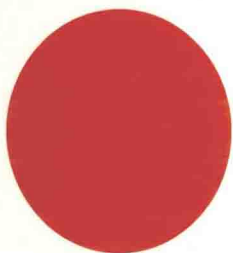


PSYCHOLOGY Series Editor: Sue Wilkinson

Attitudes toward Rape

*Feminist and Social
Psychological Perspectives*

Colleen A. Ward



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Sue Wilkinson teaches social psychology and women's studies at Loughborough University. She is also Editor of *Feminism and Psychology: An International Journal*.

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For Marge and Brenda,
mother and sister,
in hopes we can all share
our little bits of wisdom

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Introduction

They demanded to have sex with me. I refused but I couldn't do anything. They had weapons. . . . There were two of them and they wanted to take turns. I was very frightened.

May and her boyfriend David had gone out for an evening together.¹ After a stroll through a public garden they sat on a park bench to talk. About 11 p.m. they were confronted by two masked men carrying knives. After searching May and David for money and valuables, one man restrained David while the other dragged May to a deserted public toilet and raped her at knifepoint. After the rape May was returned to the park bench, but the second robber brought her back to the toilet and also forced her to have intercourse. David managed to escape at this point, leaving May alone with the two men; however, she was able to attract the attention of a passing police patrol car shortly afterwards.

The offenders were apprehended and were taken with May to the police station. There May's initial relief turned to despair. After being held at the station most of the night she explained:

I was very angry with them. At that moment I was very sad and angry. Angry because the police treated me like nothing. Sad because I was raped. Their attitude was very bad. I used to respect policemen a lot. You know, when a girl is raped, it is very traumatic for her. But they had a 'laugh it off' kind of attitude. Now I don't have a shred of respect for them.

May received medical attention the next day at a government hospital. The medical examination confirmed the occurrence of intercourse, but as May submitted under threat of violence, the physician could not find evidence to corroborate the use of force. May worked with the police and public prosecutors over the next six months while she awaited the preliminary hearing which would determine if the offenders would be tried for rape in the High Court. She indicated that the police 'made me feel like I was the criminal'. She also found interaction with the prosecutors very difficult. To prepare her for the trial they would argue that she actually consented to intercourse. She found the notion that she would voluntarily have sex with strangers in a filthy public toilet completely ridiculous. At times she remarked, 'I could not decide whose side they were on'. She also feared that the additional stress

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of a court appearance would exacerbate her epileptic condition and bring on a seizure.

The six months between the sexual assault and the hearing were particularly stressful for May. Although her family members were very supportive, her boyfriend had deserted her. She was extremely angry about this and considered that he may have actually conspired with the offenders. May was very fearful, had problems sleeping and often experienced vivid nightmares. She felt 'spoiled' and contaminated after the sexual assault, was very much ashamed of what had happened and experienced extreme anxiety over her upcoming court appearance.

On the day of the preliminary hearing May was restless and understandably agitated. She was accompanied to the court by her family and a social worker. They waited for over three hours to be called into the session. Eventually, the social worker was able to locate an officer from the appropriate courtroom and was told that the men had pleaded guilty, that there was no need for May to have her statement read in court, and that she could go home. May was extremely relieved by the news and went home with her family in hopes of putting the incident behind her. The next morning the following appeared in the newspaper:

Woman offered sex to two robbers

A woman, a victim in an armed robbery, offered sex to two robbers, a court heard yesterday. The 22-year-old woman followed the robbers after telling her boyfriend to return home. Because of this evidence, a district court judge said he might drop the rape charges. (*Straits Times*, September 26, 1985, p. 11)

May's story is typical in many ways. She was victimized by a brutal rape, deserted by her boyfriend, exploited further in an insensitive criminal justice system and cruelly exposed in the public media. Her interactions with both individuals and social systems were coloured by a common and pervading ideology about rape and rape victims: women secretly desire to be raped; they consent to sex and change their minds afterwards; and allegations of rape are easy to make and difficult to disprove. Or women are to blame; they get what they deserve; raped women are worthless; rape is only sex so what's the big deal? Although these attitudes are founded on misconceptions about sexual assault, they have a long-standing history and are resistant to change. They function at both the interpersonal and the societal levels as prescribed beliefs shared by individuals and reflected in social institutions. They are interwoven with social norms about male and female relations and directly and indirectly influence the prevalence, prevention and treatment of sexual violence. Rape

ideology is ubiquitous, powerful, both subtle and overt – and it has devastating effects on victims of sexual assault.

Visions of Rape in the Words of . . .

The Victims²

I felt guilty. I felt it was my fault because I had been drinking. I felt angry at myself for not having fought or screamed louder. (English rape victim, cited in Hanmer and Saunders, 1983, p. 37)

I have been prejudiced against since I was 10 years old. I've been at a disadvantage. I've been trying to live for 25 years feeling like I was the bottom of a scum bucket. (New Zealand incest survivor, cited in Ward, 1992)

At the police station once it was established that I had been hitch-hiking, they really lost interest in whether or not I had been raped. They felt that I had somehow been asking for it by being alone on the road. (18-year-old Canadian victim raped in Europe, cited in Levine and Koenig, 1983)

The Offenders

Don't go with a group of guys because that is the stupidest thing a girl could do. She's just inviting herself to get raped. What would a group of guys want with a girl anyway, other than sex? (Canadian rapist, in therapy, cited in Levine and Koenig, 1983)

The Family

Maybe it was my fault. See, that's where I get when I think about it. My father always said whatever a man did to a woman, she provoked it. (American rape victim, cited in Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974a, p. 983)

My daughter has never been the same since the attack. What makes it even worse is that some of our own family members even shunned her because of the incident. Instead of understanding, they treated her as if she was a criminal, whose very presence could only taint them. (Singaporean mother of a 10-year-old rape victim, cited in *Straits Times*, March 12, 1986, p. 20)

He (my husband) doesn't want me around his family. He told his mother on Sunday and said he was ashamed of me. (American rape victim, cited in Holmstrom and Burgess, 1979, p. 323)

The Public

I am concerned about the increase of the number of ladies wearing see-through blouses, low cut necklines and low backs, mini skirts and very short shorts. These sexily-dressed ladies 'invite' and tempt men to turn into molesters and rapists for as we know, man is by nature easily

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aroused sexually by sight. (Singaporean man, newspaper editorial, cited in *Straits Times*, July 26, 1983, p. 21)

The Authorities

The offence of rape is extremely unlikely to have been committed against a woman who does not immediately show signs of extreme violence. (British Detective Sergeant on investigation, cited in Firth, 1975, p. 1507)

Women who say no do not always mean no. It is not just a question of saying no, it is a question of how she says it, how she shows and makes it clear. If she doesn't want it she only has to keep her legs shut and she would not get it without force and there would be marks of force being used. (Judge Wild at Cambridge Crown Court, cited in Temkin, 1986, pp. 19–20)

Women are responsible for causing about 40 per cent of reported rape cases. (Deputy Home Affairs Minister of Malaysia, Radzi Tan Sri Sheik Ahmad, cited in Consumers' Association of Penang, 1988, pp. 8 and 16.)

The Experts

In a way, the victim is always the cause of the crime. (Menachim Amir [1971, p. 258], sociologist and expert on rape)

Women ask for or invite rape by their behaviours or dress style; women are ambivalent about sex and capricious; men are oversexed and not responsible for their own behaviour; raped women are shameful, disgraceful and blameworthy; women can easily prevent rape; 'nice' people should not associate with sexually assaulted women – these myths are espoused by the police, the courts, rape experts, the general public, victims' families and even victims themselves.³

Concern about these rape myths and their consequences is not new. It has been almost 20 years since Susan Brownmiller (1975) highlighted the significance of rape ideologies and their role in mediating the sexual exploitation of women. Feminist analysis has argued that the patriarchal system of gender inequalities which empowers men and oppresses women underpins sexual violence and that stratification and social control are fundamental elements in the sexual domination of women. Associated values and attitudes prop up the patriarchal system. They are so pervasive and deeply ingrained that they are rarely subjected to critical scrutiny in everyday life. Rather, they are taken for granted, as givens which direct the manner in which men and women relate to each other. While much of the feminist literature has concentrated on the explanation and prediction of rape in a patriarchal society, rape-supportive beliefs, held by individuals and reinforced by institutions,

have also merited analysis. In fact feminist scholarship has made two major contributions to the rape literature: (1) it has introduced rape to the scientific and professional community as a topic for serious investigation, and (2) it has increased awareness of the prevalent myths and stereotypes about sexual violence (Bourque, 1990).

This, in turn, has attracted substantial attention from the discipline of psychology. Prompted by feminist critiques and underpinned by a traditional interest in attitude theory and measurement, extensive empirical research on social cognition and rape victimology has recently emerged. Psychologists have further examined feminist claims of sexist ideology in society and have attempted to refine theory which elaborates the associations amongst rape-related attitudes and predicts rape-related behaviour (Donat and D'Emilio, 1992).

Applied psychological research and field studies have also emerged, and the relationship between attitudes and behaviour has been further explored. Psychologists have taken particular note of feminist scholarship which has implicated rape ideologies in rape proclivity (Mahoney et al., 1986), prevalence of reporting (Bourque, 1990), the formulation of rape laws (LeGrand, 1973), the likelihood of criminal conviction (Burt and Albin, 1981), the institutional processing of rape cases (Galton, 1975–6), the community response to victims of sexual violence (Koss and Harvey, 1991), policy decisions (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974a; Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1983), the quality of victim care (LeBourdais, 1976; McGuire and Stern, 1976), victims' self-perceptions and well-being (Libow and Doty, 1979), and recommended prevention strategies (Brodsky, 1976). Psychological research has begun to pursue these applied topics as well as the important issue of attitude change.

What Do We Know about Rape and How Do We Know It? Feminism and Psychology

Accounting for the ordinary is often the most difficult of tasks, particularly when the ordinary is not at all obvious. Sexual coercion is woven into the fabric of our cultural, social and personal psychologies and is not easily defined or disentangled from this context. Thus, although so common as to be ordinary, it is not at all obvious how sexual coercion should be understood.

(Burkhart and Fromuth, 1991, p. 88)

Feminist scholarship has argued that rape ideology encourages and justifies sexual coercion, trivializes sexual violence and demeans

and devalues women who have experienced sexual assault. The foundation of this argument is based on women's experiences in patriarchal societies. Because feminist knowledge is rooted in experience, it is often criticized as being subjective, value-laden and a vehicle for feminist propaganda. Because feminist research is designed for social change, its association with politics often proves uncomfortable for those in the scientific arena.

Feminist theory and research differs from that found in mainstream psychology on several counts. Although there are many voices within feminism and a variety of perspectives in psychology, the general characteristics of a feminist approach can be identified and contrasted with those of contemporary social psychology. Feminist research is broad and expansive, rather than reductionist and narrow. It is often interdisciplinary, rather than strictly defined by the pressures to imitate, yet distinguish itself from, the natural sciences. It commences with the recognition that science is situated within society and, as such, reflects pervading social values. Acknowledging that it is impossible to shed our cultural baggage at the threshold of the research enterprise, feminist scholarship adopts a view of conscious partiality – being explicit in the statement of underlying values and straightforward in admitting to the limitations of this perspective. Psychological science, in contrast, has its roots in logical positivism and has traditionally laid claims to value-neutrality and the objective pursuit of knowledge.

Contrasts between feminist and psychological perspectives often translate into differences in specific methodological preferences. Feminists, for example, often follow an experiential route to knowledge and believe that women should be studied non-intrusively in their natural contexts. Psychologists, on the other hand, frequently opt for more controlled research settings and experimental manipulations. There are also traditional differences in power-sharing in the implementation of research with feminists favouring a more egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the researched and psychologists typically preferring more hierarchical arrangements.

Despite these methodological distinctions, feminism and psychology have mutually influenced each other. Certainly many of the topics chosen for investigation in contemporary social psychology mirror the concerns of the feminist movement. Similarly, developments in psychology have added fuel to the feminist fire by identifying and assessing these insidious rape myths and ideologies. In light of this interdependent relationship, this book attempts to blend feminist scholarship and social psychology to consider both *what* we know about rape and *how* we know it. On the one hand, empirical studies

on rape and rape victims in current social psychology are evaluated from a feminist perspective. On the other hand, feminist claims about women's experiences of rape in patriarchal societies are assessed in light of empirical research findings from social psychology.

Outline of the Book

No one book can be all things to all people. This work emerges after a journey of undertaking a research and intervention project on sexual violence in Singapore, teaching feminist theory and methods in psychology in New Zealand, organizing a symposium on violence against women in Australia, coordinating cross-cultural research on attitudes toward rape victims in 15 countries, returning to Singapore to run training seminars on working with victims of sexual violence, and preparing to participate in an international symposium on sexual violence in Spain. Coloured very much by my own experiences in the field, the major objectives of this book are:

- 1 to introduce feminist theory and research on rape myths in society;
- 2 to review and synthesize what we know about all-pervasive rape ideologies through empirical studies in contemporary social psychology, incorporating research on attitudes, stereotypes, prejudice, attributions and values, including a range of methods such as case studies, surveys, experiments and field studies;
- 3 to consider practical applications of this research such as the psychological effects, both direct and indirect, of rape myths on victims of sexual assault and the strategies for changing attitudes toward sexual violence;
- 4 to incorporate, where possible, a cross-cultural perspective in the study of rape myths and attitudes; and
- 5 to evaluate psychological research from a feminist perspective and feminist theory via psychological research, including an analysis of what psychology and feminism may have to offer each other.

In achieving these objectives the work interweaves international and cross-cultural threads from both psychology and feminism. Given the diversity of resources, the production of a coherent tapestry depicting the sources, description, explanation and consequences of rape attitudes becomes a major challenge. The following is an honest attempt at the loom.

The book is divided into two major parts. Part I examines empirical evidence on attitudes toward rape. It commences with an introduction of early feminist theory and research on rape and goes on to

describe social psychological investigations of attitudes toward and perceptions of victims of sexual violence. A range of methodological approaches to the study of rape myths are described: feminist ethnographic studies, survey research, experimental investigations, case studies and field research. A variety of subjects and research contexts are also included: legal, medical and social service professionals' attitudes toward sexual violence, views of the general public, rapists' perceptions of sexual coercion, trial outcome research and cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward rape victims are described and evaluated. In addition, a range of feminist and contemporary social psychological theories such as socio-cultural theories of rape, the 'just world' hypothesis, the attitude-behaviour link, attribution theory and the principles of cognitive dissonance are presented. The section concludes with a chapter which synthesizes the theoretical and empirical bases of feminist and psychological scholarship and assesses the impact of rape myths on victims' self-perceptions and recovery from sexual assault.

Part II is composed of two chapters which are focused on applied aspects of psychological and feminist research. The first chapter presents social psychological theories of attitude formation and change and evaluates the outcomes of educational interventions on changing individuals' attitudes toward sexual assault. The second chapter describes feminist action-oriented research which attempts to alter attitudes through political activity and changing social systems. These micro- and macro-levels of intervention and analysis represent complementary approaches to improving attitudes toward victims of sexual violence.

Finally, the Conclusion contains a critical analysis of theory and research on attitudes toward rape. Theoretical, methodological and epistemological issues are viewed from both social psychological and feminist perspectives. In the end, with the merger of feminism and psychology, it is hoped that some light can be shed on the causes and consequences of rape ideologies.

Notes

- 1 The names of the victim and her boyfriend have been changed to protect their identities. The interview and case study were taken from our research on sexual violence in Singapore.
- 2 In recent times victims have come to be called rape survivors. This acknowledges the seriousness of sexual assault and credits the woman with the strength and courage needed to go on with her life. The term victim is retained here, however, because rape myths and attitudes further victimize survivors of sexual assault.
- 3 A brief description of the actual characteristics of sexual offences, in contrast with popular rape myths, is presented in Appendix A – Rape: Fact and Fiction.

PART I

A CIRCLE IN THE MAKING

Feminism, Psychology and Research on Rape

In 1975 Susan Brownmiller published *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. In the last 20 years the book has come to merit the status of a classic, and its social, psychological and political significance has been widely recognized. *Against Our Will* pioneered the documentation of a previously ignored topic and provided a major impetus for raising social and political consciousness about sexual violence. It represented a critical force in the development of feminist literature by focusing on the uniqueness of the female experience and interpreting women's realities from a female perspective. The work also sparked psychological interest in sexual violence and went on to provide the theoretical underpinnings of psychological research on rape.

Although in recent years feminism and psychology have converged in theory and research on rape, the generative work of Brownmiller and others demonstrated that the two shared very little common ground in the 1970s. Feminist scholars criticized psychological science first for its neglect of half the population and second for its androcentric perspective and misrepresentation of women in its meagre research endeavours (Kaplan and Sedney, 1980). Although these criticisms were applied to theory and research pertaining to most areas of women's lives – development, family roles, work, relationships, health and sexuality – sexual violence received particular attention. The first onslaught of feminist writings noted the invisibility of rape-related topics in the professional literature. Susan Griffin (1979), for example, was quick to point out that rape was not widely discussed by male intellectuals who described almost every other form of male activity! The second wave went on to criticize the theoretical content of what limited literature was available.

The academic and clinical literature of the time placed emphasis on the psychopathological nature of sexual offenders – suggesting that they were inherently different from other men – and the clinical characteristics of victims – implying that their traits or dispositions contributed to sexual victimization. Freud was especially notorious, postulating that masochism and penis envy are essential components

of healthy female development and that women possess an unconscious desire to be overwhelmed and subjected to painful sexual encounters. Experts often dismissed the high incidence of sexual violence yet frequently made reference to 'victim-precipitated' rape. While feminists considered ignorance 'the benchmark' of scientific theories of rape (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1983), scientific sentiments were in line with social attitudes of the day which suggested that offenders were generally sex-starved deviants and that the rape of virtuous women was practically impossible.

Not only did feminist scholars point to the neglect and misrepresentation of sexual violence in the psychological literature, they were also vocal in challenging the traditional and cherished representation of science as an objective and value-free enterprise. They argued that science, including psychology, does not exist in a cultural vacuum; rather, the questions we choose to ask, the solutions we choose to reach and the methods we choose to employ are influenced by social values. As psychology, like society, has been traditionally dominated by men, inevitably the positions assumed, the theories advanced and the research undertaken have been those that inherently reflect a pervading androcentric bias. Historically, science and philosophy, moulded from a masculine perspective, conspired to reflect patriarchal values and to maintain the social and political status quo.

Feminist critiques of science and theorizing on sexual violence have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of rape by incorporating an interdisciplinary perspective and a wide range of research methods in the investigation of sexual assault. Feminist authors have also proposed alternative conceptual explanations for sexual violence. On the theoretical level feminists have argued that rape is the consequence of deep-rooted social traditions of male dominance and female exploitation. In essence, rape is the result of differentiated and unequal gender roles and social stratification (Rose, 1977). While feminist theory has not concerned itself with attitudes in the same way as social psychology, certain rape myths have been identified, and arguments have been advanced that attitudes, norms, values and traditions of inequality constitute a world view which promotes 'rape-supportive' cultures (Russell, 1982). Feminists have also maintained that attitudes toward men, women and their sexual interactions underpin the social conceptualization of rape and are reflected in the institutional treatment of sexual violence.

In documenting these attitudes feminists have relied largely on observation. This has occurred on the macro-level in terms of the analysis of legal aspects of sexual crimes, the institutional policies