A critique of:

Scully, D., & Marolla, J. (1985)
"Riding the bull at Gilley's": Convicted rapists describe the rewards of rape. Social Problems, 32(3), 251-263.

by

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Scully and Marolla (1985) argue that, contrary to both popular and many academic accounts, most rapes are not best explained as a crime of a small number of "'special' or 'sick'" (p. 252) individuals. Instead, they argue that rape must be understood as a 'normal' part of United States society and a 'normal' activity of at least a significant minority of 'normal' American men. In fact, they would seem to suggest that in modern American society it is the men who do not rape that are in some sense 'abnormal' and whose actions need to be explored and explained. They present the results of their study of convicted rapists in the Virginia prison system as evidence of this.

In this critique of their article I will attempt to show that the evidence they present is, at best, weak evidence for their conclusion that rape is a 'normal' part of American society with "cultural supports" (Scully & Marolla, 1985, p. 262) and in fact, in a number of important respects can be seen as counter-evidence to that conclusion. I will also argue that, even given that their conclusion be true, the sample used in their study means that not only does their study not prove their conclusions, but are unlikely prove it.

Scully and Marolla (1985) cite previous studies in which rapists and rape have been treated as some form of an idiosyncratic mental disease. They argue, this represents only a small sample of rapists, a sample it would seem, biased by the method of selection (i.e., psychological patients). They argue that, while such rapes and rapists do exist, they represent only a small minority of the rapes and rapists in society. Instead thy argue that there is much evidence (which will not be reviewed here) that indicates that rape is not in fact a crime of the "'special' or 'sick'" (p. 252) individual, but rather a 'normal' part of United States society. They point to studies that
show that between 20 and 30 percent of women over 12 can expect to suffer a violent sexual assault at some time in their lives. They argue that the high frequency of rape "makes it unlikely that responsibility rests solely with a small lunatic fringe of psychotic men." (p. 252).

They argue further that the assumption that rape is the outcome of a psychopathology removes rape from the realm of culture and the social and "ignores evidence … which suggests that rape, like all behaviour, is learned." (p. 252). As evidence that rape is learned behaviour rather than psychopathological they point out that the rate of rape varies dramatically between societies (which one would not expect if it was a disease state), with the United States having an eighteen-times higher rate of reported rape and attempted rape than that for England and Wales.

Scully and Marolla present the radical feminist argument that rape is not abnormal (i.e., a mental illness) in many, probably most, societies; but in fact is a normal a aspect of the social control of women by men, i.e., rape is "an extension of normative male behaviour" (p. 253). In other words, the culture of male dominance uses the 'normal' rape of women by 'normal' men to control women. In this view rape is one way, and an important one, that men maintain their dominance and that they do so overtly through rape.

Scully and Marolla interviewed 114 convicted rapists in a Virginia prison. The participants were volunteers and, while not mentioned in this article (they direct the reader to Scully & Marolla, 1984), they represent about a 25% response rate. In the earlier article the authors state that the letter sent out to the prisoners asking for their participation (and to which the 25% positively) contained the researchers' "procedures for ensuring confidentiality" (Scully & Marolla, 1984, p. 532), however, what those procedures were is not given.

The men's sentences ranged from ten years to life. Compared to the rest of the prison population the rapists were disproportionately white, slightly better educated, and younger. The
interviews were a combination of set questions and open ended ones. The question of validity was addressed as prison inmates have a reputation for 'conning'; while not defined, this presumably involved changing their 'stories' to fit their needs (e.g., in a court situation denying their crimes). In order to ensure their validity they compared the interviews they took with official court and prison records, they found that, other than a "tendency to understate" the level of violence, the accounts were very similar.

Scully and Marolla's findings were of "how offenders view the rewards of rape" (pp. 255-261). Using analysis of and quotations from the interviews they present a number of general reasons men gave for raping women. The one they put the most emphasis on is that of "revenge and punishment" (p. 255), i.e., revenge rapes as collective punishment. They also present five other general views they found: "an added bonus" (p. 257), rape committed as part of another crime, usually robbery of some sort; "sexual access" (p. 257), rape as about getting sex when it is not otherwise available, not just violence; "impersonal sex and power" (p. 259), a preference for sex without commitment which rape provided; "recreation and adventure" (p. 259): mostly gang rapists, not surprisingly teens and early twenties, who react to peer-pressure and seek thrills in criminal activity.

Finally they noted that, while "many of the rapists expressed regret for their crime" (p. 260), the authors dismiss this as anything other than regret for having been caught and put in prison. In conclusion the state that their study highlights that "understanding that otherwise normal men can and do rape is critical." (p. 261)

I will not examine the literature that they say shows that rape is a normal aspect of the culture of male dominance, rather than the actions of a "small lunatic fringe of psychotic men" (p. 252). However, at least on the face of it, a number of their arguments for the relation of rape
and male dominance seem, at best, weak. As evidence of the cultural basis of rape, they point out that the United States has a rate of rape eighteen times higher than that of England and Wales. However, is this evidence of the link of rape with the culture of male dominance or simply evidence of different crimes rates overall? England and Wales do not seem markedly less male dominated than the United States. In fact, they would seem remarkably similar on many fundamental cultural traits (for example, pornography, which they argue is another aspect of the culture of male dominance, would seem no less common there than in the United States) and in particular male dominance.

As further evidence for their argument that rape is not in fact a crime of 'special' or 'sick' individuals, but rather a 'normal' part of United States society, Scully and Marolla point to studies that show that between 20 and 30 percent of women over 12 can expect to suffer a violent sexual assault at some time in their lives. They argue that the high frequency of rape "makes it unlikely that responsibility rests solely with a small lunatic fringe of psychotic men." (p. 252). However, if rape is as easy a crime to get away with as it is often said to be—and they found that "the overwhelming majority of the rapists indicated they never thought they would go to prison for what they did." (p. 262)—how do we know that, in fact, most rapes are not done by a small minority of the male population, men who over their life spans might commit dozens or even hundreds of rapes. It would seem that this accepted for many other crimes. For example, It seems reasonable to assume that at least 20 to 30 percent of all the population over 12 can expect to suffer a house break-in at some time in their lives, that doesn't mean that house break-ins are considered normal by society nor that house break-ins are not committed only by a small fringe of the population.
In many ways the strongest argument against their contention that their study is evidence that in American society there are, "rewards and cultural supports for rape" (p. 262) can be seen in their methodology. If rape is as acceptable as they claim it to be, why do a study of prisoners, in particular of those who have been sent to prison for rape? If rape is as widespread and accepted as they claim, then it should be relatively easy to find a sample of men who have raped who are not in prison (through random surveys or convenience samples and using methods which would ensure better anonymity than could be reasonably promised in research on prisoners).

Even if it is true that rapists are not fundamentally different from most men, their sample of prisoners might very well be very different. While they only provide limited excerpts from their interviews, many of those that they do would seem to show men consumed by extreme anger and an with a profound inability to control that anger. If rape is the activity not of a tiny minority but rather of a broad spectrum of men, it seems highly unlikely that those actually found guilty of the crime are representative of that broad spectrum.

Another problem with their study is that of validity. While they claim that they address the question of validity presented by prison inmates' reputation for 'conning'—by comparing their subjects' description of their crimes with official court and prison records—they do not seem to consider that 'conning' in prison might be dramatically different from the 'conning' which would have taken place in the courtroom. As these men were already in prison there would seem to be little reason for them to deny what they had done. Instead it is at least reasonable to suggest that, in order to get parole, they might try to make their 'stories' fit what they think that the authorities want to hear, i.e., to accept their guilt and to do so in the form that they think the authorities (in this case the researchers) want to hear.
In conclusion, Scully and Marolla argue that most men who rape cannot be considered abnormal or sick. In fact, in their conclusion they suggest that rape is so common that in a sense it is not men who rape who are abnormal but rather those who do not who are:

We are left with the fact that all men do not rape. In view of the apparent rewards and cultural supports for rape, it is important to ask why some men do not rape…. Instead of asking men who rape "Why?", perhaps we should be asking men who don't "Why not?" (p. 262, my emphasis)

Scully and Marolla also argue that a sample of rapists in prisons can tell us something about rapists outside of prison. In this critique I have tried to show that Scully and Marolla do not demonstrate that rape is culturally supported and an activity of, what American society sees as, normal men. I have also argued that, even if that were true, a sample of rapists drawn from prisoners is unlikely to be representative of the normal American rapist.
References
