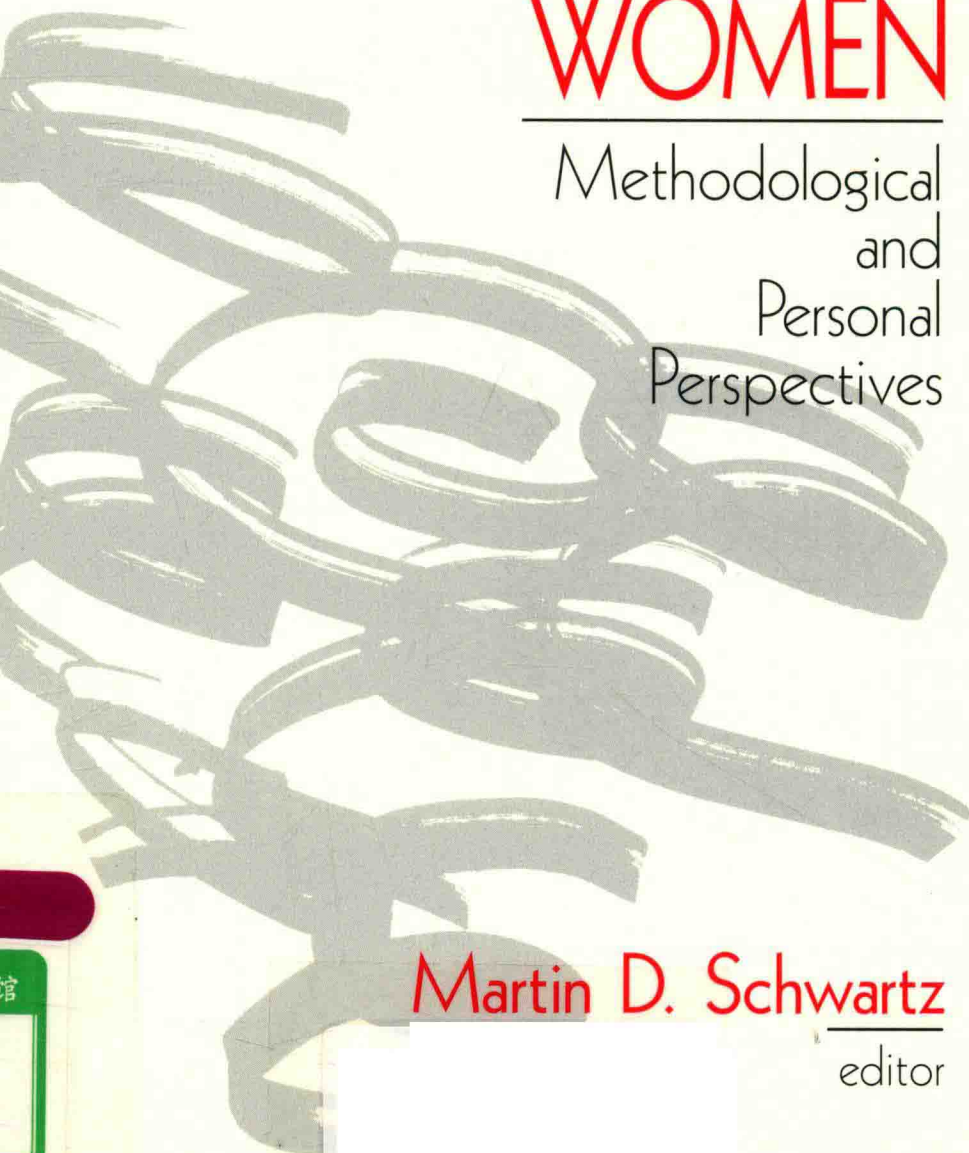


RESEARCHING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN



Methodological
and
Personal
Perspectives

Martin D. Schwartz
editor

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Preface

We have witnessed in the 1990s two countervailing trends in research on rape, sexual harassment, and other violence against women. First, there has been an enormous backlash movement throughout North America, with many men and a few women arguing that feminists have greatly exaggerated the problem. Much of the attack has obscured the major issues in favor of hard-to-follow petty complaints about the nature of scholarly research design. At the same time, however, more and more scholars and students have turned their attention to this problem. The amount of research and data available to us has been increasing dramatically.

These, then, are the two major reasons that this book of original essays has been written. The authors here unanimously reject the backlash movement and in general stand strongly behind the work that has been attacked. They believe that large numbers of women suffer from a variety of forms of sexual coercion. In fact, as we shall see below, one of the important things this book provides (in Part I) is an important resource for the reader who wishes to find out about the various studies that have been done on sexual assault on North American campuses.

In Part II of this book, we look at the sociology of emotion, and particularly at the problem that researchers face in dealing with the emotions they experience while producing the research we applaud in Part I. Certainly everyone knows that academics can become rather passionate about frog warts, the techniques of Mayan architecture, or whether Bacon actually wrote some of Shakespeare's sonnets. Yet the potential for emotional upheaval and personal attack is much greater in the field of violence against women. Researchers must learn how to control or channel their own emotions. Particularly if they are women, they are sure to be challenged, attacked, ridiculed, sexualized, or accused of being lesbians (as if this is relevant) at the same time that they are literally mad with frustration at the events they are studying.

How does one learn to deal with these problems? Why is a book like this necessary? A relative lack of mentors is one of the difficulties of conducting research in a new field, such as campus sexual assault. Most academic research programs can provide advice on when logistic regression is a better tool than discriminant function analysis, but few have mentors who can talk about how to handle your uncontrollable tears late at night after a day of conducting interviews with victimized women. Few think to prepare researchers on what to do with their emotions or how to handle sexual harassment in the field.

Thus, the second part of this book consists of chapters by three experienced researchers who talk as much about their own emotions and their emotion work as their research. They discuss how they manage to continue as researchers and offer advice for people starting out in this very emotion-laden field.

The third and final goal of this book is to help fill the gap in the methodological literature of studying sexual assault and sexual harassment of women. Although more and more studies are appearing, there still are few materials available to scholars entering this field to help them over hurdles of research design or even to just steel their nerve. Part III of this book introduces the reader to a variety of experienced researchers who explain how they resolved some important feminist research problems or discuss how their inability to resolve them left them wiser and willing to share this wisdom.

In the material below, I will discuss each of these three points in more detail, along with the materials in this book.

The Backlash Against Sexual Assault Research

Interestingly, the 1980s were fairly good times for feminist researchers into sexual assault. Led by Mary Koss, researchers discovered that there are numerous "hidden" victims who do not report their victimization either to the police or to health officials, making them invisible in official statistics. The findings of these researchers were new, different, to some minds a bit "racy," and against the conventional wisdom. All in all, this is exactly what much of the news media looks for in a story. Some of this research got extensive media play.

Unfortunately, many people do not want to believe that there are large numbers of women who have been victimized by men. Neil Gilbert (1991), for example, strongly attacked Koss, insisting that any discovery of hidden victims was a "phantom epidemic." However, Gilbert's ability to make such claims suffered from two difficulties: He himself never studied or conducted any research on rape, and virtually all of the existing data *did* show that such victimization exists. This does not mean that there is no room here for dispute. There are disputes in every field. Thinking of any scientific advance that did not involve disputes between qualified scientists on each side contesting the "truth" is difficult. The difference here is that only one side has data. Those people who represent the backlash—who argue that there are not large numbers of victimized women—are for the most part people without data, without experience in survey research, and generally without any background whatsoever in the field. What they do have are a media system and a public ready and willing to believe anyone who argues that men are not victimizing women in large numbers (see, e.g., Podhoretz, 1991).

What is most interesting about this is that all of North America is currently in the throes of a major political move that demands the harshest possible penalties against all types of offenders (Clear, 1994). Most Americans support executions, and even modern politicians argue that U.S. prison sentences—the longest in the world—are just a slap on offenders' wrists. Meanwhile, perhaps the most sacred political symbol of the mid-1990s is the crime victim, with much of this antioffender rhetoric being invoked on the victim's behalf. In the United States, most states and the federal government have passed "victim rights" legislation, generally with the image of white women attacked by strangers as the movement's most potent image (Weed, 1995). Yet for some reason, many of these same politicians and their

supporters are convinced that feminists are exaggerating when they insist that women are victimized by people they know.

The key issue for Koss and others is that much rape is hidden, sometimes even from the victims themselves. Susan Estrich (1987) explains how this can happen. Few North Americans deny that there is such a thing as rape or that it should be punished. The problem is that many people feel there is, on the one hand, "real rape," which is commonly portrayed as some greasy guy jumping out from behind a bush; then, there are other rapes that are not so "real." Thus, unless the woman was of blameless character and attacked by a stranger, many people will simply deny that a rape has taken place. Women, who have grown up in the same society and heard the same messages as men all of their lives, may also doubt that an event can be termed *rape* if the woman invited the man to her apartment or voluntarily entered the dormitory room where the rape took place (Sanday, 1996).

One of the issues that most annoyed critics such as Gilbert is that so many of Koss's respondents said that, although they were in a situation that met the legal definition of forcible rape, they did not say that the word *rape* applied to what happened. This shows, the argument goes, that feminists are trying to expand the definition of rape as part of their campaign to change the rules regarding how men and women relate to each other. Gilbert's specific attack, which brought him some small amount of fame and success, was to argue as truth the untested theoretical supposition that some people might have misunderstood one or two of Koss's questions.

Still, no matter how much Gilbert, Podhoretz, and other men have tried, there is only a limited media market for a man who attacks women on this issue. Therefore, Katie Roiphe became the darling of the *New York Times* and much of the Eastern press for her extraordinary book, *The Morning After* (1993). The arguments in her book were based completely on Gilbert's, but they were put into a wrapping of a feminist attacking feminists. What was most interesting was not that this book was published at all but that Roiphe was featured everywhere, from the cover of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* to many of the top conservative television talk shows. After all, this particular expert was a young graduate student in literature who had never held a job, had never done research, and had made no claim to have interviewed any women except her own personal friends at Harvard and Princeton. The book itself is based on misrepresentations, mistakes, and misunderstandings (Muehlenhard, Sympson, Phelps, & Highby, 1994). Why did America's media reach out to embrace someone who obviously knew

little about the subject and ignore those who had long labored in the field? The “feminists against feminists” theme was again picked up by the media when Christine Hoff-Sommers (1994) continued the attack.

In some ways, the same thing happened in Canada. Walter DeKeseredy describes his own work, in which he asked a national sample of college and university men and women about their experiences. This expensive research, partially designed to see if Koss’s findings applied also in Canada, was at first covered heavily by the media because DeKeseredy and Kelly found widespread victimization of women on college campuses. Soon, however, some of Canada’s top media figures began to argue that DeKeseredy’s figures had to be wrong, evidently because they were too high. The researchers began to receive hate mail and threats.

Research on Sexual Assault on College Campuses

Why do we keep finding large numbers of victimized women, even in the face of a national media blitz arguing that these women could not possibly exist? In Chapter 1, Koss and Hobart Cleveland, both at the University of Arizona, explain that date rape exists mainly because society does not censure it and may in fact encourage it. They provide one of the better summaries of the most current data. Koss’s original research is not discussed in great detail in this volume, but the chapter by Jacquelyn White and John Humphrey, of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, discusses in detail one way to both replicate and improve on it. Virtually all studies of sexual violence have been based on cross-sectional research—usually by the use of anonymous questionnaires. Here, these two authors describe their rationale for and use of longitudinal research. Although they present quite a number of excellent rationales for this decision, perhaps the best is that by using multiple measures over a long period of time, such surveys tend to blunt any criticisms that the respondents may have been confused enough by any one single question to change the direction of the general findings. This, of course, is one of the key attacks on Koss made by Gilbert and Roiphe.

In Chapter 3, DeKeseredy, of Carleton University in Ottawa, not only describes the Canadian national survey discussed above but also attempts to help researchers entering this field by discussing the ways in which he improved upon the original work.

Perhaps the attack on Koss's findings that most hurt survivors and front-line advocates for victims was the claim by critics that most women were not even victimized or harmed by what Koss was measuring—that Koss was labeling as rape what the women themselves were calling a bad date. Patricia Frazier and Lisa Seales, of the University of Minnesota, address these attacks by Gilbert and Roiphe by reporting that in two different studies, women who were raped suffered from a great deal of distress whether or not they personally applied the word *rape* to their experiences. Denying the status of *rape victim* to women whose experiences do not fit the researcher's definition of "real rape," as Gilbert and Roiphe would do, does not relieve these women of any distress and denies them the opportunity for help and support.

Along the same lines, Victoria Pitts (Brandeis University) and Martin Schwartz argue that the most important factor in whether women report their experiences as rape might be the actions and support of their friends and relatives. In a study of what the "most helpful person" told women who had experiences that fit Ohio's definition of sexual assault, Pitts and Schwartz found that although all of these women were given love and support, the ones who were specifically told it was not their fault were the ones who reported their experiences as rape. Like Frazier and Seales, Pitts and Schwartz argue that blaming the victim, even in a loving way, denies these women the knowledge of how to direct their anger and keeps them from seeking help.

Emotion and Researching Violence Against Women

To anyone attending teaching workshops and discussions, it is apparent that many people think that proper training means that one can and should dispense with one's own feelings when working in a professional context. Even though most sociologists today take as a matter of faith that there is very little value-free research and teaching, they still generally hold that this does not mean that one can weep with one's students. Betsy Stanko, of Brunel University in England, another of the authors who has been studying rape since the 1970s, uses her chapter to move beyond the abstract description of her earlier work to discuss her own emotions—anger, pain, fear, sadness, and frustration. She suggests capturing one's emotions as data and talks about how to foster personal support.

Susan Hippensteele is in a fairly unique position. A well-trained research psychologist who is a leader in the study of ethnoviolence, she is also a frontline activist who holds the title of victim advocate at the University of Hawaii. She analyzes the problem of simultaneously being both a committed activist and a careful research scientist. She shows us how difficult it is to isolate racism from sexism and homophobia and gives us some advice on how to follow in her footsteps.

Christine Mattley, of Ohio University, argues that part of the continuum of violence against women in North America is the pornography industry, which includes what might be called "telephone fantasy workers." In a unique field study, she managed to get employed by a telephone sex service and took almost 2,000 calls from clients. Here, she focuses on the emotions of the researcher: How do you deal with the (dis)courtesy stigma given to you by your employers and fellow employees back at the university? How does it feel to be sexualized, made the butt of jokes, and trivialized as a researcher because you have chosen to work with a deviant or stigmatized (albeit legal) group?

Jennifer Huff's chapter complements Mattley's in many ways, although Mattley discusses her treatment in the academy whereas Huff discusses her treatment in the field. Specifically, Huff found that being sexually harassed by her research subjects made it difficult for her to gather data. Those who are experienced in the study of sexual harassment will recognize in her work some classic signs of self-blame, worry, and uncertainty about whether it might be easier to drop the project than to continue. She does not have a magic formula for ending sexual harassment, but she does feel that training in dealing with it should be a part of the standard training of field researchers.

Doing Research on Violence Against Women

One of the most inappropriately used words in feminist research methods is *participatory research*. Many researchers, particularly in professional schools, have found it "catchy" to refer to research subjects as "coresearchers," for example, when they are nothing of the sort. However, Claire Renzetti, editor of the top journal in this field, *Violence Against Women*, has accomplished perhaps the best-known feminist participatory research in the United States with her study of lesbian battering. Here she discusses in detail

the advantages of her research method over standard positivist research for studying violence against women.

Jody Miller, of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, takes many of these same questions and relates them to the issues discussed in the emotions research section. Miller has published research from her studies of violence against prostitutes in some of the field's top journals, and this piece is only superficially about prostitutes. She addresses a number of essential questions about feminist research, including her own reaction to stories of rape, the problem of middle-class women studying a deviant group, and the difficulty of following the advice of many feminist researchers.

As a man who does research on campus sexual assaults, I have a particular interest in the chapter by Dawn Currie and Brian MacLean. Having heard for almost 20 years the received wisdom that this research is best done by women because female victims will not volunteer information to men, it has always interested me that this presumption has never been tested. Here, Currie and MacLean, two of Canada's best-known and most respected criminological researchers, address this presumption empirically and conclude that training is more important than the sex of the researcher. Yet they move far beyond this finding to show how, in our constant concern with a researcher's sex, we forget that research is gendered in many more complex ways.

Kimberly Huisman, of the University of Southern California, takes on an important subject for field researchers. There is no question that the literature on violence against minority women is significantly weaker than the literature on violence against white women. Yet most researchers with an interest in this area are white. Can a white woman gain entry into a minority community? Should she? Will the data be of any value? Huisman draws on her experience in studying violence against Asian women to deal with these questions.

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