

# Root Causes of Sexual Assault

Many people have a hard time thinking about sexual assault, and it can be particularly difficult to imagine why someone would do something so horrific to another human being. The theories about why sexual offenders commit sexual violence or assault are numerous and varied. They range to both ends of the “nature vs. nurture” debate, and include biological factors such as evolution, physiology, substance abuse, and psychopathology, as well as environmental factors such as attitudes, sex roles, sex and power motives, social learning, and dynamics within a relationship. Some people suggest that there may be characteristics or behaviors of a victim that make them more vulnerable to sexual assault. The purpose of this paper is to present the various theories of the causes of sexual assault suggested by current research.

## I. Offender-related theories

These theories suggest that there are factors at the individual level that contribute to the likelihood of a person committing sexually violent acts. The variables that have been explored in the research range from biological factors to personality characteristics to attitudes and beliefs.

### A. *Evolution*

One of the most controversial theories to explain sexual assault is that it is the natural byproduct of human evolution. This theory suggests that rape is best understood as a means of enhancing male reproductive success, a mating strategy used by some men as a viable alternative to the usual pattern of courtship.<sup>1</sup> The differences between men and women in current human mating patterns may be the result of strategies that created reproductive success among our human ancestors. It is argued that our male ancestors benefited from mating with as many fertile females as possible to increase their chance of impregnating one of them. Females, on the other hand, were better served by pair bonding, as they assumed the risks of pregnancy and the responsibility of nurturing young children.

Supporters of this perspective point to studies which find that young adult males in our society are more interested in partner variety, less interested in committed long-term relationships, and more willing to engage in impersonal sex than are young adult females. Extreme sexual jealousy is explained as an attempt by males to assure the paternity of their offspring.<sup>2</sup>

This theory is hotly debated, and not widely accepted by most researchers in the field. Evolutionary theories do not address the large number of assaults lacking reproductive consequences because they involve oral or anal penetration or victims who are prepubescent or male. Even those who favor evolutionary explanations for modern behavior acknowledge that evolution alone cannot account for sexual assault or intimate partner violence.<sup>3</sup>

### ***B. Physiology and Neurophysiology***

A slightly different biological approach to the issue is taken by those who suggest that the cause of sexual assault may be found in hormones and other chemicals in the body, as well as head traumas or brain abnormalities. Researchers in this area have found a correlation between testosterone levels in humans and aggression, but it is not clear whether testosterone levels lead to aggressive behavior or rise as a result of aggressive behavior.<sup>4</sup> There is also some evidence of an interaction with serotonin, a well-studied neurotransmitter, and aggression, impulsivity, and suicidal behavior. Trauma and violence have been proven to have effects on hormones, neurotransmitters, and brain function. Studies examining brain injuries and abnormalities suggest trauma and violence can lead to an increase in battering behavior, as well as other violent or impulsive acts.<sup>5</sup>

Most researchers believe it is the interaction between biological, developmental, and environmental factors that is important. Biological facts may set the stage for learning, providing limits and possibilities rather than determining outcomes. Developmental and environmental factors likely play the larger role.<sup>6</sup>

### ***C. Alcohol***

Nearly every category of aggressive acts is more common in people who have been drinking.<sup>7</sup> Considerable evidence links alcohol and physical aggression. Alcohol use is involved in up to 75% of acquaintance rapes.<sup>8</sup> Research has shown that alcohol affects men's perception of women's sexual intent. Alcohol increases the likelihood that friendliness will be misperceived as sexual intent and that a man will feel comfortable forcing sex after misreading a woman's signals.<sup>9</sup>

Alcohol use by both victims and perpetrators is often used to explain or even excuse sexual assault. Study subjects' expectations about the effect of alcohol on them has been proven to lead to greater levels of aggression, even when they were not actually drinking alcoholic beverages.<sup>10</sup> Fifty-five percent of

sexual assault victims in a 1994 study indicated they were at least somewhat drunk at the time of the assault. These people reported engaging in higher levels of consensual sexual activity with the aggressor immediately prior to the assault and reported lower levels of resistance than those who were not at all drunk.<sup>11</sup> In short, perpetrators are more aggressive and victims less effective at setting boundaries and defending themselves when drinking alcohol.

The relationship between alcohol and violence is complex and not completely understood. While it is very commonly involved in sexual assaults, many assaults occur in the absence of alcohol, and many people drink without engaging in violent behavior. Clearly, the use or abuse of alcohol does not entirely account for the incidence of sexual assault in our society.

#### ***D. Psychopathology and Personality Traits***

Men who have been convicted of rape have been diagnosed with a wide variety of psychiatric and personality disorders, most often antisocial personality disorder. Sexually aggressive men are said to differ from other men in antisocial tendencies<sup>12</sup>, nonconformity,<sup>13</sup> impulsivity,<sup>14</sup> and hypermasculinity.<sup>15</sup> Yet, personality testing of convicted rapists has found no significant differences between sexual offenders and those incarcerated for nonsexual offences. When research examines the personality characteristics of admitted sexually aggressive men who have not been arrested for sexual assault, the differences between these men and the general population are more subtle.

Researchers consistently find that a startling number of college-age males report being involved in a wide spectrum of sexually coercive behaviors. The degree of involvement in sexually coercive behavior appears to be related to personality measures of irresponsibility, a lack of social conscience, and a value orientation legitimizing aggression, particularly against women. “These characterological features were necessary to potentiate the general cultural context of coercive sexuality into personally coercive sexual behavior.”<sup>16</sup>

Malamuth identifies a set of characteristics that he labels hostile masculinity. Hostile masculinity is defined as “hostility toward women, dominance in sexual relations, and attitudes accepting of violence against women,” and is a significant characteristic of men who commit acts of sexual and/or non-sexual aggression against women. He found, for example, that sexually aggressive men were domineering in conversations with females but not with other males.<sup>17</sup> David Lisak and Carol Ivan found that sexually coercive and aggressive men have poor empathy skills, score lower on femininity scales and make more errors in identifying affects on male faces.<sup>18</sup>

Another prominent researcher, Steven Thompson interviewed hundreds of sexual perpetrators and developed a profile of a typical serial date rapist. His research indicates that these men are typically thought of as “nice guys,” who are macho, athletic, and outwardly confident. They tend to be attractive and popular with both men and women, despite the fact that they are also somewhat egocentric, self-serving, unable to handle rejection or criticism, socially immature, and see women as objects.

Most investigators have concluded that there is a great deal of heterogeneity among rapists and that sexual aggression is determined by many factors.<sup>19</sup> Often, sexual offenders demonstrate attitudes and behaviors toward one end of our society’s accepted continuum of masculinity, while not meeting the necessary criteria to be diagnosed as mentally ill. Hence, many researchers suspect that the roots of sexual aggression lay in more general characteristics of our culture, rather than the pathology of individuals.

### ***E. Attitudes and Gender Schemas***

Men are, in general, more likely to be accepting of men abusing women than women. Those men who are most culturally traditional men, i.e., men who believe that men should be heads of households, make decisions, etc., are the most accepting of this abuse. Sexually aggressive men are more likely to believe myths about rape and that use of interpersonal violence is an effective strategy for resolving conflict than are non-aggressive men. These sorts of beliefs may serve as rationalizations for sexual offenders, allowing them to imagine that their victim either desired or deserved to experience forced sexual acts.<sup>20</sup> Once men have developed attitudes that support violence against women, they are likely to misinterpret ambiguous evidence as confirming their beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

There is evidence that rape-supportive attitudes and misconceptions are common on college campuses. In a 1989 study, 59% of men who were shown a date rape scenario indicated some likelihood of doing something similar to the depicted rape. Of men shown a stranger rape scenario, over one third expressed some likelihood of raping. Two thirds of college men shown a date rape scenario felt the victim was responsible for the assault. (Only 18% of the men exposed to a stranger rape scenario assigned the victim this level of responsibility.) Four out of ten college men agreed with the statement, “Many times a woman will pretend she doesn’t want to have intercourse because she doesn’t want to seem loose, but she’s really hoping the man will force her.” One out of five agreed that “Being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women.” 17% indicated that “Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force.” The same number agreed with the statement, “A woman who goes to the home

or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex.” Over a third agreed that “If a girl engages in necking or petting and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her.” Finally, 11% of college men expressed some agreement with the statement, “If a woman gets drunk at a party and has intercourse with a man she’s just met there, she should be considered ‘fair game’ to other males at the party who want to have sex with her too, whether she wants to or not.”<sup>22</sup> While it is generally only a minority of men who hold many of these beliefs, they result in one quarter of women being sexually assaulted during their lifetime. A small number of men have an enormous impact on a large number of victims.

### ***F. Sex and Power Motives***

“Rape is not a sexual act, it is an act of power, using sex as a weapon.” This is the central tenet of the feminist movement’s analysis of sexual assault. Research has confirmed that motives of power and anger are more prominent in rapists’ rationalizations for sexual aggression than sexual desires are. And sexually aggressive men openly admit that their sexual fantasies are aggressive and sadistic.<sup>23</sup>

Steven Thompson’s recent work on serial date rapists describes a date rapist who plans out a “conquest,” but does not believe it is rape, or that there is anything wrong with it. The sequence of events that typically precedes this type of sexual assault includes steps such as **selecting** a target, **approaching and evaluating** the likelihood of controlling this target, **separating** the target from others, and **attempting to have consensual sex**. If the victim resists, the rapist will use **intimidation** and **force** to get what he wants. The sexual conquest he describes is an act of domination within a sexual form.<sup>24</sup>

In 1985, Mary Koss, *et al.*, examined the psychological characteristics of three types of undetected sexually aggressive men who had assaulted female acquaintances. The findings of their study suggested that acquaintance or nonstranger sexual aggression could be explained by social control/social conflict motivations.<sup>25</sup> Yet, even if rape is an attempt at social control, results of a 1999 study show that victims of sexual assault are not only socially powerful women. Unemployed, poor, older, unmarried, white, suburban females are at a disproportionate risk for rape victimization.<sup>26</sup>

In studies of convicted rapists, Nicholas Groth identified three basic patterns of rape – “anger rape,” “power rape,” and “sadistic rape.” In the first type, the offender aims to debase the victim and is usually violent and profane. For him, rape is the ultimate expression of his anger. The power rapist seeks a sense of conquest and control, and often kidnaps his victim and entertains the

fantasy that she is enjoying his abuse. The sadistic rapist eroticizes sex, anger, and power, ritualistically tormenting and abusing this victim whom he often sees as a symbol of something he wants to punish or destroy.<sup>27</sup>

### ***G. Relationship Context***

The stage of relationship between a man and a woman may affect the probability of violence, although the research is still unclear on this point. Some research suggests that men who rape on first or second dates may have similarities to stranger rapists, while men who rape early in what otherwise appears to be a developing relationship may simply misperceive their partners' intent.<sup>28</sup> Once a couple has been sexually intimate, a man may be more likely to believe that he has a right to such intimacy any time he desires it. He may also make the false assumption that a forced sexual encounter with a sexually experienced woman is harmless.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, knowing each other a long time does not seem to protect one from being sexually assaulted by their dating partner. A 1989 study found that completed rapes were more likely in couples who knew each other well than among acquaintances.<sup>30</sup> Variables that appear to increase the risk of sexual violence in the context of a dating relationship include: the man's initiating the date, paying all the expenses, and driving; miscommunication about sex; heavy alcohol or drug use; "parking"; and men's acceptance of traditional sex roles, interpersonal violence, adversarial attitudes about relationships, and belief in rape myths.<sup>31</sup>

## **II. Societal Influences**

Another body of theories suggests that socio-cultural factors contribute to the occurrence of sexual violence. These theories suggest that our society tacitly accepts and encourages sexual violence through expectations and cultural morés, which are transmitted through our history, families, media and institutions.

### ***A. History***

The history of our society's understanding of sexual violence has its roots in English property law. "Rape entered the law ... as a property crime of man against man. Woman, of course, was viewed as the property."<sup>32</sup> At the end of the thirteenth century, Edward I of England enacted the Statutes of Westminster, and in doing so extended the same penalties to men who raped married women as those who raped virgins. Prior to that, married women who were raped were punished along with their rapist. Marital rape was considered, essentially, an

oxymoron -- a contradiction in terms. The law assumed marriage vows implied consent to sexual relations, and men were permitted to use whatever force necessary to gain sexual access to their wives.<sup>33</sup>

In this country, the popular view of sexual assault and women's sexuality has changed significantly since its founding. Colonial women were valued for their sexual purity. Women were expected to refrain from sexual intercourse until they married. "If a woman engaged in sex outside of marriage, even against her will, she was considered a 'fallen' woman and was often blamed for her own victimization."<sup>34</sup> It was not until 1871 that the first state rescinded the right of a husband to beat his wife. As a result of the child protective movement of the 1870s, there was some public concern raised that wife beating should be treated as a crime, but few men were ever punished. The issue of sexual assault would not enter the consciousness of the U.S. public until the feminist movement of the 1960s. Feminists saw rape as a mechanism for maintaining patriarchy, a violent means of inducing fear in women and reinforcing their subordination to men. This perspective has shaped the way our culture defines and understands sexual assault today.<sup>35</sup>

In recent years, many laws have been changed to reflect this new public concern for the rape victim and the devastating effects of the crime. For example, every state has modified its laws to allow for the prosecution of marital rape.<sup>36</sup> In addition, other laws shield a victim's past sexual behavior from being introduced in court by defense attorneys trying to shift the blame for the assault onto the victim's character in a rape trial. Nonetheless, vestiges of the historical perspective on sexual assault remain imbedded in our laws and legal practices.

## ***B. Family***

Social learning theory posits that aggression is not inevitable, but rather is a social behavior that is learned and shaped by its consequences.<sup>37</sup> In other words, aggression continues because it is reinforced. Sexual violence endures in human societies, according to this paradigm, because it is modeled by influential members of our society and has positive results for the perpetrator.<sup>38</sup> Studies suggest that children who are exposed to violence between their parents are more likely to be involved in violent intimate relationships as adults.<sup>39</sup>

The structure of the family seems to have an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of children raised in them. For example, men raised in patriarchal family structures in which traditional gender roles are encouraged are more likely to become violent adults, to rape women acquaintances, and to batter their intimate partners than men raised in more egalitarian homes.<sup>40</sup> David Lisak found that rapists were more likely to come from families where the fathers were

distant parents -- physically abusive, emotionally absent and generally unavailable.<sup>41</sup> Further, the relationships these men had with their mothers were often problematic, although not poor. In most instances the men indicated that the mother was very domineering and controlling. These men may try to dominate and control women in an effort to reject any internalized feminine characteristics, and in an effort to resist any perceived control or domination by women.<sup>42</sup>

Violent sex offenders have been found to be more likely than other adults to have experienced poor parental child-rearing, poor supervision, physical abuse, neglect, and separations from their parents.<sup>43</sup> There is some evidence that boys who have been sexually abused are more likely to be sexual offenders in adulthood.<sup>44</sup> Sexual abuse in the family can lead to sexual confusion and poor personal boundaries, as well as contribute to the development of problematic coping strategies including denial, reinterpretation of experiences, rationalization of violent behavior, and extreme levels of avoidance.<sup>45</sup>

### ***C. Sexual Expectations and Rape Myths***

We develop expectations about how men and women should act in dating and intimate relationships from our culture. The sexual expectations transmitted by our culture typically encourage men to feel superior, entitled, and that they should be always on the lookout for and ready to initiate sex in their relationships with women. At the same time, our sexual expectations teach women to feel responsible for setting sexual limits and the pace of sexual contact in their relationships with men.<sup>46</sup> For example, parents expect their daughters to resist sexual advances and their sons to initiate sexual activity.<sup>47</sup> By the time they are teenagers, boys and girls have accepted these expectations and have incorporated them into their own belief systems.

“Rape myths” were first defined and measured by Martha Burt in 1980.<sup>48</sup> Since then, many researchers have examined the effect of attitudes and false beliefs on the issue of sexual assault. Rape myths typically deny the existence of sexual assault, excuse it, and minimize the seriousness of its effects.<sup>49</sup> Men have been found more accepting of rape myths than women.<sup>50</sup> Acceptance of rape myths is correlated with sexually aggressive behavior.<sup>51</sup>

Burt concluded in her study that acceptance of rape myths is strongly related to adversarial sexual beliefs, tolerance of interpersonal violence, and gender role stereotyping<sup>52</sup>. Kimberly Lonsway suggests that hostility toward women can partially account for the relationship of these constructs to rape myth acceptance. Rape myths may function differently for men and women and there

is value in exploring a more broadly defined construct of misogyny for understanding the acceptance of sexual violence toward women.<sup>53</sup>

When rape myths were first being studied, usually on college campuses, a quarter to a third of students accepted a variety of them.<sup>54</sup> During the last two decades, many colleges instituted programs to raise awareness of sexual assault. Perhaps as a result, very few students admit finding sexual aggression or coercion acceptable. It has been surmised that years of rape education have made it unacceptable to admit to believing rape myths, but there exists evidence of a persistent acceptance of these beliefs, and expectations that sexually aggressive behaviors will occur.<sup>55</sup> One in four teens believe, for example, that it is acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman if he spent money on her.<sup>56</sup>

#### ***D. Cultural Morés***

Studies by anthropologists demonstrate the critical role that sociocultural morés play in defining and promoting violence against women. Cultures differ in the amount of intimate partner violence, as well as the acceptability of this violence. Researchers have identified two general types of rape: transgressive rape and normative rape. Transgressive rape is genital contact against the will of the woman and is in violation of social norms; tolerated or normative rape is unwanted genital contact that is supported by social norms.<sup>57</sup> Nearly all societies (97 percent)<sup>58</sup>, tolerate some type of normative rape and have mechanisms that “legitimate, obfuscate, deny, and thereby perpetuate violence”.<sup>59</sup> In our society, rape within marriage was legal until recent efforts changed the laws to acknowledge that husbands should not force their wives to have sexual relations against their will. Date rape is another example of normative rape, tolerated by much of our society to this day. Studies have found rape in up to 90 percent of non-industrial societies.<sup>60</sup> Pre-literate societies that were characterized by a high degree of interpersonal violence and an ideology of male toughness had higher frequencies of rape. Rape is also very common when societies are significantly inequitable and disorganized, for example, during slavery and war.<sup>61</sup>

#### ***E. Media***

Social critics have long targeted the media when searching for the cause of the problems in our culture. From the early days of the modern women’s movement, feminists contended that pornography encouraged sexual aggression towards women by portraying them as nothing more than sex objects,<sup>62</sup> a view that is supported in the research. Men who are exposed to pornography in laboratory studies are more likely to be aggressive toward women, especially when a woman insults or otherwise “provokes” a male participant.<sup>63</sup> And while

sexual offenders are typically sexually aroused at depictions of rape<sup>64</sup>, even non-explicit sexual scenes have been shown to decrease empathy for rape victims.<sup>65</sup> In other words, it is depictions of violence against women, rather than sexually graphic material, that encourage acceptance of violence and callousness toward women who are its victims.<sup>66</sup>

Our media is filled with images of violence against women. Prime time television and PG-13 movies are filled with scenes of women being threatened, raped, beaten, tortured, and murdered. Numerous studies have demonstrated the alarming effect of children watching these images. Children who watch many hours of violence on television during elementary school tend to exhibit more aggressive behavior as teenagers and are more likely to be arrested for criminal acts as adults.<sup>67</sup> A 1994 review of 188 studies found a strong correlation between exposure to television violence and antisocial and aggressive behavior.<sup>68</sup> Children who are exposed violence on the screen may develop a distorted view of real world violence, become desensitized to the pain and suffering of others, and learn that the world is a mean and dangerous place.<sup>69</sup> Too often, violence is depicted outside of the human context – the pain and suffering of a victim and her community are invisible, and the offenders suffer no consequences for their actions.<sup>70</sup> In other words, television and movies often send the message that violence works.

### ***F. Schools and Other Influences***

School climates contribute to socialization supportive of violent behavior when they reinforce sex role stereotypes and attitudes that condone the use of violence. For example, adults reinforce myths when they suggest a girl who dresses in revealing clothing is “asking for it.” Various researchers suggest that other institutions that contribute to the socialization that supports violence against women include organized religion,<sup>71</sup> the workplace,<sup>72</sup> the U.S. military,<sup>73</sup> and the media.<sup>74</sup>

School-sponsored athletic teams may encourage boys to behave in a violent manner. Students who participate in revenue-producing sports at the collegiate level were found to be significantly more likely to be sexually aggressive.<sup>75</sup> It is not known whether team sports actually encourage aggressive behavior or merely reinforce pre-existing tendencies toward aggression. It is certainly possible that team sports simply attract young men who are already aggressive. Nonetheless, it appears that participation in team sports is correlated with an increased risk of sexual aggression.

“Peer pressure,” often blamed for all sorts of unacceptable behavior in adolescents, may in fact play a role in forming attitudes and behaviors that

support sexual assault. Alan Berkowitz's recent research into social norms reveals that peers are more influential in shaping individual behavior than biology, personality, family, religion, or culture. Yet, contradictory to the traditional notion of "peer pressure," the power of peer influence appears to be founded more on what one imagines his or her peers think or do, rather than on their real beliefs or actions <sup>76</sup>

### ***G. Conclusion***

Generally, research on the causes of sexual assault has focused on two types of theories – those rooted in characteristics of the individual offender, and those that point to characteristics of the culture in which we live. Neither focus nor any one theory totally explains the prevalence of sexually violent behaviors in our society. Recent research in the field of sexual assault suggests an integrated theory may have the best chance of explaining what causes sexual violence in our society.<sup>77</sup>

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