

# Rape and Sexual Coercion

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## Abstract

This article summarizes the biological and cultural approaches to the understanding of rape in human societies and evaluates these approaches by reference to studies demonstrating the incidence and social correlates of sexual coercion in the United States and cross-culturally. The biological, evolutionary view is compared and contrasted with the cultural approach proposed by anthropologists. The wide variation in the response to rape cross-culturally and intraculturally in the United States suggests that whatever the biological basis of male sexual aggression might be, family background and cultural context make a difference.

## The Biological View

The biological explanation for rape and sexual coercion is grounded in the argument that sexual aggression is an evolved adaptation in human males. The argument builds on Charles Darwin's theory of natural and sexual selection. Natural selection is the doctrine that in the struggle for existence evolutionary progress is achieved by the inheritance of advantageous characteristics that prosper at the expense of less advantageous ones. Sexual selection is a specific case of natural selection applied to the evolution of sex differences. Darwin claimed that the greater size and strength of human males was due "in chief part to inheritance from his half-human male ancestors." According to Darwin, such characteristics "would have been preserved or even augmented during the long ages of man's savagery, by the success of the strongest and boldest men, both in the general struggle for life, and in their contest for wives." He measured success by the number of children some men left as compared with their "less favored brethren" (Darwin, 1936: pp. 872–873).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Darwinian doctrine of sexual selection was applied to treatises on human sexual behavior produced by the famous sexologists R.F. von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. In his magnum opus, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, first published in German in 1886, Krafft-Ebing argued that "gratification of the sexual instinct [is] the primary motive in man as well as in beast" (quoted by Sanday, 1996: p. 125). In the third volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, published in Philadelphia between 1897 and 1910, Ellis comes very close to making rape the *sine qua non* of sexual arousal. Ellis conceives of human sexual behavior as a game of combat. Playing the role of hunted animal the female conceals her sexual passion by adopting a demeanor of modesty in order that the male may be more ardent and forceful. Ellis claims that as the hunt becomes more sexually charged, "an element of real violence, of undisguised cruelty" is introduced. Accepting the Darwinian theory of natural selection with its emphasis on competition and brute strength, Ellis claimed that a woman who resisted "the assaults of the male" aided natural selection "by putting to the test man's most important quality, force" (quoted by Sanday, 1996: pp. 127–128).

At the end of the twentieth century, the Darwinian approach was again applied to the subject of the 'biological bases of sexual coercion' by Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer in their book *A Natural History of Rape* (2000). Like Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, they make a distinction between sexual desire in human males and females. Citing the work of anthropologist Donald Symons (1979: pp. 264–267), these authors claim that rape is due to certain adaptations making males more easily aroused, with a greater sex drive, a reduced ability to abstain from sexual activity, in need of greater sexual variety, and less discriminating in choice of sexual partner (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000: p. 62). However, while Symons suggests that rape is a by-product of such adaptations, Thornhill and Palmer suggest that rape is itself an adaptation, which they call "the human rape-adaptation" (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000: p. 62). By this they mean that rape has a direct biological basis rather than being a behavioral consequence of other evolved behaviors.

To support their argument, Thornhill and Palmer (2000: p. 62) say it is necessary to identify "mechanisms involved in rape that were designed by selection in the past specifically for reproduction by means of rape." Because such mechanisms exist in the morphology of certain insects, they seem to suggest, they must also exist in humans. To make their case, the authors draw parallels with scorpion flies, which they point out have a physical adaptation for rape. Male scorpion flies have an organ, "a pair of clamp-like structures, one on either side of the penis," that serves to keep unwilling females in a mating position (2000: p. 63). Admitting that there is no "conspicuous morphology that might be a rape adaptation" in human males, Thornhill and Palmer (2000: pp. 64–65) look "to the male psyche for candidates for rape adaptations." They propose (2000: pp. 65–66) a number of 'psychological mechanisms' as 'adaptations' that can be viewed as 'analogous' to the rape adaptations observed in 'male insects.'

In a review of the argument put forward by Thornhill and Palmer, Frans B.M. de Waal, a prominent primatologist, points out that they have not demonstrated that rape in humans is a product of natural selection. According to de Waal, "for natural selection to favor rape, rapists would have to differ genetically from nonrapists and need to sow their seed more successfully, so to speak, causing more pregnancies than nonrapists, or at least more than they would without raping"

(de Waal, 2000: p. 24). "Not a shred of evidence for these two requirements is present" de Waal concludes (2000: p. 24). de Waal also points out that the psychological mechanisms Thornhill and Palmer propose do not demonstrate natural selection but have to do "with judgment of people and situations, a multi-purpose capacity also present in women" (2000: p. 24). de Waal's emphasis on judgment illuminates the fact of variation in the incidence of rape, which turns attention to the role of culture.

Early in the twenty-first century, Cheryl Brown Travis, Professor of Psychology and Chair of Women's Studies at the University of Tennessee, published responses to the Thornhill and Palmer argument authored by prominent anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, ecologists, philosophers, primatologists, psychologists, sociologists, and women's studies scholars. This was the first and most up-to-date volume providing multidisciplinary responses to essentialist biological claims regarding male rape from both a cultural and biological point of view. In her introductory article, Travis (2003: p. 4) points out that if evolutionary theory is to be used to understand gender differences and sexual aggression in particular, "it is necessary to take a considered look at basic principles of evolution and it is necessary to examine assumptions about gender in general." "Evolutionary theory is not sexist," she says. However, it can become so when applications of evolutionary principles to gender relations are characterized by grandiose overgeneralization and a politically charged gender philosophy. Travis (2003: p. 4) argues instead "that there should be a broad understanding of gender and of sexuality as phenomena that are as much social as biological." This is a point with which the other authors in the book agree. Claiming that Thornhill and Palmer's book represents bad science, bad history, and bad politics, one of the authors, Michael Kimmel (2003: p. 222), concludes that the book "tells us less about 'the biological bases of sexual coercion' than the ideological fantasies of those who justify sexual coercion."

### The Cultural Approach

Against a strictly biological explanation of human behavior anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: p. 46) argues that without cultural patterns (i.e., 'organized systems of significant symbols') human behavior would be shapeless and without direction, "a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions." Applied to sexual behavior, the cultural approach, accepted by many anthropologists and sociologists, suggests that sexual behavior is part of a broader cultural system that includes notions of masculinity and femininity, ideas about appropriate sexual relations, cues for sexual arousal, and messages about the consequences of sexual expression. As anthropologist Malinowski said long ago, "[s]ex in its widest meaning ... is rather a sociological and cultural force than a mere bodily relation of two individuals" (Malinowski, 1929: p. xxiii).

Peggy Reeves Sanday (1981) puts Malinowski's claim to the test in a study of the sociocultural context of rape cross-culturally. Using a standard sample of band and tribal societies, she reports that 47% of the societies for which there was

adequate information showed a low frequency of rape, compared with 18% that were unambiguously 'rape prone.' Commenting on the pattern of correlations revealed by her study, Sanday (1981: p. 5) concludes that rape by males is part of "a cultural configuration," which includes interpersonal violence among men as well as between men and women and male social dominance. Rape-prone societies are more likely to be characterized by male segregation in separate houses, an ideology of male toughness, emphasis on competition, low respect for women as citizens, and the absence of women in the public domain of economic and political affairs. In the more rape-free societies, there is an ethos of cooperation and consensus in human affairs. The social separation of the sexes is less marked and both sexes are more likely to hold exalted positions in public decision making and to be integrated and equal in the affairs of everyday life. These findings support Malinowski's observation, based on his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, that the expression of sexual behavior is consistent with social forms and cultural meanings.

Anthropologist Carole Vance (1984: pp. 7–9) also cites the diversity in human sexual practices to suggest that biology does not "directly or simply determine the configuration or meaning of sexuality." If this were the case, she argues, one would encounter uniformity cross-culturally rather than the startling diversity that actually exists in which "activities condemned in one society are encouraged in another, and ideas about what is attractive or erotic, or sexually satisfying or even sexually possible vary a great deal." Vance concludes that "the body and its actions [must be] understood according to prevailing codes of meaning." She suggests that an important question for research must be "What is the nature of the relationship between the arbitrariness of social constructions and the immediacy of ... bodily sensations and functions?" For similar points, see articles in Caplan (1987).

In two books, Sanday expands the understanding of the cultural foundation of acquaintance rape in the United States by examining fraternity gang rape on college campuses (1990) and the legal and historical contexts of rape in the United States (1996). Sanday (1996: p. 26) coins the term sexual culture to describe the system of meanings, standards, and expected behaviors by which male and female sexuality is judged and understood. She argues that in the United States, theories like those of Darwin, Krafft-Ebing, and Ellis functioned as cultural templates for popular sexual stereotypes by means of which males and females judged appropriate sexual behavior and acted accordingly. Because these stereotypes condoned sexual aggression by making it 'natural,' such as seen in the idea that 'boys will be boys,' US rape laws applied primarily to the use of force by a stranger. This changed after feminist activism in the 1970s resulted in more stringent legal codes. The same activism initiated studies of the incidence and social correlates of rape on US college campuses showing that acquaintance rape was much more common than stranger rape (Sanday, 1996: pp. 161–207). In her ethnographic study of "fraternity gang rape," Sanday (1990) demonstrates how alcohol is used to "hit on" young women guests in the "hooking-up" sexual culture prominent on college campuses that snares unsuspecting young women.

## Rape Statistics in the United States

US statistics come from numerous studies utilizing national, community, or college samples. In general, these studies define rape as nonconsensual sexual intercourse irrespective of whether the parties know one another. Nonconsent is defined using the modern legal definition of rape. In most states, rape is defined as nonconsensual sex either due to the use of force or taking advantage of a person's inability to consent because of intimidation or because of alcohol or drugs. Although most studies of the past focused on heterosexual rape, most now include same-sex rape as well.

The first study designed to measure the percentage of those claiming they had been raped in a specified sample population was conducted in 1957 by sociologist Eugene Kanin on a college campus. This survey revealed that 55% of the 291 college women interviewed said they had experienced offensive episodes "at some level of erotic intimacy." Twenty-one percent said they were offended "by forceful attempts at intercourse" and 6.2% by "aggressively forceful attempts at sex intercourse in the course of which menacing threats or coercive infliction of physical pain were employed." Of the latter group, 48% told no one and none reported to anyone in authority (Kirkpatrick and Kanin, 1957: pp. 53, 56).

Another well-known path-breaking study was conducted by Diane Russell in 1978 in San Francisco. Russell interviewed 930 women ranging in the age from 18 to 80 years of diverse social classes and racial/ethnic groups. Twenty-four percent of the women interviewed reported at least one completed rape, and 31% reported at least one attempted rape. The majority experienced rape by acquaintances and a much smaller percentage by strangers (Russell, 1984: pp. 34–38).

Two large-scale national studies yielded similar results. In 1985, Mary Koss joined with *Ms.* magazine to survey a national sample of 6159 students on 32 college campuses. This study found that many more women and men were having sex in the 1980s compared to the figures reported by Alfred Kinsey in his landmark studies of male and female sexual behavior published in the 1940s and 1950s. One-quarter of the men interviewed in the Koss-*Ms.* study reported involvement in some form of sexual aggression, ranging from unwanted touching to rape. A high percentage of the males did not name their use of force as rape. Eighty-eight percent said it was definitely not rape. Forty-seven percent said they would do the same thing again (summarized by Sanday, 1996: pp. 191–192; see also Koss, 1988, 1992; Warshaw, 1988).

One in four of the women surveyed by Koss said yes to questions asking about behaviors that in most states would be legally defined as rape or attempted rape (for this definition see above). The power of popular stereotypes for defining acceptable sexual behavior and the adversarial nature of these stereotypes is reflected in the fact that most of the women reporting incidents that would legally qualify as rape did not call it rape. The term 'date rape' evolved from this study because many of the women surveyed said that the behavior often occurred on dates. Although most did not call it rape, Koss reported that "the great majority of rape victims conceptualized their experience in highly negative terms and felt victimized whether or not they realized that legal standards for rape had been met" (Koss, 1992: pp. 122–126).

By the end of the 1990s, a number of scientifically designed research studies revealed similar statistics (for a summary of studies, see Koss, 1993; Sanday, 1996: pp. 184–206). The findings reported in these studies are corroborated by a national study of sex in America conducted in 1992 employing a representative probability sample of 3432 Americans (see Michael et al., 1994). The findings fall within the range of many other studies: "22 percent of women were forced to do something sexually at some time," while "just 2 percent of men were forced." The authors of this study concluded that "as many as one in five women" experience some form of sexual coercion, including rape, in the United States (Michael et al., 1994: pp. 33, 221–222).

During the first decade of the twentieth century, despite the attention given to 'date' and 'acquaintance rape' in the 1990s in the sexual assault policies adopted on many campuses, acquaintance rape statistics did not change. Verbal consent and a partner's ability to withdraw consent continue to be more debated than observed. Alcohol use continued to play a role in the sexual culture of acquaintance rape. Rape statistics reported by various colleges and universities resembled those reported in the late twentieth century. One study, funded by the Department of Justice published in 2007, found that approximately one in five (19%) women surveyed experienced attempted or completed sexual assault during their years in college. Close to the same number (15.9%) reported attempted or completed sexual assault before entering college. Many of the college women said that the incident occurred during their first or second year and was tied to alcohol. A large number also reported that they were at a party when the incident happened (Krebs et al., 2007).

Some campuses now administer occasional surveys to monitor the local incidence of acquaintance rape. The University of New Hampshire (UNH), which is especially known for its support, prevention, and monitoring policies, is one of the few institutions to both conduct campus surveys at regular intervals and publish the findings. In its 2006 survey, UNH compared data for this year with survey results for 2000 and 1988 showing a slight downward trend. Unwanted sexual contact was reported by 35% of women surveyed in 1988 as compared with 20% of those surveyed in 2000 and 23% in 2006. Unwanted sexual intercourse was reported by 10% of women surveyed in 1988, 6% in 2000, and 5% in 2006. The perpetrator's use of alcohol was mentioned in the large majority of cases both of unwanted sexual contact and sexual intercourse for each of the three reported years: [www.unh.edu/news/docs/2006unwantedsexualexperiences.pdf](http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/2006unwantedsexualexperiences.pdf).

The relationship between alcohol and rape is evident in a study by the Harvard School of Public Health conducted during the years spanning the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This study surveyed female students at 119 schools representing a national cross section of students enrolled at 4-year colleges. During the 3 years of the study (1997, 1999, and 2001), a total of 23 980 female students were questioned. Roughly 1 in 20, or 5% of these students, reported being raped since the beginning of the school year. Seventy-two percent experienced rape while intoxicated. These young women tended to be under 21, white, resided in sorority houses, used illicit drugs, drank heavily in high school, and

attended colleges with high rates of episodic (binge) drinking (Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004: p. 37).

It is now more common to include males in local collegiate surveys. In the 2006 survey conducted by the UNH, mentioned above, 10% of men reported experiencing at least one unwanted sexual contact; 4% unwanted sexual intercourse, and 8% (as compared with 11% of the women respondents) reported that they had sexual intercourse when they were too intoxicated to consent. The 2009 stats for a southeastern college, published internally about the same time but not for distribution, found that 8% of males reported sexual touching against their will, 3% attempted rape, and 2% reported being raped. This tendency to now include males reflects the growing recognition that sexual equity applies to both sexes with respect to issues regarding consent.

### The Social Correlates of Rape in US Studies

A number of studies conducted late in the twentieth century indicate that the adversarial view of male–female sexual interaction described by the early sexologists is frequently held by sexually coercive males. In a study of a large southeastern university, Boeringer (1996: pp. 137–139) reports that 56% of the males he interviewed admitted to obtaining sex by verbal harassment (i.e., “threatening to end a relationship unless the victim consents to sex, falsely professing love, or telling the victim lies to render her more sexually receptive”). One-quarter of the males reported using drugs or alcohol to obtain sex and 9% reported at least one use of force or threatened force to obtain sex. Boeringer concludes that such verbally coercive tactics suggest an “adversarial view of sexuality in which one should use deceit and guile to win favors from a woman” (p. 140).

Sexually aggressive men, from convicted rapists to college males answering questions on social surveys, share a remarkably similar set of attitudes. Most believe that sexual aggression is normal, that sexual relationships involve game playing, that men should dominate women, that women are responsible for rape, and that relations between the sexes are adversarial and manipulative on both sides (Koss and Leonard, 1984: pp. 221, 223). Reanalyzing Koss’ data to pinpoint attitudes held by the self-admitted sexually aggressive men of her study (i.e., those who admitted to forcing a woman to have sex in Koss’ 1985 questionnaire), Sanday (1996: pp. 196–197) found that these men often expressed adversarial-like beliefs. For example, many stated that they believe that a woman’s No means Yes and that women say no to intercourse because they do not want to seem loose but really hope the man will force her. Compared with men who do not admit to forcing a woman, more of these men also think that being roughed up by a man is sexually stimulating to women and that women have an unconscious wish to be raped. Few of the women in Koss’ sample hold such attitudes.

### Prevention

Examples of prevention strategies based on the biological approach are offered by Thornhill and Palmer (2000:

pp. 169–88). Believing that rape occurs “in all the environments in which humans societies [sic] have been known to exist” (p. 171), they are less interested in changing the environment by challenging popular stereotypes than with focusing on the “exact nature of the psychological mechanisms that guide male sexual behavior” (p. 172). They offer a number of suggestions including certain types of educational programs. Citing the view of rape proposed by Camille Paglia, Thornhill and Palmer (2000: p. 183) claim that since men “have evolved sexual preferences for young and healthy women and are attracted to women who signal potential availability by means of dress and behavior,” women should be informed of the risk factors and use the information to lower their risk of rape by paying attention, for example, to dress and appearance. They also suggest more direct social interventions such as separating vulnerable females from males.

The cultural approach argues for a change in rape laws and sexual stereotypes so that nonconsensual sex is treated unambiguously as a crime. Increasingly, this approach defines rape not just in terms of the use of force or drugs, but more broadly as failure to obtain verbal consent. The operative words of the new American sexual ideology are ‘affirmative verbal consent,’ ‘freely given agreement,’ and ‘sexual communication.’ Increasingly, this sexual ideology is supported publicly by male public figures.

A notable example can be found in an address given in 2011 by Vice President Biden addressing an audience of some 600 students at UNH kicking off its annual ‘sexual awareness month’ now observed on many campuses.

Look guys—all you guys in the audience—no matter what a girl does, no matter how she’s dressed, no matter how much she’s had to drink—it’s never, never, never, never, never okay to touch her without her consent. This doesn’t make you a man—it makes you a coward. A flat-out coward. (US vice president Joe Biden, 4 April 2011)

The tone of this talk and the events surrounding it marked another turning point in the cultural history of acquaintance rape. The US government is now playing a stepped-up public role. More men are participating in the struggle for sexual equity. Other developments suggest optimism for the future. Policies on many campuses are now in place to support students, prevent rape, and engage in oversight by measuring the incidence of acquaintance rape. These policies are supported by changes in the legal arena leading to more prosecutions of rape (see Sanday, 1996; for updated developments see Afterword in the 2011 Random House ebook edition).

The public, legal, and political actions to stem the incidence of acquaintance rape can be likened to Darwin’s view of natural selection because they promote sexual health and well-being in an era of sexually transmitted diseases. One point left out of discussions of the biological bases of rape is the fact that as much as Darwin stressed competition, he also stressed cooperation or acting on behalf of what he called “the general good or welfare of the community” (quoted by Sanday, 1996: p. 288). Called ‘altruism’ by students of human evolution, some suggest that the primary selective pressure in human



evolution was not for violent men but for those who were able to cooperate with women and other males in organized food gathering. Some anthropologists believe that this ability to cooperate was responsible for the evolution of human culture (Tanner, 1981). In light of the ever-increasing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases together with the evolution of nuclear weapons, one can also note that today there is a fine line between aggressive behavior that results in reproductive success as argued by the biological approach and behavior that leads human populations to the brink of extinction.

## Conclusion

There is considerable evidence suggesting that whatever the biological basis of male sexual aggression might be, family background, and cultural context make a difference. The incidence of rape is far lower among men raised in stable, peaceful environments be it a family context in a complex society like the United States or the intimate communities of many small-scale traditional societies in which the ethos is one of mutual respect between the sexes. To say that some men will rape in all societies and to use this fact to make generalizations about the sexual predilections of all men may bring about the very sexual culture one is trying to avoid by creating a lore that makes sexual aggression a 'natural' part of masculinity. More important for the education of young males is the conclusion based on studies in the United States and cross-culturally that most men in most societies do not rape, and those who do face social rejection or incarceration.

*See also:* Domestic Violence: Sociological Perspectives; Empirical Legal Studies; Feminist Legal Theory; Feminist Theory: Radical Lesbian; Gender and Feminist Studies in Geography; Gender and the Law; Heterosexism and Homophobia; Occupational Health; Perversions, Sexual (Paraphilias); Pornography; Prostitution and Sex Work; Repetitive Sex offenders, Treatment of; Reproductive and Sexual Rights: Transnational Trends from a Global South Perspective; Sex offenders; Sexual Harassment: United States and Beyond.

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INTERNATIONAL  
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THE SOCIAL &  
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SCIENCES

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY

JAMES D. WRIGHT

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SECOND EDITION

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#### British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

#### Library of Congress Catalog Number:

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN (print): 978-0-08-097086-8

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15 16 17 18 19 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*Publisher:* Lisa Tickner

*Acquisition Editor:* Lisa Tickner

*Content Project Managers:* Claire Byrne, Michael Nicholls, Gemma Tomalin, Mark Harper

*Designer:* Maria Ines Cruz

Printed and bound in United States of America