**Rape Culture**

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Rape culture exists when rape, or sexual assault, is a normalized expectation. The definition of rape culture originated in the 1970s, coinciding with the second wave of the feminist movement. Dianne Herman (1984), the first scholar to articulate the definition, posited that rape will continue to be pervasive as long as sexual violence and male dominance are glamorized. In 1993, Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth defined rape culture as one in which rape is a fact of life, like death or taxes. Rape culture does not only pertain to women; men, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals are raped (Ridgway, 2014; Stotzer, 2009). Disabled people are raped at a high rate (80%) as well (Madden, 2014). As a result, rape culture is an intersectional phenomenon that crosses gender, race, ability, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth.

Rape is prevalent around the world. In the United States, the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network reports that a rape occurs every 107 seconds; 68% of those assaults are not reported, and two-thirds of them are committed by someone the victim knows (RAINN, 2014). In the United Kingdom, more than 85,000 women are raped and 400,000 are assaulted each year (Bates, 2014). Men in nine countries in Asia and the South Pacific reported committing single- and multiple-perpetrator rape, with over 50 percent having raped as young teenagers (Jewkes, Fula, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013). In India, after the gang rape of the student on the bus in New Delhi, activists began to shed light on the widespread problem in that country (Udas, 2013). Other countries known for a high incidence of rape include Lesotho, Sweden, South Africa, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, New Zealand, and Belgium (Iaccino, 2014). Thus, rape and the culture that normalizes it is a worldwide problem.

This culture reinforces itself in a number of ways: through hegemonic masculinity, the media, language, politics, and rape myths. Regardless of where one lives, a culture exists in which men are taught to be dominant, sexually aggressive, and powerful (Kivel, 2012). This is the most acceptable way for boys and men to behave, and if they stray from this behavior, they are teased, beaten, or made to conform to the man box; such pressure creates an environment that fosters the idea that rape is part of being a man.

The media, reinforcing the notion of hegemonic masculinity, depict men as aggressive, and rape as a common occurrence. For example, the teen drama, *Reign,* created controversy in late 2014 when it showed a violent rape scene (Davies, 2014); *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* is supposed to educate its audience about rape culture, but instead it often portrays the victims as being at fault (Madden, 2014). Movies such as *Say Anything, Crazy Stupid Love, The Fast and the Furious, Neighbors, American Pie, Hitch, The Notebook*, and even the Disney movie, *Beauty and the Beast* demonstrate that assault is a normal part of any story (Maxwell, 2014). Further, when the media objectify the human body, especially that of black women, in television, movies, and magazines, the message is that bodies are “things” that can be violated (Maxwell, 2014). Beyond fictional drama, media perpetuate rape culture by referring to “rape” as “sex,” or sympathizing with the rapists rather than the victims, as evidenced by a CNN reporter’s coverage of the Steubenville rape case (Madden, 2014).

Popular music and social media reinforce rape culture. Lyrics from the 2013 Robin Thicke song, “Blurred Lines” intone, “I know you want it” (Ridgway, 2014); Rick Ross, in his 2013 song, U.O.E.N.O., rapped, “Put molly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it. I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it.” Twitter feeds in 2014 degraded the victim and promoted the aggressor in both the United Kingdom and United States (Bates, 2014; Ridgway, 2014).

Not only do media play an influential role in fostering rape culture, so does misogynistic language (Madden, 2014; Najumi, 2014). For example, “rape” is used to describe success (“I raped that test,” “We raped that team.”). The normalcy of assault is reflected in language on contemporary t-shirts (“I’ve got a dick and a knife. At least one of them is going inside you tonight,” “You say no? Challenge accepted”).

Rape culture has not escaped politics, either. In Representative Todd Akin’s campaign for Missouri Senate, he claimed that women’s bodies shut down if they are being legitimately raped (Kacmarek & Geffre, 2013). In a Senate debate, Richard Mourdock argued that even in cases of rape, God must have intended it if the woman got pregnant (Kacmarkek & Geffre, 2013). These false statements demonstrate that even in public dialogue, rape culture is perpetuated.

Rape myths continue to dominate the dialogue about sexual assault, and they also tend to place blame on those who have been victimized. According to a research study on the role of communication in perpetuating rape culture, Burnett et al. (2009) provide a number of examples of rape myths. For instance, if a woman says “no,” she really means “yes;” women are strong enough to resist rape; women who get raped are promiscuous; and women tend to falsely report rapes. Further, rape culture is created when victims are challenged about what they were wearing at the time of the incident, what/how much they were drinking, and with whom they chose to spend their time. Victim blaming, then, emphasizes the victim’s supposed role in the rape and places responsibility on her/him.

Rape culture may be found in any number of contexts. Often it is used to describe a college or university campus in the United States in which it is not unusual for rape to occur. In fact, one in four women will be raped in college (RAINN). Rape cultures on college campuses remain intact for the reasons described above. Additionally, college men’s athletics fosters rape culture because of the inherent aggressive nature of sport. The nature of some sports fosters a culture in which male athletes who are lauded as perfect physical specimens, celebrated as heroes, and allowed privileges that other students do not enjoy, expect women to provide for their sexual needs. In fact, the promise of a number of beautiful, willing women can sometimes be a not-so-subtle recruiting strategy.

Likewise, fraternities on campus foster a party atmosphere in which women and sexuality play a significant role. Although the epic movie, “Animal House,” was released in 1978, the sex and party scenes depicted might only be a slight exaggeration from today’s reality. One might find several fraternity parties during the course of a weekend (and some parties in between) in which alcohol is readily available, and first-year female students are targeted for sexual exploits because their alcohol tolerance levels are low, and they are naïve.

In fact, fraternity men and sorority women are more likely than independent men and women to use alcohol before having sex, which may contribute further to the perpetuation of rape culture on college campuses. With the ease of obtaining alcohol illegally in the United States, and the idea that one cannot have fun without it, alcohol contributes a great deal to rape culture. The combination of alcohol, college fraternity/sorority students, and sex creates a culture in which rape is normalized – it is part of everyday life. As a result, reporting rates of rape on college campuses is low, which protects the perpetrators and creates a sense of tolerance, thereby reinforcing the rape culture.

In countries outside the United States, rape culture may come about due to reasons described above, as well as poverty, alcohol abuse, and childhood abuse (Jewkes, Fula, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013). Many individuals in these countries do not report rape due to fear of retaliation or because it is a taboo topic (Iaccino, 2014; Udas, 2013). Most of the perpetrators are not punished (Jewkes, Fula, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013). In particular, rape in wartime occurs as a way to intimidate and dislocate civilians, especially women and children (United Nations Human Rights, nd).

In the post 2010 era, rape culture has become more widely discussed and debated in the U.S. and other countries such as India. The Obama Administration, in 2011, began to use Title IX as a way to compel colleges to take seriously sexual assault on campus, threatening to withhold funding to those campuses that failed to address the problem. In 2014, 55 campuses were placed under federal scrutiny for not effectively handling sexual assault and rape. In India, there is now wider discussion of sexual assault and rape culture, especially among young men and women (Udas, 2013).

President Obama also created a task force to address sexual assault on college campuses. This task force, The White House Council on Women and Girls, prepared a report, “Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action,” that was released in early 2014. The report noted, “sexual assault is pervasive because our *culture* still allows it to persist” (author’s emphasis, p. 5); it called for society to view rape as a crime and not a private matter, and it promoted bystander training.

Concurrent with the Obama Administration’s actions, *Time Magazine* (May 25, 2014; see also *The* *Nation*, June 23-20, 2014) headlined a story about “the crisis in higher education.” The story centered on the number of rapes at the University of Montana, but argued that Montana was not the exception, but the rule, suggesting that rape culture was the rule on many college campuses. The story created an uproar in which some experts (Christina Hoff Sommers and Caroline Kitchens) and the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) either denied the existence of rape culture or argued that sexual assaults on campus should not be attributed to it. Other experts (Zerlina Maxwell and Eliana Dockterman) refuted these claims, providing evidence from scholarly research to support the existence of rape culture. It remains to be seen whether or not the increased attention to the subject will result in any change of rape culture, especially on the college campus.

Rape culture is complex and vast; therefore, solutions are complicated. Education must begin early on male role socialization and media literacy; attempts must be made to alleviate root causes of rape, including poverty and childhood sexual abuse (Jewkes, Fula, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013). Individuals can work to interrupt rape culture by pointing out that rape jokes are not funny, emailing complaints to artists and advertisers, refusing to buy certain products, and talking about/naming rape culture with family and friends (Najumi, 2013). Burnett et al. (2009) suggest that such “talking about” be about rape before it occurs, during the rape itself, and after the rape. In fact, they conclude that communication is muted about rape in all three areas. Before rape occurs, the definition of rape is ambiguous and peer pressure about drinking alcohol and having sex is confusing. During the attack, how to go about articulating consent or non-consent is not clear. After the rape occurs, the victim may doubt what occurred, or be encouraged not to report. Although there is no simple solution to rape culture, there may be small efforts to chip away at it.

The encouraging news is that people the world over are talking about and defining “rape culture.” Despite the individuals who have benefitted from the culture and who will argue that it does not exist, there is more possibility today than ever before to make change. If any culture is to change, talking about it may be the first step.