

Sexual Assault: Whose Fault is it Anyway in a Rape Culture?

By Grace Pappas

ABSTRACT. Sexual assault has recently gained attention as a prevalent issue in American culture, particularly on college campuses. While in some places much is being done to raise awareness and end this form of gendered violence, too often fingers are pointed at possible causes rather than intertwined as hands held together in the fight against this injustice. Through an examination of empirical research, it is clear that the issue of sexual assault stems from and is perpetuated by a rape culture, a culture in which we are all a part. This paper argues that if we are to fight sexual assault, we must take a broad perspective of the issue and a critical view of our own actions in order to see the problem not as a women's problem, a men's problem, or even a Greek System problem, but rather a cultural problem, and then take the steps necessary to change this culture.

Introduction

Rape and sexual assault have recently become hot topics in America, particularly on college campuses. With studies revealing that one out of every five women has been sexually assaulted or raped (one in four on a college campus), few deny the prevalence of this issue (Rabin, 2011; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2006). What many people fail to realize, however, are the root causes of these issues and how they are perpetuated by rape-culture. Sexual assault has been looked at as a women's problem, a men's problem, and even more recently, a Greek System problem. Both the victims and perpetrators have been told the problem is theirs alone to deal with, a tactic that relieves the population at large from their share of the responsibility. Though gender and

sexuality based violence affects many different populations, I focus on current issues regarding the sexual assault of women in order to provide a broad perspective of the trends and realities of sexual assault, rather than dissect one single element of awareness or intervention in depth. Though honing in on the complexities of one aspect of sexual assault provides detailed explanations and opportunities for important theoretical applications, I propose that we cannot forget to step back from time to time and examine the bigger picture. I suggest that it is not only one piece that is tainting the puzzle, but that the puzzle itself isn't always a beautiful picture, though it is a picture that is able to be changed. If we are to raise awareness and encourage others to join the fight against sexual assault, we must first help others become aware of the part we all play in a culture that allows it to exist. From a socio-cultural perspective, I will first analyze the ways that society has blamed sexual assault on different groups and then propose the idea that sexual assault is better viewed as a product of a patriarchal society that condones hegemonic masculinity in a rape-culture that we fail to challenge.

A Women's Problem

The vast majority of sexual assault victims are female (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2006). This reality, however, has not prevented women from being blamed as the cause of the sexual assault. One of the most harmful rape-myths engrained into our culture is that women deserve to be sexually victimized if they are wearing revealing clothing or have consumed alcohol (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013). After reporting a sexual assault, women are often asked what they were wearing, something the Washington Post equates to "talking about parking after a series of car break-ins instead of...finding the bad guy (Dvorak, 2014)." Women's clothing choices have been even been substituted as a form of consent. For example, the tightness of one woman's jeans was used as

evidence that the victim was asking for sex, and therefore sexual assault did not occur, though a verbal “yes” was never given (Stanley, 1999).

Hayes, Lorenz, and Bell (2013) attribute this pattern of victim blaming to the deeply rooted cultural notion that victimhood in general is a female issue. In a patriarchal society that views women as weaker than men, it becomes both expected and accepted that women are to be the victims of crimes. Much of sexual assault education focuses on what women can do to avoid being sexually assaulted, and though this is helpful advice, it addresses the effect of the problem, rather than the problem itself. This line of thinking is also reflected in the common discussion of “women being sexually assaulted.” Though true that women are often the victims, it is equally true, and perhaps more efficient, to discuss the issue as “men are sexually assaulting” (Earp et. al, 2013).

A Men’s Problem

Given that 99% of people who rape are men, it follows to label this as a men’s issue once the blame is shifted from the victims to those who actually commit these crimes (Black et al, 2011). Sexual assaults don’t happen to women out of nowhere; somebody is committing this crime, and in nearly all cases, this somebody is male. A recent study of college-aged men reported that one out of three men admitted they would force a woman to have sex with them if they knew they wouldn’t get caught (Kingkade, 2015). This statistic is nothing short of startling, as it so clearly demonstrates that a third of males would view their desire for sex as more important than a woman’s desire. Not only so, but it also shows that the issue of sexual assault stems from an issue more deeply rooted than the culturally engrained stereotype of males wanting sex more than females. In this case, the problem lies with the male desire having a stronger value than the female desire. Sex in this case is not a shared act in which two people actively participate; it’s merely a way for a male to find satisfaction,

regardless of the cost to a woman. If we are to find a solution in lowering the numbers of sexual assault cases, it would appear that the male population is a logical place to start. Be that as it may, this isn't the whole story.

A Greek System Problem

Recently, pointing the finger at the Greek System has been one effort to get closer to a root cause of the issue by suggesting that perhaps not all men are to blame, maybe just certain groups of men. Though the number of sexual assaults that have occurred in the Greek system is tragic, blaming the system as a whole still removes the weight of the blame from the shoulders of the perpetrators. Sororities have taken it upon themselves to propose ideas such as moving the locations of social gatherings to their own houses in order to ensure the safety of the drinks being served, and to allow women to feel they have more power to ask men to leave when they have had too much to drink or are acting inappropriately (Schwarz, 2015). While this appears like a decent idea on the surface, it again shifts the focus onto something other than the perpetrators. The reality is, "no" means "no," no matter whose house you're in. Even if the typical "frat party" creates an environment where getting away with sexual assault is easy and perhaps even encouraged, this in no way excuses the act. Regardless of the environment, women should be empowered to say no, and men should respect women enough to listen.

A Cultural Problem...Our Problem

Labeling sexual assault as solely a men's issue and asking men to deal with it appears to be an adequate response, one even recently adopted by Cal Poly (Wilson, 2015). However, taking a step back and examining our culture as a whole provides a different perspective. Yes, men are the perpetrators, but who tells men how to be men? Aggression and dominance are engrained in our cultural expectations of how men should behave (Dean,

2011, & Barber, 2011). At the core of the male sexual script is the idea that to prove one's masculinity, one must "get a girl" and those who tell tales of their sexual domination are highly praised (Pascoe, 2011, p. 180). Though hidden curriculum in schools is often cited as a source of the message that masculinity and sexual dominance are one in the same (Klein, Markowitz, Puchner, & Anderson, 2011), one walk down the video game aisle at Wal-Mart and it becomes hard to deny that men are being fed the idea that violence is an acceptable form of behavior (Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012). Couple this hegemonic masculinity with the homophobic fear that if a male fails to reach this masculine ideal his sexuality will also come into question (Dean, 2011), and it becomes clear that our culture raises men in such a way that having a sexual encounter with a female appears to be the ideal way to assert the male dominance patriarchal society so highly values.

Asserting this dominance is one thing, but it becomes even more dangerous when men with this attitude are placed in a rape-culture that is callous towards sexual assault and has blurred the lines of what is or isn't rape. The same study that found that one in three men would have non-consensual sex with a woman if they wouldn't get caught also found that many of these men claimed they would never rape (Kinkade, 2015). This begs an important question: what is allowing these men to believe that non-consensual sex is not rape? Not only are men raised to see sexual dominance as a part of their masculinity and are encouraged to value the achievement of this masculine ideal over respecting women (Barber, 2011), our rape-culture furthermore allows men to avoid viewing these actions as criminal.

In a rape-culture, sexual assault becomes mitigated as rape themes emerge and go unquestioned in pop-culture, such as in the songs "Blurred Lines" and "She Ain't Even Know It" (Vagianos, 2015). Though the beat is catchy, the reality is that the lines aren't blurred; "yes" means "yes," and if a woman "ain't even know" you are having sex with her, chances are she's not able to give consent. Our

culture knows that rape is bad, but tends only to recognize it by its name and not by what it entails, especially when it's hidden amongst brassy beats and bass drums. Our culture recognizes "rape" as a crime, but accepts "male coercion of females into having sex" as a natural part of masculinity. This incongruity must be recognized, and it must be changed.

Conclusion

If we are to end sexual assault, we must first recognize how our culture promotes hegemonic masculinity and allows for sexual assault to cease being viewed as a crime and violation of human dignity. Furthermore, we must admit our own participation in this rape-culture rather than search for others to blame. Blaming the victims of this crime exonerates the perpetrators. Blaming the perpetrators for their adherence to a cultural norm, or even pointing fingers at a sub-culture with a stronger adherence to this cultural norm, still fails to acknowledge that the norm exists first in our culture. We do, however, have the power to change our culture and to redefine what it means to be man in our society. In the words of President Obama, "It is on all of us to reject the quiet tolerance of sexual assault and to refuse to accept what's unacceptable" (Obama cited in Somander, 2014).

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