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# *Empirically Enhanced Reflections on 20 Years of Rape Research*

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*Using PsychInfo review of rape and sexual assault publications, the period of greatest fertility coincided with the establishment (1975) and demise (1987) of the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape. To document what has been learned and when, the era in which new rape concepts entered the literature is summarized and important developments highlighted. Then, new investigations that are urgently needed are elaborated. The author expresses concern that current federal investment is insufficient to sustain and expand a science workforce adequate to the tasks ahead. Since 1995, more than \$1 billion have been awarded to prosecutors, law enforcement, and community agencies to assist victims of violence. In contrast, between 1996 and 2003, only 14 of 178 (7%) of investigator-initiated grants funded by the Department of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for violence against women had titles pairing the word sexual with assault, violence, abuse, or rape.*

**Keywords:** rape; sexual assault; funding; history; empirical studies

**Given empirical findings on the fallibility** of eyewitness testimony, readers may question how accurately I remember the placement of momentous findings on the timeline of rape research, even though I have focused on this topic since 1976. So I have chosen to ground my reflections in two quick and certainly not definitive searches. The first involved reviewing published articles retrieved by PsychInfo. The second was an Internet-based search of the major sources of federal funding for rape research. This article begins with a summary of the findings on productivity across time. Then I use my empirically refreshed reflections to select my highlights of what we have learned, the most important methodological innovations in the past and for the future, and what we need to learn.

The first PsychInfo literature search used the term *rape* in the title field; the second search used the term *sexual assault*. Both searches examined publications in English. Searching PsychInfo from its inception produced a slightly different total number of publications than obtained by summing the

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results produced by searching specific time periods (1,654 vs. 1,684). The results presented are those returned from searching within delimited time periods. For the 86 years prior to 1958, a total of four journal articles were published on rape (sexual assault added two more). Focusing on rape articles, the years from 1959 through 1973 produced 12 articles. Then, in 1974, the publication rate exploded. Using 5-year periods, the number of journal articles on rape published in English was 80 (1974-1978), 166 (1979-1983), 207 (1984-1988), 226 (1989-1993), 237 (1994-1998), and 245 (1999-2003). The numbers for books and chapters revealed that they increased from 4 prior to 1984 to 185 in the past 20 years. Although approximately 42% of journals articles and 98% of chapters and books on rape were produced within the past 20 years, the largest percentage increases in the rates of publication occurred between 1974 to 1978 compared to 1979 to 1983 (210%). The next largest increase was contrasting 1979 to 1983 and 1984 to 1988 (125%). Since 1989, the percentage growth has fallen in each 5-year period, starting with a 7% increase from the 5 years ending in 1988 to the 5-year period between 1989 and 1993 and reaching the lowest growth (3%) contrasting 1994 to 1998 and the contemporary period from 1999 to 2003.

Dissertation numbers are also important to track because they are a rough indicator of the maximal size of the future scientific workforce prepared by training to study rape. PsychInfo retrieved a total of 462 dissertations on rape or sexual assault. Only 4 appeared prior to 1978; 87% were published in the past 20 years. The eras in which the change in dissertation numbers grew most were the 300% increase from the 5 years ending in 1978 compared to the 5 years ending in 1983 and the 160% increase comparing the years between 1984 to 1988 to the period from 1989 to 1993. Since 1998, there has been a 33% decrease in the number of dissertations (135 to 90). The proportion of the literature retrieved with titles containing the term *sexual assault* versus the word *rape* has increased over time. Prior to 1984, sexual assault represented 16% of the literature, and from then on, the percentages increased in each succeeding period: 27% (1984-1988), 30% (1989-1993), 34% (1994-1998), and 42% (1999-2003). Although the term *sexual assault* sometimes refers to a broader spectrum of sexually aggressive acts, it is often used synonymously with rape. Feminist legal scholars have argued that the word *rape* is more explicit, politically evocative, and better at capturing the outrage and shame that is historically associated with sexual violation. From their perspective, the term *sexual assault* represents a shift toward more conservative language use.

Overall, the literature search identified that the largest number of articles published is in the contemporary era, but the rate of growth has slowed since 1989, and the number of dissertations has significantly declined. These

results could be accounted for by several trends, such as lower numbers of graduate students and declining interest or encouragement to enter the field, less visibility for the sexual violence research agenda, and lack of resources for a sustained career devoted to rape research. To support the assertion that lack of resources is a problem, I offer the following cursory overview of federal funding mechanisms and dollar amounts available for sexual violence research. The National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape (NCPCR) was established in 1975. Its first research grants were made a year later. The NCPCR was recommended for de-funding by Reagan, moved around, reorganized, and eventually phased out in 1987. The Violence Against Women Act was passed in 1994, and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) began funding research through the Violence Against Women Office. In 2003, this office was reconceptualized and renamed the Violence Against Women and Family Violence Research and Evaluation Program (VAW & FV). Only in the past 2 years has there been a dedicated sexual violence portfolio, but the reorganization also has brought in a wider range of victimization that must now compete for the office's funding stream. The Department of Justice opened the Violence Against Women Office in 1995 (now called the Office on Violence Against Women [OVW]). Since then, the office has given more than \$1 billion in grant funds. The grant programs cover all forms of violence against women but have funding streams specifically targeted at sexual violence and include awards to help state, tribal, and local governments and community-based agencies train personnel, establish specialized domestic violence and sexual assault units, assist victims of violence, and hold perpetrators accountable. Prosecutors, public safety departments, judges, and victim service programs approximately evenly share the funds. In 1992, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention established the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), which sometime later brought sexual violence into their injury research agenda. The NCIPC supports national resource centers to build community capacity to offer services for sexual violence survivors, awards formula grants based on population to fund state rape prevention and education programs and to operate hotlines, and also makes grants for investigator-initiated research projects.

Despite what appears to be a large amount of money available for the sexual violence field, closer inspection reveals that all three federal funding sources award the majority of funds to states or national centers and not to investigator-initiated research. The National Academy of Sciences Panel on Research on Violence Against Women reported that in 1996, NIJ and the NCIPC annually awarded less than \$3 million to research studies on the

broad field of violence against women. The home pages of the offices listed above provide information from 1996 through 2003 (VAW & FV, NCIPC) and through 2002 (OVW). During that period, a total of 178 investigator-initiated research grants are listed. Of these, only 14 (7%) contained the words *rape*, *sexual assault*, *sexual violence*, or *sexual abuse*. Proposals using broader violence against women or domestic violence terminology may have included some focus on sexual violence, but the area was not prioritized. The number of awards made for investigations of the violence against women field in totality averaged 19 per year and peaked in 1998.

### WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT RAPE

To address this question, I examined the time period in which new topics entered the published literature tracked by PsychInfo. Between 1974 and 1978, studies focused on initial response and assessment, rape trauma syndrome, attitudes, attributions, resistance, aftereffects, self-blame, desensitization and biofeedback treatments, reporting, typologies of rapists, prostitution, unwanted pregnancy, crisis response and training, fear of rape, police attitudes, and social cultural context of rape. In the 5 years following the establishment of the NCPCR (1979-1983), the list of topics investigated exploded. During this period, standardized measurement of rape incidence and prevalence as well as assessment of rape myths were developed. New language, including *date*, *acquaintance*, *marital*, and *party rape*, were introduced, triggering public and private dialogue on these previously unnamable sexual violations. Areas of investigation included rape prevalence on college campuses, cross-national studies, characterological and behavioral self-blame theory, diagnostic classifications, comparisons of stranger and acquaintance rape, treatment of anxiety and depression in rape victims, male rape, rape in the military, rape reform, forensic evidence, rape-reduction strategies, mock juror decisions, rape proclivity and predictors of laboratory aggression, rape and race, pornography and rape, prison rape, penile tumescence, group therapy, and rape avoidance and the effects of resistance.

Prior to the past 20 years on which these reflections center, the highest federal visibility for rape research had already come and passed, although the fruits of that investment were working their way into the literature. The years from 1984 to 1988 were highlighted by the appearance of the first national incidence and prevalence studies documenting the rate of rape in the community and on college campuses. Further new language was introduced to the scientific community, including *hidden rape*, *undetected rapists*, *unacknowl-*

*edged and acknowledged rape, adolescent rape, single and multiple victims, growth outcomes, token resistance, and delayed treatment.* New foci of investigation included the introduction of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), services in the community, evaluation of rape prevention campaigns, state-level influences on rape, effect of R-rated violence, "factitious rape," rewards of rape, rape as reported in the press, and social support as a mediator of rape.

From 1989 to 1993, strong criticism of the National Crime Victimization Survey's approach to measuring rape first appeared. Rape as a medical issue emerged, including documentation of injuries and prevalence of victimization among primary care patients, assessment of children, and the impact of rape on medical diagnoses and medical and mental health care. New language included medical screening for violence and serial rapists. The concept of undetected rape was widely promulgated. The American Psychological Association published the first agenda that aimed to guide development of research on rape, and the American Medical Association issued guidelines for health provider response. Other new topics included acquaintance rape in high schools, athletes/fraternities and rape, prevention programs for men, social skills of rapists, drinking and rape, and the cognitive processing theoretical model of responses to traumas such as rape.

Between 1994 and 1999, both the National Academy of Sciences and the American Psychological Association published books that reviewed scholarship across the spectrum of violence against women and concluded with action agendas for community responses, the research infrastructure, and future directions for research. To date, there has been no process initiated to assess progress toward these goals. The ascendance of the PTSD diagnosis as applied to rape victims was questioned, and the new vocabulary of chronic and complex PTSD was introduced. Articles critical of the criminal justice system response to rape began appearing along with calls to apply restorative justice to crimes against women. Other new topics included rape and HIV, virtual rape in video games, study of masculinities, empirical studies of secondary victimization, rape and memory, emotional processing of rape and cognitive mediational models of rape, pharmacological treatment for rape victims, the precautionary behavior of women, empirical analyses of community response, rape of college men by women, phallometric test validity, steroid use, and rape and cults. New subjects that drew attention in the most recent 5-year period included rape empathy, sexual exploitation on the Internet, the effect of victim impact statements on sentencing, discourse analysis of rape and seduction scripts, empirical tests of rape backlash, models of an array of other cognitive mediators of rape trauma, rape prevention with

diverse ethnic groups, and treatment-related topics, including empirical evaluations of cognitive behavioral treatment, treatment of nightmares, writing about rape, and community healing rituals.

What can be considered the major advances in this treasure trove of scholarship? To me, development of the vocabulary and methods to describe and measure experiences of rape must be counted as essential methodologies in moving the field forward. Standard surveys have proved themselves important beyond measuring incidence and prevalence because they have been widely used to select participants for research on victimization and perpetration and as one measure of outcome in prevention studies. Vocabulary has facilitated the extensive public dialogue on sexual violence that exists today. The recent publication of standard definitions of sexual violence by the NCIPC is a clear advance. The application of the PTSD diagnosis has also been highly significant. However, in important ways it has tilted research on rape impact away from some of its most salient impacts on relationships, sexuality, and attributions, beliefs, and other cognitive factors central to understanding the impact of rape. Documenting the impact of rape on physical illness and medical care usage facilitated ownership of sexual violence by health care providers. Examination of causes of rape, community responses to rape, rape resistance, and empirical evaluations of treatment approaches has provided a scholarly foundation that is not widely enough applied to service provision, design of prevention programs, and the targeting of prevention on high-risk groups. Measurement of rape myths and rape attitudes has facilitated a large proportion of published studies and become a central curriculum component and evaluation tool for rape prevention programs. This body of literature typically focuses on college students and often uses manipulations in rape scenarios to determine the impact of almost everything imaginable on attributions to victims. It is understandable that this topic is well suited to short-term goals of graduate students and limited resources for research. However, these studies have consumed significant intellectual resources and resulted in little impact on the field. The lack of support for attitude interventions revealed by evaluations of prevention education has been used insufficiently in evolving creative approaches that build on existing knowledge. Studies of the attitudes and behavior of police officers, prosecutors, and judges have led to many procedural changes and upgrades in training within the criminal justice system. At the same time, these studies have laid the groundwork for the critiques of the limits of standard justice and calls for alternative processes to address crimes against women, especially sexual violence among acquaintances.

### THE MOST PROMISING METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION IN THE PAST 20 YEARS

Methodological interventions have already been identified that were critical in advancing sexual violence knowledge. Similarly, there are many existing methodologies that will support important future developments. Due to space constraints, I focus my response on my own work with restorative justice responses to sexual and physical violence. It has been established that current justice approaches generally do not serve these victims well, that treatment of sex offenders has modest impacts at significant cost, and that typical primary prevention approaches fail to create lasting change. Restorative justice offers a theoretical umbrella for a variety of community-based methodologies that promise to be more healing for victims and more rehabilitative for offenders and to better target prevention efforts to high-risk groups and the community. Alternative justice approaches are among the top three priority items to stopping sexual violence that are on the agenda of the Sexual Violence Research Initiative based at the World Health Organization.

#### What We Need to Learn

It is a daunting task to develop a research agenda for sexual violence (the subject of multiple full-length articles and books) in the remaining paragraph. The following are my best efforts to highlight several salient points from my perspective. First and foremost, the federal government needs to reassess the strategy for funding the field of sexual violence. Overlaying this short review of funding streams with the productivity evidence suggests that the most fertile period of rape research coincided with the life of the NCPCR. In addition to the amount of money the center made available for research, the visibility it created for rape attracted many investigators to the field, including me. Current funding levels are far below what is needed to ensure a stable workforce of experienced scholars and to attract new researchers to sexual violence. Without generation of new knowledge, community capacity may suffer from paucity of basic science, including surveillance, etiology, and clear delineation of high-risk groups. Treatment interventions, educational programming, and community services may become stale due to lack of innovative, empirically validated approaches. If significant resources were available, further development of standard measurement is needed in many different areas of sexual violence, and it needs to be more equitably assessed in general screening tools for intimate partner violence. This task is a prerequisite to enhancing the integrity of our work and the accumulation of knowledge. Better theories of prevention are needed, and to the extent that these

involve applying restorative techniques, careful evaluation of these models is essential. More work on the etiology of sexual violence is needed not only to inform primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention but also to understand and respond to rape in institutions such as detention centers, prisons, and the military. Contemporary influences on masculinity and sexual behavior need further study, including the impact of mixing sexual content and high levels of violence on the Internet, in mainstream sports such as wrestling, and in the popular media. In addition, studies should examine the interaction of media influences with the social ecology of contemporary children's lives, including the adverse environments that have been created by income disparities and inadequate investment in human capital. Policy makers also need to re-examine the barriers that have been placed in the way of studying school children at every age and building, implementing, and evaluating developmentally appropriate curriculums on healthy relationships that extend throughout the educational career. Current efforts at the university level are too little and too late. In addition, predicating the content of these programs on political dictates rather than on theoretical foundations and empirical evidence is doomed to failure. Finally, allocation of resources for sexual violence needs to better support collaborative work between academia and the community that is not limited to basic research but also includes program innovation and evaluation. From my perspective as both a clinical psychologist and public health practitioner, knowledge proves its importance by its application to improving human life.

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