

SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 21: Sexual Assault 1

It is often noted that women are at risk of sexual assault in war. Indeed, it is something that opposing forces use to strike terror into each other's population. Yet this problem is also prevalent in peacetime. According to a nationwide U.S. survey, at least 22% of women between 18-59 reported forced sex at least once since age 13. In Canada, the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey indicates that 39% of women surveyed have been the victim of sexual assault. Other studies have shown lower figures, both in Canada and the U.S., but even the most conservative estimates place the average woman's chance of being sexual assaulted at 1 in 10. Moreover, many of these women know their rapists.

In today's class we will explore the general patterns of sexual assault and their consequences. In the next class we will continue by looking at the cultural factors encouraging men to assault women, discuss the major explanations of sexual assault, the issue of male victims, and analyze the problem of child molestation.

Patterns of Sexual assault:

Certain patterns can be detected in sexual assault. With regard to sex, victims are overwhelmingly female. Figures from the UCR, the CUVS and crisis centres indicate that 85, 90, and 96% of victims, respectively, were female (though, to be fair, males who are sexually assaulted may be quite disinclined to report it and the figures can be distorted somewhat as a result). On the other hand, the vast majority of offenders are male (98% according to the UCR - higher than the 85% males make up in violent crime figures generally).

Age is also a factor in the relationship between rapists and their victims. Victims tend to be young, with over 60% of victims being under age 18. However, the most vulnerable age for victims is between 18-24 years of age, with risk falling off sharply with age past that point (WS 1993). Offenders, on the other hand, tend to be young males just a little older than the victim - except, of course, in cases of child abuse where the age gap increases.

With regard to marital status, the odds of being a victim are highest for unmarried women. Studies report that somewhere between 53-78% of sexual assault victims are single rather than married. Offenders, on the other hand, break down at 48% single, 44% married or common-law, and 8% separated, divorced or widowed. In addition, it has been shown that women in common law relationships face higher rates of violence than do those who are legally married.

As for socioeconomic status, the CUVS illustrates that sexual assault victims tend to have low incomes or come from lower income families - and the fact is that young females are a low income group generally. In Kinnon's (1981) study, 63% of victims were students. The rest were evenly distributed across the occupational spectrum, although professions were under-represented. As for offenders, while they come from all socioeconomic backgrounds, one factor

that seems to be important is the loss of job/income for the assailant (VAWS).

Finally, in the US, race is an issue as well (statistics on race and crime are generally unavailable in Canada). For example, Amir's classic Philadelphia study (1971) found that most rapists were poor, and that minorities were more likely to be both perpetrators and victims. Indeed, most sexual assault was intraracial, not interracial. In about 95% of the cases both offenders and victims were of the same race. This parallels the pattern for murder. This may be explained by the comparatively harsh penalties for interracial sexual assault as well as the fact that races, at least in the U.S., do not interact frequently so there are fewer opportunities available to engage in this crime.

Yet today US sexual assault has become considerably less intraracial - or more interracial - soaring from 3% in the late 1950's to 19% by the early 1980's (involving offenders from various races). This may have resulted from increased racial integration and more contact between potential offenders and victims. It also may relate to the anger of oppressed minorities, as well as the cultural ideals of beauty favoring whites. Nevertheless, most sexual assaults still involve members of the same race.

With regard to the characteristics of the offence itself, research has shown that, unlike most assaults, sexual assault is usually premeditated and involve some planning. Most victims, because they fear for their lives, do not vigorously resist their attackers. Indeed, many know their attackers. Studies indicate that most sexual assaults (50-70%) occur in private residences. While weapons are occasionally used in sexual assault, this is relatively rare (3% according to the VAWS). 85% of cases involve a single assailant (CUVS). Alcohol consumption by the offender was present in 43% of cases (VAWS), and tended to be a factor- lowering inhibitions against aggression and providing a convenient excuse as well.

There are also situational factors in sexual assault. The number of sexual assaults, especially gang sexual assaults, tend to increase in the hot summer months, on weekends, etc. This often is the result of increased social interaction between offenders and potential victims that makes sexual assault more likely to happen. All the same, sexual assaults are not generally as violent as murders, nor happen as explosively and impulsively.

Planning and Execution:

Since most sexual assaults involve acquaintances, friends or lovers, the planning aspect largely involves the offender using sweet talk, romantic moves, alcohol or some other means to induce the woman to have sex, and then single-mindedly striving to achieve this goal without paying any attention to her wishes.

But rapists operate differently if they don't know the victim well or at all. In these cases, offenders tend to choose women who they believe are vulnerable to attack. Such targets are in a disadvantaged situation so they cannot react appropriately or swiftly to the threat (e.g. mentally

challenged girls, women sleeping, old women or women under the influence of alcohol or drugs). Other women are more vulnerable to sexual assault if they appear to be passive or submissive, lacking in assertiveness or confidence. Then again, there are some rapists who prefer aggressive, domineering women that they can "put in their place." Apparently, then, women who project confidence without appearing too aggressive are less subject to sexual assault.

If a rapist cannot easily determine the vulnerability of a woman, he may work out a strategy to test her. He may check and see if she is a friendly, helpful person - asking her directions for example - and, gauging her response, may then push things further to see how she reacts. If she reacts submissively or fearfully, he knows that she can be intimidated into submitting to his sexual demands. Similarly, some may use a ploy to get into a potential victim's home, and, if she falls for it, then attack.

After they have successfully identified a target for sexual assault, offenders frequently do not resort to intimidation with such violent means as brandishing a weapon. Instead, most sexual assaults involve only verbal coercion and non-physical aggression at the outset. Rapists ordinarily become more violent only when they are ready to carry out the crime. At this point they become rougher - pushing, shoving, slapping, or choking. Indeed, many victims are forced to go beyond intercourse to perform oral or anal sex - often repeatedly. During this time, many make degrading comments at the victim's expense.

Gang Sexual assault:

Of the sexual assaults studied by Amir, 43% were gang sexual assaults. In most cases these involve lower-class adolescents between 10-19, often members of street gangs. They often find their victims by cruising for hitchhikers, kidnapping women from the street, or a member arranging a date with a woman who has no knowledge of what is to come.

Less frequent are gang sexual assaults on college campuses, committed by middle and upper-class youth. This usually involves a party where men encourage a woman to drink or take drugs and then sexual assault her once she is intoxicated.

Why do these youth participate in such crimes? Some psychiatrists suggest that this is an expression of latent homosexuality - that the male youth really want to have sex with one another. This is not convincing (e.g. do robbers really want to rob each other?) It makes more sense to suggest that such participation in gang sexual assault fulfills a social need more than a sexual desire, particularly for adolescents to show they are "men" in the eyes of the group, not "wussies." Similarly, college men who share a close relationship may find it hard to resist the social pressure to participate out of fears of having their masculinity questioned. Their comradery also enables them to playfully urge each other on without seeing it as a serious crime. This may explain why fraternity brothers and college athletes on some campuses are more likely than other students to engage in gang sexual assault. Indeed, the likelihood of committing gang sexual assault is relatively great in other cohesive, tightly knit groups (e.g. groups of

soldiers).

Acquaintance Sexual assault:

Compared with those who engage in stranger sexual assault, offenders in acquaintance or date sexual assault are more likely to use verbal or psychological coercion and less likely to use guns or knives. They may pressure the victim verbally or try to make the victim feel inadequate by ignoring her wishes when she wishes to stop. Also, while stranger rapists typically premeditate the sexual assault, acquaintance rapists tend more to premeditate only a sexual relation - which then leads to sexual assault when the victim refuses and the offender brushes this off (assuming she means yes when she says no). Most victims of acquaintance sexual assault see themselves as victims, but are more likely than victims of stranger sexual assault to blame the sexual assault partly on themselves (e.g. being careless or trusting the man too much).

Acquaintance sexual assault has always been common. Kahn (1957) found that 55% of women in his college survey had been sexually assaulted in the previous year (ranging from forced necking to intercourse). Kanin and Purcell (1981) followed up on this and got a similar result, as did Ms. Magazine which found 52% of 7000 women surveyed on 35 campuses had encountered some form of sexual assault (15% were actually sexual assaulted). In short, of all college women, more than half are sexually assaulted in some way and about 15% are forcibly sexual assaulted by their dates.

Acquaintance sexual assault is this common because it appears to be an extension of, rather than a departure from, the conventional pattern of male sexual behavior. In our culture where men are expected to be aggressive rather than shy in dealing with women, young men can easily go too far. Not surprisingly, the more sexually active they are, the more likely men are to commit date sexual assault. Moreover, most of the rapists and even many of their victims do not regard date sexual assault as real sexual assault. For example, in a survey by Ms. Magazine, about 8% of the college men admitted to committing the sexual actions that can be legally defined as sexual assault, but virtually none of these men identified themselves as rapists. Similarly, of the women who had been sexual assaulted, nearly 75% did not identify their experiences as sexual assault. They simply found it hard to believe that someone they knew could have sexual assaulted them.

Campus Sexual assault:

As noted, sexual assault is particularly prevalent on college campuses, with about 15% of college women having been so assaulted. Yet most of the rapists and victims do not define the specific actions as forcible sexual assault. Why not? North American culture traditionally defined aggressiveness with women - rather than gentleness - as a highly desirable quality for young men to have. As such, campus sexual assault represents an extension of this culturally favored male behavior. Thus, the more sexually active men, who can be said to have acquired the highly desirable masculine trait as proven by their great success with women, are more likely than other men to commit date sexual assault.

Yet, is there anything unique about the college campus itself that encourages sexual aggression? Perhaps an answer to this question is suggested by the work of Sanday (1981) on "sexual assault free" and "sexual assault prone" college campuses. On a sexual assault-free campus, sexual assault is treated as a serious offense punishable by expulsion, fraternities discourage heavy drinking, women are respected as friends rather than viewed as sex objects, and gays and lesbians are accepted. On a sexual assault-prone campus, however, sexual assault is not seriously dealt with, heavy drinking is encouraged, taking advantage of an intoxicated woman is accepted, bragging about sexual conquests is prevalent, homophobia is rampant, and pornography is a popular guide to female sexuality. Thus, we can expect a higher incidence of sexual assault on such "sexual assault-prone" campuses.

Other researchers have made similar observations about what causes the high incidence of campus sexual assault. Martin and Hummer (1995) suggest that student groups contribute heavily to campus sexual assault in a number of ways through their unique norms and practices. First, the brotherhood norm requires "sticking together," which discourages anyone's stopping sexual assaults when they occur or reporting them to outsiders. This form of "participation" effectively condones and encourages sexual violence. Secondly, fraternity norms emphasize the values of maleness and masculinity over femaleness and femininity, causing members to devalue women by using them as mere sex objects - which can lead to sexual assaults when women resist. Third, certain fraternity practices that often lead to coercive sex include excessive drinking and pressure from fellow members to prove one's masculinity through sexual conquests.

Of course, not all studies have found these norms and practices to be unique to fraternities, or fraternity brothers to be more sexual assault-prone than other college students. Schwartz and Nogrady (1996), for example, found that excessive drinking and peer pressure toward sexual aggression are just as prevalent among other college men. Athletes, however, have been found to be more sexual assault-prone than other students because they subscribe more to the norms and practices noted above. Additional research is needed to determine which campus group is more sexual assault-prone. At this point, all that can be said is that a sexual assault-prone culture exists both on and off campus, and this may explain the relatively high incidence of sexual assault on campus.

The Myth of Victim Precipitation:

Following the perspective of Wolfgang on Homicide, Amir found in his Philadelphia study that 19% of sexual assaults were precipitated by victims themselves, referring to these as "victim precipitated sexual assault." The argument was that the victim had either consented to sexual relations and retracted it, that the victim engaged in behaviors that were interpreted by the offender as consent, or that the victim did not resist enough when the suggestion was made by the offender. Of course, this concept of victim-precipitated sexual assault reflects a biased, male centred view rather than an accurate description of the crime, and has drawn criticisms for being a sexist myth. For example, while hitchhiking and walking alone at night in a rough neighborhood are assumed by men to be behavior encouraging a sexual attack, the woman may

merely be looking for a ride - not expecting or hoping for a sexual encounter.

Kanin (1984) also argues that this concept of victim precipitation - as utilized in homicides - is simply not applicable to sexual assault. Yet, in his view, victims do "contribute" in some way to being sexual assaulted in cases where the victims have willingly engaged in things like "deep kissing" or some other form of advanced intimacy before the occurrence of the assault. Yet, there could also be problems with his view of victim contribution. Most importantly, it amounts to suggesting that virtually all dating women contribute to sexual assault because they usually engage in uncoerced intimacy with their dates. We should note that sexual assault victims only contribute to the pre-sexual assault intimacy. The sexual assault victims cannot be said to contribute to the sexual assault itself because they try to stop it at the moment of the crime. In brief, a fundamental difference exists between pre-sexual assault intimacy, which does not involve the use of force and therefore is not a crime, and sexual assault itself, which involves force and therefore is a crime.

Many men, however, don't seem to recognize this distinction between consensual pre-sexual assault intimacy and forced sex. In one study by Shotland and Goodstein (1983) 50% of the young men interviewed considered it acceptable for a man to force a girl to have sex when she initially consents but then changes her mind. More recently, Whilt and Humphrey (1991) found 76% of male high school students felt the same way. These young men, in effect, blame the victim. It reflects the popular myth that it is her fault if she is flirting, attractively dressed, or a "tease."

Consequences of Sexual assault:

The response to sexual assault varies from one victim to another. At one extreme are the individuals who show lack of concern (e.g. those who go out for a bite just after, fall asleep, express more concern about an associated theft of personal property, voluntarily engage in later sexual relations with the assailant, or even marry their rapists). At the other extreme are those so traumatized that they sink into deep depression, attempt to commit suicide, or actually do so. In between these two extremes are the great majority who initially experience shock, disbelief, anger, anxiety or depression, but eventually pull out of it.

This diversity of reactions is apparently related to such factors as the degree of violence, the age of the survivor, her social class or cultural background, and prior sexual experience. If she has been violently sexual assaulted, is relatively young, comes from a middle or upper class family, or has had no or little previous sexual experience, she is likely to suffer relatively severe consequences. Other factors also come into play. Trauma will be much greater when the victim has suffered a major life change within a year prior to the sexual assault (e.g. divorce, separation or unemployment). Survivors of stranger sexual assault are more likely to have serious depression, fear and interpersonal problems than those involving someone they knew - generally because these tend to be more violent. Conversely, survivors of acquaintance sexual assault suffer more from self-blame, primarily because society holds them responsible in some way. They also distrust men more and longer because their earlier trust in men has been betrayed.

Most sexual assault survivors go through two phases of disorganization before they gradually and finally regain their ability to live normally. From the time immediately following the sexual assault to a few days or weeks thereafter is the acute phase of disorganization. Here most succumb to extreme fear, shock, humiliation, embarrassment, self-blame or anxiety. After this, survivors generally go through a longer, lingering phase of disorganization, which often lasts a few months, but may persist for years. Here they experience a variety of phobic reactions, including the fear of being alone and the fear of sex. Understandably, survivors suffer from an increased risk of divorce, reduced income, and unemployment.

As noted above, many of the survivors' feelings tend to be inward or self-directed (depression, anxiety and self-blame). Other possible feelings are outward directed such as anger, revenge and the courage to prosecute the offender. While most survivors are gnawed by the passive, inner-directed feelings, a few others express the outward-directed feelings of intense hatred, hostility and desire for revenge. Interestingly, such active, angry survivors tend to feel better about themselves and swing back faster to their normal lives. Indeed, Bart and O'Brien (1984) found that sexual assault survivors who have resisted their attacker readjust more easily to life than passive ones who have yielded crying and pleading. Survivors of acquaintance sexual assault can also recover faster if they learn to see the sexual assault as totally their attacker's fault.

Since the early 1970's, mainly due to the womens' movement, an increasing number of sexual assault survivors not only have expressed their outward-directed feelings, they have also actively tried to combat sexual assault by setting up anti-sexual assault organizations, sexual assault crisis centres, etc. The function of such organizations is to help the sexual assault survivor, organize conferences, teach self-defence, establish special units in police departments, encourage victims to report crimes, and fight for tougher laws against sexual assault.

Since that time organized women have been offering such post-sexual assault services as getting the survivor to the hospital, providing VD and AIDS prevention, pregnancy tests, and, if necessary, abortion and psychiatric help. They also offer moral support at the police station, legal aid in the courtroom, and courses in self-defence - the latter to be better able to fend off potential rapists (e.g. by screaming, biting, clawing with fingernails, pulling the rapists hair or kicking his crotch).

It may be reasonably expected that the impact of sexual assault will change in the future. More and more women who are sexual assaulted will probably stop plunging into the traditional self-destructive feelings of fear, anxiety and guilt, instead taking the active, constructive steps to give peace to themselves but none to the rapist.

The Feeling of Being Sexually Assaulted Again:

In the 1960's and '70's both popular writers and social scientists published many horror stories about how police officers were grossly insensitive in dealing with sexual assault survivors (e.g. suggesting that the stories were fantasies of sex starved women).

When such blatant insults from the police were added to the physical and psychological injury from the rapist, most survivors could not help feeling that they were being sexual assaulted again. Although this "second sexual assault" by the police is only psychological, the impact can be just as painful or traumatic as that of the first sexual assault by the criminal. Today, police officers are generally much more polite and respectful, but many survivors continue to suffer the second sexual assault because police questioning often puts their moral character under the microscope (e.g. "Did she agree to have drinks with the man? Accept a ride home? Was she ever arrested for soliciting or a known prostitute? Did she resist?"). The presumption behind such questions is that the sexual assault survivor might have "asked for it." The police, in effect, blame the victim rather than the criminal.

If the police find their presumption proven wrong, they will proceed to file a complaint against the alleged rapist. In court, however, the woman is likely to suffer another psychological sexual assault. Many have described their courtroom experience as "worse than the sexual assault itself." This is because defence counsel often attack them - and their reputation - on the witness stand, frequently in humiliating and demeaning ways. If their reputation or credibility can be undermined in any way, their testimony will not be taken as seriously. Many women subjected to these practices feel like they - not the accused - are the ones on trial.

One of the most common tactics has been for defence counsel to focus on the victim's sexual history or reputation in order to discredit her. In effect, they were putting her on trial, accusing her of having "asked for it." There have been several legal reforms in this regard. The crime of "rape" has been renamed "sexual assault," and "rape shield" laws enacted such that prior sexual history is no longer automatically allowed when cross examining the victim's testimony. Nevertheless defence lawyers can still get around the sexual assault shield laws, as these are no longer written in absolute terms (in Canada, defence counsel now have to argue before a judge why they should be allowed to examine such testimony in the specific case). Moreover, defence counsel can use tricky tactics to expose testimony about the victim's drinking, drug use, birth of illegitimate children, or some other aspect of her life - in a way that her lifestyle can be used to make jurors question her character and credibility.

Indeed, many judges allow such evidence to be presented to the jury because they believe that without it the accused cannot get a fair trial. The "relevancy" argument is often that the woman willingly performed the sex acts with the accused - reflecting the cultural popular myth that the sexual assault victim asked for it somehow.

In the next class we will continue with our examination of sexual assault to further consider the culture of sexual assault, various theories that have been posited attempting to explain why men sexual assault, consider the unique situation of male sexual assault victims, and close this topic with a brief examination of child molestation.