

**SOC 3290 Deviance**  
**Lecture 22: Sexual Assault 2**

Now that we have examined patterns of sexual assault, as well as considered its consequences, today we will continue with this topic by considering four additional matters:

- (1) The culture of sexual assault;
- (2) Theories of Sexual assault;
- (3) Males as Victims;
- (4) Child molestation.

Each will be dealt with in turn.

**The Culture of Sexual assault:**

While many cultures condemn sexual assault as a serious crime, these self-same societies often have a hidden culture of sexual assault that encourage men to sexually assault women. Of course, this doesn't affect all men the same. Those who are immature, irresponsible, and lacking on social conscience are those most influenced by it. But what is the nature of this sexual assault culture? It is found chiefly in prevailing attitudes toward women as well as through the concept of male/female sex roles.

**Treating Women Like Mens' Property:**

While the law against sexual assault appears to protect females, in many ways it protects the interests of the male. This is because the female is treated like a piece of property that before marriage belongs to her father and after marriage belongs to her husband. Traditionally, if a man sexual assaults a woman, he is in effect considered to be committing a crime against her father or husband - as the case may be. The laws against sexual assault exist to protect the male as the possessor of the female body, and not the right of the female over her own body (e.g. traditionally, a man could not legally sexual assault his own wife). Thus, sexual assault has been viewed as an offence one male commits against another - aggrandizing his manhood at the expense of another.

The traditional absence of marital sexual assault laws, and the rarity of husbands currently being imprisoned for raping their wives, reflects this treatment of women as mens' property. This component of sexual assault culture also comes across in other ways (e.g. sexually assaulted women being regarded as "despoiled" or "ruined"). These words carry the connotation that a sexually assaulted woman is like "damaged goods." Further, once a man's wife has been sexually assaulted, he often tends to feel as if she is less "lovable" than before - even though she deserves more. It is thus not surprising that sexual assault has the tendency to strain or wreck the victim's relationship - 75-85% of such marriages break down within 2 years after the crime.

Keeping with this line of reasoning, it is also generally accepted that the more an object has been used, the less valuable it is considered. Thus, the more a woman has "been around" the less valuable a property she is judged to be. A woman with little value in this sense may be referred to as a "cheap woman" - among other things. Moreover, if a man ravages a relatively "cheap" woman, he can more easily get away with it. This may be why it has been difficult for a rapist to be convicted if his victim is known to have engaged in sexual relations with more than two men - and it is virtually impossible for the rapist to be convicted if his victim is a known prostitute. Moreover, since poor or minority women are considered less valuable in our society than white or rich women, raping the former carries a lesser risk of conviction than raping the latter. Indeed, many convicted rapists themselves do not feel guilty for having sexually assaulted such "cheap" commodities.

More broadly, throughout human history, conquering armies sexually assaulted the population of the vanquished as if they were part of the "spoils of war" (e.g. Germany and Japan in WWII, Pakistan in Bangladesh, Serb armies in Bosnia, Hutus in Rwanda). Following such actions, the women were often regarded as damaged property, valueless, and thrown out of their homes by family.

Lastly, the widespread availability of pornography - especially the type that shows violence against women - reinforces the popular image of women as men's sex objects. By degrading women in this way, pornography increases men's callousness toward women. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to pornography tends to cause men to trivialize sexual assault - advocating less serious punishment for rapists and expressing less sympathy for victims. This doesn't mean that it causes sexual assault, but that it does make certain men more dangerous to women (e.g. already violent, angry men).

Since women are culturally defined as men's property, men may find it difficult to respect women as human beings. It is through a lack of respect for women that men are encouraged to sexual assault women. Thus, Scully and Marolla (1985) found that the overwhelming majority of rapists they interviewed thought that they would never go to prison for what they did, because they viewed women as sexual objects that they could use for pleasure as a "man's right."

### **Using Women in Men's Masculinity Contests:**

In a society that places a high value on competition, men are pressured to engage in a masculinity contest to prove their male prowess and to earn a macho reputation among peers. To come out a winner, a man has to make out with the largest number of women possible at the least cost. This contest is comparable to such competitive sports as football, baseball, etc. In any of these sports the players need an object - such as a ball - to push around and score. Here the woman becomes the ball needed to score.

Such a dehumanizing attitude towards women can further be found in the language that men use for sexual intercourse as if it were merely a game of violence and conquest (e.g.

"banging" or "knocking up"). Such language and attitudes may encourage men to play the masculinity game. Whether they will actually do so depends on (1) the social pressure to play the game; and (2) learning some basic pointers for playing it.

The social pressure often comes from friends who ask "did you score?" - and who put the man down if he says no. Such pressure tends to make men, especially teenage males, afraid of showing any sign of femininity - being soft, gentle and considerate. It also tends to make them want to show off their "masculine" qualities - being aggressive, forceful and violent. It is thus likely that they will engage in sexual violence, of one degree or another, against women at some point. Research backs this up, suggesting that the most important factor distinguishing sexually violent males from others is peer pressure from sexually aggressive friends.

As for the pointers for playing the masculinity game, these come with the masculine role that men have been taught to play. This requires the man to take the active part in achieving social and then sexual relations with a woman - and the burden on women to stop his advances. This aggressive view is often reinforced by TV movies, etc, that show initially resistant women melting with passion and giving in.

### **The Myth that Women Ask for It:**

There is a popular myth that women have a secret wish to be sexual assaulted, and the existence of this myth has been backed up by studies (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994). The view that "she actually wanted it," "she lied about it," or that "she wasn't really hurt" is pervasive, and essentially holds the victim responsible for the sexual assault, assuming that the victim did something that provoked the man to sexual assault her. This may include going to a bar, walking alone at night, wearing sexy clothes, or turning the man on.

Such blame the victim rationalizations reflect society's sexist attempt to "put women in their place," denying them the freedom that men enjoy. These also stem from the popular assumption that sexual assault is only sexually motivated. This explains why men tend to blame physically unattractive women more than attractive ones for sexual assault - they find it hard to believe that a man would try very hard to have sex with an unattractive woman who resists.

This myth is understandably popular with rapists - which may help explain why they committed the crime in the first place. Most convicted rapists studied deny their culpability - insisting that their victims had encouraged and enjoyed the experience, or that their victims have seduced them, meant yes while saying no, and eventually relaxed and enjoyed the experience (Scully and Marolla, 1985). This willing victim myth is also popular in the courtroom, with many victims being presumed "guilty" of this until proven innocent of provoking the sexual assault. While defence lawyers aren't as crude as in the past, it is relatively easy to subtly influence a jury influenced by the same popular myths.

Because of the willing-victim myth, when a woman declines a man's proposition, he may

continue pressuring her. If he eventually sexual assaults her, he will assume she consented even if she resisted all along.

### **Socializing Girls to be Victims:**

To make it easier for men to sexual assault, the culture teaches girls to play the stereotypically feminine role - sweet and passive. Girls learn from the movies and other mass media that women like macho men and expect such men to be rough and ready. Moreover, videos and violent movies teach women to associate sex with violence. In learning this as part of the feminine role, the girl acquires two tendencies that make her a potential victim: (1) femininity: passivity, gentleness, weakness, and dependence; and (2) submissiveness to aggressive or violent men. These factors means that women will not as likely be physically aggressive and psychologically prepared when encountering their would be attackers. Many do not like to "cause a scene" for example, when sexually harassed. Perhaps this helps explain why traditionally passive or submissive victims are the perfect target for rapists.

### **Why Men Sexual assault:**

Various researchers have tried to explain why some men are more likely than others to sexual assault, or why some groups or societies have a higher incidence of forcible sexual assault.

The first group, psychologists, tend to argue that rapists suffer from some personality defect or emotional disturbance. While most are not considered "insane," neither are they healthy. In their view, the rapist is a person who has serious psychological difficulties which handicap him in his relationships with other people, and which he discharges, when under stress, through sexual violence. Of course, disagreement abounds over what the specific psychological problem is - ranging from feelings of sexual inadequacy to fear of homosexual tendency to sexual addiction. One popular argument is that rapists are men who, as a result of unpleasant childhood experiences, have developed personality defects that render them unable to relate to women ("sexual inadequacy"). This inadequacy drives the rapist to indulge in fantasy and then act it out in sexual assault. Yet psychological theories such as this can explain only a few cases of sexual assault. True, some rapists cannot relate to women that well - but they are a small minority. Indeed, in prison, the majority of rapists appear quite normal - no different from other convicts. Indeed, in an experiment, convicted rapists were just as skilled and relaxed in conversations with a woman as other convicts (Scully, 1990). The psychological theory of sexual inadequacy is even less applicable to the countless acquaintance rapists outside of prison - often highly skilled in dealing with women. Indeed, Rapaport and Posey (1991) have demonstrated that they have often had more dates and more consensual sexual experiences than other men.

The second theoretical approach comes in the form of social-psychological theory that focuses on sexual permissiveness. Chappell (1971) argues that the rate of sexual assault is higher in some societies than others because some are more sexually permissive - and it is these that

have a higher rate of sexual assault. This unusual conclusion is explained through the idea of relative frustration: when encountering the same experience of being rejected by a woman, men in a sexually permissive society feel more frustrated than men in a sexually restrictive society in which premarital and other non-marital sex is prohibited. This is because in a sexually restrictive society men are able to take a woman's rejection in stride - it isn't him, but society's restrictive rules. In a sexually permissive society, in contrast, such rationalizations aren't so readily available, and the man may more likely take it personally, become angry, and engage in sexual assault. In short, a sexual atmosphere of sexual permissiveness produces a great number of sexual assaults because it generates a great deal of relative frustration by causing men to take a woman's rejection personally. This may be why the U.S., Canada, etc have higher rates of sexual assault than in the past, and in comparison to traditional societies.

Yet a third group of theorists question the assumption that sexual assault is sexually motivated. To these feminist theorists (e.g. Susan Brownmiller, 1975), sexual assault is seen as primarily motivated by the man's desire to dominate the woman because of gender inequality. On this view, sexual assault serves to intimidate women, "keeping them in their place" to maintain sexual inequality. The evidence on sexual assault as an expression of male dominance exists everywhere. Most sexual assaults involve men raping women. Men generally have greater physical, political and economic power than women. Thus, sexual assault is essentially an expression of male power over women. Indeed, Sanday (1981) has found that in sexual assault-prone societies, male dominance is a key feature. The same is true of campuses where masculinity and male dominance are highly valued (Schwartz, 1995).

Nevertheless, the feminist theory has drawn fire for exaggerating the influence of male dominance on sexual assault - not all men would use sexual assault to intimidate all women, and it is easy to think of numerous men who do not want to dominate women by raping them - especially their mothers and daughters). Thus, it would be fairer to say that sexual assault is a primary expression - rather than the sole expression - of male dominance.

### **Males as Victims:**

Many in society feel that men by nature are simply too big, strong and in control to be sexually assaulted. Yet, there is growing evidence that at least 10,000 American men are sexually assaulted each year. The risk of a man being sexually assaulted is still considerably less than that of a woman (urban surveys suggest that men make up 1 in 10 sexual assault victims, while other studies assert that 12-48% of male college students have been pressured to have non-consensual sex). Most of these involve women using verbal pressure rather than force. In the fewer cases where men are sexually assaulted by men, however, most offenders use physical force - with sodomy being the most common mode of assault. Male assailants are more likely than female assailants to use physical force because their victims are much more likely to be strangers. In contrast, female assailants are more likely to use verbal pressure because their victims are more likely to be their acquaintances.

In those rare cases where men sexually assault other men, still nearly half of assailants know their victims as peers, coworkers, subordinates or dates. These sexual assaults include attacks by men meeting their victims at parties or bars, gang sexual assaults in the military, and seduction with pressure by authority figures like psychiatrists, doctors, priests, and teachers. Most victims are in their late teens/early 20's, and slightly more than half of both victims and offenders are heterosexual. The rapist in such cases assaults his victim mostly out of anger, with the intent being to punish or dominate rather than to derive sexual pleasure.

The male victim reacts in many of the same ways to same-sex sexual assault as the female does to heterosexual sexual assault. The reactions include shock, self-blame, shame, anger and depression. However, due to male sex-role socialization, the male victim is more likely to control his emotion by denying or minimizing the trauma of sexual assault. Moreover, unlike women, the male victim tends to feel a loss of masculinity.

Such experiences are far more common in prison. Indeed, same-sex sexual assault is more prevalent in prison than heterosexual sexual assault is outside (1 in 5 male inmates have been sexually assaulted vs. 1 in 10 females in society). Virtually every slightly built young man is sexually approached within 1 or 2 days of incarceration - many being repeatedly sexually assaulted by gangs of inmates. Some commit suicide, others seek protection from more powerful inmates in return for sexual (and other) services. Some are forced into prostitution so that they can earn goods for their keepers, others are offered goodies such that the gift giver later demands payment. Finally, some are lured into gambling and are forced into sex to repay debts.

Male rapists and their male victims in prison may be compared in many ways to such rapists and their female victims in society. Rapists in each case are generally heterosexual, generally older, taller, heavier, and more violent than their victims. However, it is also true that, compared to sexual assaults outside prison, same sex sexual assaults in prison are far more likely to be interracial. Still, the two types of sexual assault are similar in that both involve members of a dominant group raping a subordinate group.

Common sense may suggest that prison sexual assault is intended to relieve one's sexual deprivation - but that isn't the primary motivation (masturbation would be more efficient). Instead, the primary motivation for same sex sexual assault is the need to subjugate and humiliate the victim (e.g. "We're going to take away your manhood"). This doesn't mean that the sexual assault serves only to express the need for dominance - if it did, offenders would merely beat up each other. But the drive for power appears to be the stronger motivation than sex for prison sexual assault. The same is true for the majority of men who sexual assault other men in the larger society.

Moving on to a more controversial question: can men be sexually assaulted by women? Alex Thio (2001) argues that they can, because sexual assault is basically an expression of power. Just as prison rapists are more powerful than their victims, and male rapists in the wider society are more powerful than their female victims, there are situations where it is the woman

who is in the power position and invulnerable. Thus, to the extent to which a woman can overpower a man in a sexual encounter, she is able to sexual assault him.

But is this physiologically possible? Some might assume that men cannot perform sexually if frightened or anxious, but doctors have refuted this. Some men can and do have erections while anxious, and, even if not capable of engaging in intercourse, they can still be forced to perform other sex acts meant to humiliate them - fulfilling their attacker's need for asserting power and dominance.

Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that there are actual cases of women using physical force to sexual assault men, but these are extremely rare. Presumably as we move toward gender equality these cases will increase, but, so far, the cases that have occurred usually involve a single victim and two or more offenders - an apparent attempt to compensate on the power dimension.

Still, rather than use physical force, most female offenders resort to verbal persuasion and other non-violent methods (e.g. older women seducing teenage boys, female babysitters abusing young boys, and female college students persistently "getting fresh" with their dates until they consent to sex). We may argue, though, that the use of verbal persuasion alone doesn't legally constitute sexual assault if the victim is no longer under the age of consent.

The use of physical force is quite another matter. It is sexual assault and may traumatize the male victim as much as it does the female victim. He is likely to feel a loss of masculinity, suffer sexual dysfunction, etc. But since most female offenders don't resort to physical force, most male victims are far from being traumatized. Thus, the most common effect is avoidance of aggressive women and pressured sex. Currently, even those male victims who are badly shaken by the more violent assault may not get much sympathy.

### **Child Molestation:**

Child molestation can also be considered a form of sexual assault because their victims are too young to legally give consent to sex.

There are many widely-ranging estimates of how common child molestation is. Yet some facts are clear: (1) girls are more likely than boys to be molested; (2) most molesters are men; (3) most molesters are not strangers, but acquainted with their victims; (4) the molester is usually unmarried, never or rarely dates, lives alone or with his parents.

The impact on the victim is profound. 45 studies have shown that molested children are more likely to suffer from various problems such as PTSD, behavior problems, sexualized behaviors, and poor self-esteem.

Child molesters may be compared with the type of rapists who victimize women. In this

regard (1) molesters are considerably older (over 35 vs. 20 and under); (2) molesters are more gentle and passive than the tougher, more aggressive rapists; (3) molesters are less likely to resort to physical violence or penetration, often content with fondling; (4) molesters are much more capable than rapists of getting along with adult members of the opposite sex (rapists are less skilled); (5) most molesters commit the offence against the same child for a period of time, while rapists attack different victims; (6) most molesters admit their guilt, while most rapists refuse to do so.

All this suggests that child molesters disastrously fail to meet the sexist cultural standard of "masculinity" or male dominance over women. This may explain why they are scorned and, if young enough, sexually assaulted by their fellow inmates in prison. Their lack of masculinity may also explain why, unlike rapists, child molesters feel inadequate with adult women but dominant over children. Moreover, while the culture of sexual assault encourages rapists to blame their adult victims, this same culture fails to have the same impact on molesters. Yet, child molesters are, at bottom, similar to rapists: both victimize a person who is less powerful than they are.

### **Less Common Type of Child Molestation:**

But what about the less common type of molester who abuses young boys? There is some evidence that most of these molesters are not really gay - they are usually married, have no sexual interest in other men, and do not identify themselves as gay. Their male victims, however, are more likely than other boys to grow up to be child molesters themselves.

Then there are women who molest young boys. This is even rarer. Yet, this kind of sex can so anger the boy that he may later as an adult take it out on other women by raping them. In an investigation of 83 rapists in prison, researchers found that 59% had been molested as children by older women - compared with only 3% in a study of college students.

There is, however, a gender difference in the way that victims deal with the anger caused by their victimization. Men who have been molested by either women or men are more likely to act out their smouldering anger by becoming rapists or child molesters themselves. Women abused as children, in contrast, are more likely to internalize their anger by becoming victims of additional abuse (e.g. sexual assault victims, wife-abuse victims, drug addicts or prostitutes). This gender difference can be attributed to traditional sex-role socialization which encourages boys to be aggressive and girls to be passive.

### **Summary & Conclusion:**

In the past 2 classes we have reviewed patterns of sexual assault, its personal consequences and social responses, the culture of rape, explanatory theories, and the specific situations of male victims and child molestation. Much research continues in these important areas, particularly in describing and explaining varieties of sexual deviance, as well as in formulating social policy.