

# RAPE

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What's the big deal?

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In our current North American culture with its over the top emphasis on political correctness, would anyone dare suggest there are issues with how society has come to view rape as not sex, but a violent act of power and control of a men over women?

The second wave of feminism, spearheaded by Susan Brownmiller (*Against our Will, Men, Women and Rape*, 1975), view of rape has removed “sex” from rape and places the offensive assault into a category that places the full responsibility on the perpetrator, primarily men. The position is that sex requires consent; ergo, without consent from the woman, rape is not sex but an assault which uses sex as the weapon. What? Has anyone asked the women who have been raped if they felt like they had sex? [Statistically, many more women than men are raped. This paper will focus on female victims with an emphasis on North American experience]

In my rudimentary analysis of the complexities of rape, I believe we have created confusion as it relates to semantics and the language used to describe “the act of sex”. It is difficult for me to develop a target statement as a basis for this paper as I too have become confused. Therefore, I will address what I believe are the essential components of the rape/sex discussion and how each component adds to or detracts from considering if there is, in fact, sex in rape. These include the premise used by the current feminist theories that rape is not sex because sex requires consent. The fact that women suffer significant psychological damage from being raped that goes beyond what would be expected from other types of physical assault because of the value and intimacy women attached to sex; and what, if any, role women have in

feeding into a “rape culture”. Is rape sex or a violent act perpetrated by men on women to exert power, control and dominance? Or both?

Merriam Webster defines sex as “the sum of the structural, functional, and behavioral characteristics of organisms that are involved in reproduction marked by the union of gametes and that distinguish males and females”, gender as “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex” and intimacy as “something personal and private in nature.” For our purposes, we will consider sex to mean sexual intercourse or other similar sexual act. Gender will simply mean male or female and intimacy will encompass the romance and interpersonal connection commonly believed to be present in sexual “relationships”, i.e., marriages or dating. Culturally, we have used these terms so broadly that we often fall victim to misunderstandings and miscommunications. On employment applications for example, a request to identify the applicant’s sex also means gender.

As a starting point I will agree that rape occurs when a man forces sexual intercourse on a woman against her will or without her consent. Whether this is sex or not remains to be decided.

Several motivators and types of rape exist, sometimes simultaneously. These types generally support the argument that rape is both an act of violence as well as an act of sex. These include, but are not limited to, **anger** where “the aim of the rapist is to humiliate, debase and hurt their victim, sex is a weapon to defile and degrade the victim, rape constitutes the ultimate expression

of their anger. This rapist considers rape the ultimate offense they can commit against the victim.” Second is **power** where “rape becomes a way to compensate for their underlying feelings of inadequacy and feeds their issues of mastery, control, strength, authority and capability. The intent of the power rapist is to assert their competency. The power rapist relies upon verbal threats, intimidation with a weapon, and only uses the amount of force necessary to subdue the victim. The power rapists tend to have fantasies about sexual conquests and rape. They may believe that even though the victim initially resists them, that once they overpower their victim, the victim will eventually enjoy the rape.” Thirdly is the **sadistic** rapist who has “a sexual association with anger and power so that aggression and the infliction of pain itself is eroticized. For this rapist, sexual excitement is associated with the inflicting of pain upon his victim. The offender finds the intentional maltreatment of his victim intensely gratifying and takes pleasure in the victim's torment, anguish, distress, helplessness, and suffering; the offender finds the victim's struggling an erotic experience. Fourthly, **date rape** is “a non-domestic rape committed by someone who knows the victim. It can occur between two people who know one another usually in social situations, between people who are dating as a couple and have had consensual sex in the past, between two people who are starting to date, between people who are just friends, and between acquaintances. Fifthly, **spousal rape**, “also known as marital rape, wife rape, husband rape, partner rape or intimate partner sexual assault (IPSA), is rape between a married or *de facto* couple.” And finally **war rape** “is often used as means of psychological warfare in order to humiliate the enemy and undermine their morale. Rapes in war are often systematic and thorough, and military leaders may actually encourage their soldiers to rape

civilians. Likewise, systematic rapes are often employed as a form of ethnic cleansing.”

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Types\\_of\\_rape](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Types_of_rape))

The above “types” of rape highlight both the power as well as the sexual component involved in “the act”, or offence. From here we will examine these elements individually, starting with the origin of power and control. In *Evolutionary Theories of Rape* (2001), John Archer and A. Elaine Vaughan analyze the evolutionary and adaptive nature of rape and point to the fact that forced copulation occurs widely in the natural world, predating the development of patriarchal societies. This view does not necessarily completely conflict with the feminist position that rape is a product of the patriarchal power, control and domination of men over women but a primary point of controversy is that the evolutionary analysis suggests that all men could be rapists; “it is inherent in men’s nature.” (p.95)

Archer and Vaughan refer to works by feminist Susan Brownmiller (1975) and evolutionists Thornhill and Palmer (2000) to highlight a difference in emphasis regarding the nature of rape:

“The feminist view (from Brownmiller 1975) is that the goal of rape is to exercise patriarchal power, and that the means to this end is for a man to force a woman to have sex. The alternative view (advanced most recently by Thornhill and Palmer 2000) is that the goal of rape is to have sex with a woman who has indicated her non-consent, and that the means to achieving this is to exercise physical power over her. In both explanations

the act of rape involves motives of both sex and power, but the emphasis is different in the two cases. The nature of the power is also different, in the first case stemming from the role of men in society, and in the second from the relative ability of men and women to overpower one another physically.” (p. 98)

Referencing Brownmiller, Archer and Vaughan go on to suggest that the feminist analysis of rape,

“...directed attention to a serious social problem that had largely been ignored before then. Her [Brownmiller] analysis stimulated a range of research on rape in the social sciences, including survey, interview, questionnaire and quasi-experimental studies in psychology. Behind all this research there has been one particular view of the origin and causation of rape: male domination arising from patriarchy. Whatever its deficiencies, the current evolutionary view of rape acknowledges the origins of forced sex in the natural world, and its subsequent justification and facilitation by human patriarchal structures, could potentially draw upon the strengths of both perspectives while at the same time avoiding their limitations.” (p. 100)

As to the origins of rape as power and control, Susan Brownmiller (1975) states,

“Man’s structural capacity to rape and women’s corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself. Had it not been for this accident of biology, an accommodation requiring the locking together of two

separate parts, penis into vagina, there would be neither copulation nor rape as we know it.” (p. 13-14)

“It seems eminently sensible to hypothesize that man’s violent capture and rape of the female first to the establishment of a rudimentary mate-protectorate and then sometime later to the full-blown male solidification of power, the patriarchy. As the first permanent acquisition of man, his first piece of real property, woman was, in fact, the original building block, the cornerstone, of the “house of the father”. Man’s forcible extension of his boundaries to his mate and later to their offspring was the beginning of his concept of ownership.” (p. 17)

Brownmiller acknowledges that sex came first, followed by man’s realization that there was power to be had in the exercise of obtaining this sex; his property. Although the idea of a woman being a man’s property is laughable to many, there are still strong signs that this is the case. Consider a father walking his daughter down the aisle to give her away to her new husband, followed by the new wife taking the man’s last name. Has this woman ever had her own identity?

Renee Angelvette, the coordinator of the Abbotsford Police Department Victim Services Unit stated that victims of rape are encouraged to see the offence as an act of power and control as opposed to sex and when asked why she believed that, she stated that she really didn’t know but that was what she was trained to do. When I suggested that eliminating sex from the assault

minimized the experience and violation of the victim, she agreed but didn't know how to reconcile this concept. Angelvette referred to training she and her colleagues received from local women's organizations such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW).

In speaking with Caity Goerke, a volunteer at the Vancouver based WAVAW, she explains that rape is inherently not a sex act because "sex" requires consent. Therefore, because rape lacks consent, it can't be sex. Goerke emphasised that this is an important way of viewing the issue because, when we view rape as a sexual act we start to blur the lines between rape and sex and we can accuse women of things like being "too sexually enticing" if they have been assaulted. This also suggests that men can't control their sexual desires and that if they are sexually turned on by a woman they are likely to act on it. In contrast, when we view rape as a power-based crime we understand that it has nothing to do with a man being sexually attracted to a woman and everything to do with male assertion of power and dominance. When women who have been assaulted get caught up in viewing their rape as a sex act, they can start to compare their rape to consensual sex in really harmful ways. In addition, it's important to support women in using power-based language around rape, as opposed to language that implies sex because it can affect their experiences with the legal system in a very real way. The intent sounds honourable in that it encourages women to view their assault in a less personal way and to place emphasis on the man's misguided need to dominate women. However, this is not a reality based approach. The woman does feel violated personally and likely is not concerned with the plight of her entire gender.

Next we will consider how rape is, in fact, sex. An internet blog response by Gord McCord (Rape is Not Sex, <http://feministing.com/2012/08/28/rape-is-not-sex/>) addresses the absurdity of rape not being sex by listing the following comparisons: vehicular homicide is not driving, assault is not fighting, robbery is not theft, peanuts are not nuts, showers are not rain and flurries are not snow.

The defining feature of rape is sex. Men obtain this sex through by powering and controlling a woman. This is a political discussion surrounding semantics and language where we try to rationalize behaviour that for the most part is actually incomprehensible. In order to fill our need to understand and label behaviours, we have reduced this very complex behaviour to identifiable points of “power and control”. For not every man who has a need to exert power and control over women resort to rape.

Stephen Law is a Philosopher and the editor of the Royal Institute of Philosophy journal THINK. He maintains an Internet blog on various topics, including rape. Highlights of the blog topic “Is rape a sex act?” include the point that some women become pregnant as a result of being raped and it is possible to become pregnant without having sex, therefore rape is sex. Likewise, a virgin cannot become pregnant, despite religious belief systems, and therefore a woman who has been raped and becomes pregnant is no longer a virgin. Of course the next logical statement, that a woman who has been raped and does not become pregnant, is still not a virgin. Shifting the focus from sex to a power based offence does little to remove the very sexual nature of the offence. Men rape as opposed to using other forms of physical assault because of the sex.

By removing “sex” from rape we minimize the individual’s decision to violate a woman (or female child) sexually. There is a decision process undertaken by the offender. This process can either be rapidly opportunistic or meticulously planned, but the perpetrator chooses to express their sense of entitlement, sense of ownership or lack of respect of the victim as an equal human being in a manner that he knows will torment the very core of the victim.

Power, control and male dominance is valued cross-culturally. If rape is used as one means to exert this power [and the threat of rape is equally effective] why is rape generally considered a most despicable offence? Rapists do not generally publically revel in the power and control they have gained over a woman by raping her. There may certainly be some locker room pats on the back about a conquest but this does not equate with the societal power and control men seek to obtain. Despite the “rape culture” promoted in various forms of media, rape is viewed as a lowly offence; the rapist is despised.

Rape is an act perpetrated by weak men. They must plan it; stalk areas where women might be found alone and use an element of surprise; they prey on the emotional vulnerability of girlfriends/friends/family to not aggressively fight back and attack in a manner that they hope to not “get caught”. For the most part, I believe these attackers know it is a vile crime.

By viewing rape as a violent means for men to exert power and control over women then the focus remains on societies to address the systems that perpetuate inequality. This is an important goal but negates the man’s individual responsibility and minimizes the trauma inflicted

on the female victim. How much power and control does a man obtain when he rapes a young girl, an infirmed or elderly woman?

The feminist position that rape is not sex is a movement with its roots in North America and it does not appear that it has developed tentacles that reach most of the world. Consider how effective rape is as an instrument of war in many parts of the world. Men and women in Africa and the Middle East, for example, believe that once a woman has been raped, she is no longer a virgin and has brought shame to her family and community. Rape is sex.

The average person is likely not familiar with the feminist position regarding rape being an act of power and control as opposed to sex. The semantics and politics of the rape language is beyond the experience of the victim who simply feels violated on many levels, included and perhaps most importantly, sexually. It is the very sexual nature of rape that makes it such a powerful weapon.

In reviewing various writings on the evolution of patriarchal societies and the current manifestation of how women have and continue to be oppressed on every level, it appears that there is little discussion regarding the psychological effects of forced sex on women. The feminist position on rape is that it is not sex because sex requires consent. Without consent a man having sexual intercourse with a woman is an assault on her akin to any other act of violent physical domination. The sexual intercourse is simply the weapon used. This is a legal argument and leaves little room for the emotional damage to a woman who feels sexually violated, not just physically violated.

It has been documented that women often suffer intense damaging psychological effects as a result of being raped; fear, depression, insomnia, eating disorders, as well as symptoms of

post traumatic stress, to name a few. And there is a sense of violation that extends beyond the mere “physical assault” suffered by someone who, for example, is robbed or beaten. The violation is of the intimacy that women have attached to sex. Men know that women view sex differently than they do and that the most effective way to crush them is to rape them. There is something about the “act” of sex that provides the offender with the opportunity to degrade and humiliate the victim. Rape is something much larger and more complicated than dominating or controlling a woman.

Patriarchal societies envelop much more than just viewing women as property and sexual objects. If women change their minds about the value they place on sex then “forced” sex could hold less power and women would be less affected psychologically by the assault.

Finally, let us consider what role women play in maintaining the oppressive environment that men have created to dominate virtually every aspect of their lives, particularly sexually. Differences between men and women include the fact that women bear children and generally, men are a little taller and heavier than women. Anything else appears to be still subject to debate. Yet based on these minimum facts men have created cultures and societies that afford them, collectively and individually, varying degrees of power and domination in virtually all aspects of a woman’s life; economically, politically, and physically.

In North America, a primary method used to educate women on their gender role expectations is the wide and varied forms of media. Current media trends would have one believe that men are regularly having sex with many women; women who are beautiful, thin,

sexy, passive and who like aggressive and powerful men. The media, corporately controlled by men, propagates the unrealistic objectification and sexuality of women and feeds what has been referred to “rape culture”. Rape culture can be considered to be a “culture where sexualized violence towards women is regarded as a continuum in a society that regards women’s bodies as sexually available by default.” It is also “closely related to slut-shaming and victim blaming, where rape victims are considered at fault for being raped, and it is argued that this connection is due to the presence of a culture that shames all females sexually...” “One of the ways that it is said to do this is by reducing the female body to a commodity.” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape\\_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_culture)) Diana Francis (2004) takes the position that women contribute to this trend, “Since women are those who also spend the most time with children and are their chief educators, it is clear that they participate in the perpetuation of this cultural viewpoint (male domination and women’s passivity).” (p.3)

Culturally, we have a distorted view of reality as it relates to body image, sex, “success”, and interpersonal relationships, among other things. If you compare the “real people” shown in news broadcasts or shows depicting “everyday” people or even those at your local Wal-Mart store, to the beautiful and successful people in the entertainment industry, it is clear that reality and fantasy are very far apart. The entertainment industry has selected a fraction of the

population as representative and has defined this beauty, sexuality, power and success (for men) as the preference.

While woman's attractiveness and sexuality may garner the attention of a desirable mate, it also attracts the attention of those deemed "undesirable". Our society entices and rewards women to appear sexually attractive but those unlucky enough to be raped are condemned as "deserving it". Rape is a catch-22 for the average young adult woman. She must look attractive to achieve "status", yet she will be condemned for looking attractive if she is raped.

Julia T. Wood (1994) succinctly highlights the above points in her analysis of Gendered Media, in that "All forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions." (p.31). Wood goes on to identify the current conflict that both men and women face in this regard,

"A...theme in mediated representations of relationships between women and men is representation of women as subject to men's sexual desires. The irony of this representation is that the very qualities women are encouraged to develop (beauty, sexiness, passivity, and powerlessness) in order to meet cultural ideals of femininity contribute to their victimization. Also, the qualities that men are urged to exemplify (aggressiveness, dominance, sexuality, and strength) are identical to those linked to abuse of women." (p. 36)

Women regularly buy into their sexual objectification and in doing so, exploit themselves. We see this in the steps women take to modify their bodies to fit the perfect and beautiful mold; diet fads to become or stay thin, dying the gray out of their hair, plastic surgery to remove natural aging lines or to even to reshape features deemed less desirable (Wood). If women are not willing to give up their attachment to the image they feed in the media (sex object, beauty, thin and passive) then the occasional forced sex may be a small price to pay.

And women sometimes walk a fine line when they play with men and tease them despite knowing that men can be single minded regarding casual sex. Women know they have power over men with their sexuality and can easily exploit this, and sometimes do. And conversely men know that they can often get sex without it being considered rape if they simply add an element of "romance".

Studies indicate that many, if not most, rapes go unreported to the authorities. Why don't women report rape? Women are looked upon with a significant amount of suspicion and doubt when they report rape, even by other women. Is it because women are confused about their role in the sex?

Many women subscribe to a form of romance where sex is something that just happens during some magical moment. This vision is seldom translated into reality and women often end up feeling that the sexual encounter lacked something, even if was not a forced or aggressive act. It seems that women have elevated sex to an unrealistic sacredness that must be surrounded by an intimate connection with their partner to feel "complete". Sex is laden with many layers of feeling and meaning; designed to be both practical and pleasant it is interwoven with identity and

intimacy. Along with the obvious physical assault, the depth of the violation suggests that something more “intrinsic” is violated. If women separated intimacy from sex, would rape be less powerful?

I propose that women do a disservice to themselves by placing an unrealistic emphasis on sex to be connected to intimacy and self worth. Generally speaking, men seek sex and women seek relationships. Women set themselves up by continuing to attach such value on the sex act when men continually demonstrate that for them, sex is utilitarian. What are some alternatives for a woman who does not want to be or feel oppressed sexually? How can women take control of their sexual experiences?

In some cases, women have turned the tables in this power game and treat sex as a commodity; commercializing sex and in some cases even “romance”, “intimacy” and relationships”.

In a revealing internet blog titled College Student by Day, Escort by Night, Alexis writes freely about her decision to work and her mostly positive experience as an escort. Alexis was curious about sex as a teenager but was also intrigued with the psychology of sex. “Brushing off” the sex trafficking shown in films as being “out of proportion”, Alexis chose to work part-time for what she considered to be a professional escort agency. Alexis made the “decision” to separate her “work” from the rest of her life for social reasons. She understands that her approach to sex would be viewed as morally bankrupt but she views it as more of a corporate decision; an

experiment even. She describes the best things about her work as being the “instant gratification...the pay, which is given in cash; it includes the compliments, which are lavishly given...; it includes the sex, which is conducted without the awkward conversation or attachment or emotional baggage.”

Touching Base is an organization in New South Wales, Australia that has partnered sex workers with disabled individuals who, lacking other means, wish to fill their desire for sex and sexual relationships. The sex workers, who work legally in this country, provide a variety of “non-discriminating” services to people with disabilities which include sex.

Not all women can or need to view sex as a commodity in order to gain control of their emotional experience of it. Recognizing that women place intrinsic value on their sexuality and sexual experience will keep societies focus on the fact that rape is not just an attempt by men to exert power and control over her, but that when a man rapes a woman, he inflicts a wound that cuts to her core and damages society. Rape is a symptom of deep and entrenched attitudes and values held by men that the essence of women is not valued, and perhaps even dangerous. If men embraced women’s sexuality they might experience vulnerability, a weakness and a crack in their “masculinity”. The challenge continues to be one of equality, breaking the established “roles” of the genders; teaching men that it is okay to feel vulnerable and women that it is okay to strong.

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