoa, a society reported by Margaret Mead in the 1930s to be essentially rape free, has since been shown to have an official rape rate twice as high as that for the United States (Marshall, 1983:1044), suggesting the need for careful verification of individual ethnographic accounts for a particular society. Furthermore, ethnographers have reported (in about 10% of the preliterate societies) that it was common for women to desire that men make physically aggressive sexual overtures (Broude & Greene, 1976:417; also see LeVine, 1977). This point will be addressed in