

# Saliency of power in sexual offending



## UBIQUITOUS POWER

A discussion on the saliency of power in sexual offending

Power is a prominent aspect that accompanies acts of sexual offending. The following essay intends to show that this is so by discussing the role of power according to a 'tri-theme' approach. First, this paper will demonstrate an understanding of role of power within key theoretical approaches in relation to sex crime through a discussion of the typology of rapists as proposed by Groth (1979) and supported by Vandiver et al., (2017). Despite each type imposing some form of power in Groth's typology, particular attention will be placed upon the Power Rapist and its two sub categories: Power Reassurance and Power Assertive Rapists.

Following this, opposing views maintained by Tedeschi and Felson (1994) will illuminate the view that power is not always the central force in sexual offending. This shall lead to a discussion of the role power plays in perpetration and surrounding issues the that of consent in sex crime, referencing authors Kasubhai (1996), Brownmiller (1975) and Wartenberg (1992). Lastly, the lingering consequences of power as experienced by victims during sexual offences will be outlined. This is highly relevant as power is not fleeting and has the ability to cause secondary victimization for individuals who are forced to reexperience the trauma or confront those who committed the offence against them in legal situations.

Hostile masculinity is explained by Vandiver and colleagues as operating according to "two primary sets of attitudes" (2017: 66). The former attitudes are those which are based on the belief that women desire to be raped. The

latter are those attitudes that are propelled by control and the desire to exert power and domination. Vandiver et al., maintain that these attitudes in combination with hostile masculinity are “ a strong predictor of sexual assault” (2017: 67).

Nicholas Groth developed his typology in 1979. It is the result of the consideration of several factors including those such as motivation and the extent to which power is exerted over the victim. The typology is useful in understanding the relationship between power and sexual offending, however it is limited in that it is based on a sample of convicted offenders and thus cannot be generalised to extend to all types of sexual perpetrations. Vandiver notes that “ it is important to recognise the limitations of this typology”(Vandiver, *et al.* 2017: 70). Vandiver, *et al.* go on to describe the three categories as proposed by Groth in his typology which he determines based on the goals and motivations of the offender. These are (a) the power rapist, (b) the anger rapist, and (c) the sadistic rapist. Each will be discussed briefly in order to create contextual evidence for their association with power respectively, however special attention will be made to the power rapist to emphasise its centrality.

Groth maintains that the Power Rapist, as the name suggests, is driven by power. As noted by Vandiver, *et al.*, this category is comprised of those who “ are interested in having control over the victim and ‘ possessing’ them” (2017: 70). The use of force is present in this type, and is not limited to physical force, “ including verbal intimidation [or the] use of a weapon”. Moreover, Power Rapists are plagued by feelings of inadequacy and commit these types of acts “ as a means of feeling more powerful, strong or in

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control”(Vandiver, *et al.*, 2017: 70). is separated into two categories, one being the Power Reassurance Rapist, or Gentleman Rapist, and the other is the Power Assertive Rapist.

The Power Reassurance Rapist is reported to express complimentary and polite behaviour towards a victim, hence the moniker “ Gentleman Rapist”. This is carried out based on the belief of a “ fantasy that the victim sexually desires him” (Vandiver, *et al.*, 2017: 70). Despite the powerful portrayal of confidence of this type of offender during the attack, reality dictates that this type of offender is “ often described as having low self-esteem, underachieving and living a solitary lifestyle” (2017: 70). In contrast to the Power Reassurance Rapist, who is more strategic in his approach, the Power Assertive Rapist is described as being impulsive and spontaneous during attacks. The use of force is constant and consistent throughout the encounter as a way to assert power, as the term suggests. Furthermore, this type of perpetrator is more confident and strives to be seen as a “ macho man” with a job that emphasises this masculinity (Vandiver, *et al.*, 2017: 71). Furthermore, assessing the percentage of incidents that are reported according to this typology, the Power Assertive Rapist scores highest at 40% (Garrihy, 2018).

Power has an undeniable presence in the act of rape. This discussion is also illustrative of the fact that power is erratic and adjustable. To elaborate, using the exertion of power as applied by the Power Reassurance and Power Assertive rapists respectively, it becomes clear that power is omnipresent to the situation of sexual offences such as rape, rather than to the characteristics of he who perpetrates the offence. Put simply, power is an

active feature of the rape more than it is of the rapist. Accordingly, with reference to the ability of power as an ‘adjustable force’, the power portrayed by the Power Reassurance rapist is asserted in a passive fashion and only takes place during the offence. Alternatively, the Power Assertive rapist is more active in expressing power, not limiting its exhibition only during the act. Thus, the flexibility of power during the act of rape is illustrative of the situation being a powerful indicator of the extent of power that will be exerted by the individual and is not an entirely internal process.

The Anger Rapist is described as committing sexual offences as an ‘outlet’ of feelings of anger and hostility. Groth (1979) and Vandiver et al., (2017), maintain that this type is considered the most unpredictable in nature, as attacks are capable of resulting in the death of the victim. The attacks are aggressive, and control is physically sought-after, through demonstrations of power as a means to achieve this. The rarest type, the Sadist is driven by fantasies of being ‘all-powerful’ and dominant. Engaging in violent and aggressive behaviour to enforce authority and gain compliance over their victims, Vandiver et al., note that in addition to an extreme sense of self-control, this rapist is also highly intelligent (2017: 71-72).

Vandiver et al., describe rape as an act motivated by power and control. They posit that “it is a crime involving anger, aggression and power...rarely [exclusively] motivated by sexual desire” (2017: 83). In contrast, Tedeschi and Felson(1994) maintain that rape is about gaining sexual pleasure. The coauthors argue that perpetrators of sexual offences are motivated by achieving sexual fulfilment as opposed to exerting dominance and power over their victims, as suggested by Groth and Vandiver *et al*. The pair insist <https://assignbuster.com/saliency-of-power-in-sexual-offending/>

that “ rape is an aggressive form of sexual coercion” with the goal of “ sexual satisfaction rather than power” (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994: 313). A further opinion holds that “ rape and sexual assault are always about power, control and entitlement, not about sexual desire.” (Equality Now, 2017: 22).

As mentioned in the discussion above, power is not fixed in the sphere of sexual crime. Kasubhai (1996: 42) notes that “ power is not linear; it does not merely flow directly from one acting agent (i. e. perpetrator) to one subordinate agent (i. e. victim)”. Thus far, it has been illustrated that power is not manifested in isolation but occurs in a specific situation by a specific individual with a specific set of characteristics. Kasubhai (1996) criticizes this traditional linear model that has been applied to assessing sexual offences on the basis that such a model “ can only recognise who immediately wields power and who is subordinated...[it] fails to account for the aspects present in a patriarchal society that “ enable men to systematically subordinate women”. Furthermore, the author posits that the model is unsuccessful in providing a reason as to *why* the perpetrator is in a position of power:

A linear power model ignores the fact that the acting agent derives his power and the validation to exercise that power from social institutions; he is not exercising power in isolation. Because it is static and objective, the dyadic linear model cannot accurately describe society’s oppressive influences on relations between men and women. This model assumes that such relationships exist independently of other actors and other influences. Rape cannot be adequately described in the traditional linear power model(Kasubhai, 1996: 43-44).

Susan Brownmiller is regarded by Kasubhai as a key thinker in his article, recognizing that she is “ among the first to posit that rape is an act of violence” (Kasubhai, 1996: 38). This is an important revelation as there are strong connotations between violence, rape and power. She asserts that “ rape [is] a male prerogative...man’s basic weapon of force against women” (Brownmiller, 1975) as cited in Kasubhai, 1996: 39).

Brownmiller’s tactic of referring to the act of rape as ‘ a weapon’ allows for increased clarity on the harm and power associated with sexual offences. Drawing this inference has allowed for a greater distinction between the aspect of power within the context of rape. Furthermore, it has been successful in providing and strengthening the opportunity for analysis by feminists, “ to deconstruct the nuanced aspects of power and consent in rape” (Kasubhai, 1996: 40).

Helen Gavin makes further comments on the condition of “ unequal power relationships between men and women” (2014). However, she attributes the imbalance of power to socialization rather than biology. In other words, the need for expressing power during a sexual offence is motivated by maintaining control as a result of being socialized within a patriarchal society. This is not to say that Gavin posits rape is the inevitable result of being male, but rather that those who are inclined to commit violent sexual crimes, such as rape, are fueled further by socialization. This speaks to another phenomenon in criminology used to explain criminal behavior: The self-fulfilling prophecy as maintained by Merton in 1948. The theory posits that:

The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning (Merton, 1948: 195).

When considering the logic, it hardly seems enough to justify that because society tells men to be powerful, this is something that must be fulfilled. However, logic within a patriarchal society must be considered more lucidly and in crimes like rape, this may seem adequate to portray power in itself.

Thomas Wartenberg uses the analogy of a “ student-teacher relationship” (1992: 82) in order to explain the strength of power relations between individuals. His work is important in indicating how power need not be declared explicitly but is dictated automatically. This is akin to the assumption of the male to female hierarchy experienced in patriarchal society. The teacher holds power in his position that he controls grades and thus, determines the nature of the outcome awarded to the student. This is not something that is explicitly communicated but rather, implicitly declared which is in itself, “ enough to exert power” (1992: 99), essentially forming a subordinate and dominant relationship between individuals.

In closure, this paper has deliberated the nature of power and consent by discussing notions made by separate authors such as Kasubhai, Brownmiller, Gavin and Wartenberg, allowing for a collective position to be reached on the effects of power exertion on victims of sexual offences. Furthermore, it has explained how power does not have to be overtly declared as well as how



the disempowerment experienced by victims during (and after) the assault may serve to revictimize them, ultimately increasing the potential of traumatization. This essay has made an attempt to move past explanations of power and sexual offending that merely focus on theories of perpetrators who have been victims of sexual offences themselves and are on a mission to regain power. In addition to this, it has shown how separate concepts such as control and power may be related at times when considering how power is exerted for the purpose of gaining sexual access to those more vulnerable. Intermittently, it has included discussions from a variety of perspectives including those of a feministic, gendered and societal nature and the role power plays within each. Evaluating the saliency of power as a prerequisite of sexual offending illuminates just how well preserved it is.

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