



Understanding the origins and the development of rape and sexual aggression against women: Four generations of research and theorizing



Patrick Lussier^{a,b,*}, Jesse Cale^c

^a School of Social Work (Criminology), Faculty of Social Sciences, Université Laval, Quebec City, Quebec, Canada

^b Centre for Research on Sexual Violence; Centre Jeunesse de Québec – Institut Universitaire; Centre International de Criminologie Comparée, Canada

^c Faculty of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Several explanations have been proposed to explain the origins and the development of rape and sexual aggression against women. For the most part, the first three generations of research and theorizing provided an inherently static view of the propensity among males to commit a sexual aggression, providing little information about the developmental processes involved in the origins and course of sexually aggressive behavior. This article provides a review of contemporary explanations of sexual aggression against women and an examination of the underlying developmental issues that these models imply. Given the emergence of longitudinal research on sexual aggression, these issues are then contrasted and compared with the relatively nascent body of knowledge about the origins and the development of sexual aggression over the life course. More specifically, in recent years a fourth generation of research and theorizing concerned by the developmental and life course factors conducive to rape and sexual aggression has emerged. This fourth generation proposes a more dynamic etiological framework to understand the origins and the development of sexually aggressive behaviors that is directed by men toward women. Emerging research from this generation highlight unresolved issues about, among other things, the understanding of the continuity and discontinuity of rape and sexual aggression over time as well as the developmental pathways leading to rape and sexual aggression.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: patrick.lussier@svs.ulaval.ca (P. Lussier), j.cale@unsw.edu.au (J. Cale).

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1. Introduction

Several hypotheses and theories have been proposed to explain the etiology of rape and sexual aggression against women (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Hall & Hirschman, 1991; Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey & Rice, 2005; Malamuth, 1998; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003; Quinsey, 1984). To date, most theories reflect a propensity-focused explanation of sexual aggression of women. Propensity models suggest the presence of a relatively fixed and stable trait that, in combination with situational and contextual factors, can lead some men to commit an act of sexual aggression against a woman. From this perspective, stable and fixed between-individual differences are associated with this propensity. Therefore, propensity theories of rape and sexual aggression provide information about the nature of these individual differences. Contemporary models have either stressed biological, personality, neuropsychological, cognitive, and/or sociocultural factors along these lines (e.g., Baumeister, Catanese & Wallace, 2002; Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003; Lalumière et al., 2005). The foci of these models, while providing some research directions and hypotheses, are not well-suited to explain the origins and developmental course of sexual aggression. More specifically, it is unclear whether these propensity models can account for offending patterns of sexual aggressors of women over the life-course. Indeed, contrary to ideas proposed by propensity theorists, sexual aggression is generally characterized by a high degree of discontinuity over the life course, albeit some continuity. Indeed, prospective longitudinal research has shown that sexual aggression is typically short-lived for most, and can be considered largely opportunistic and transitory (e.g., Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Zimring, Piquero, Jennings, 2007; Zimring, Jennings, Piquero, & Hays, 2009). In this article, therefore, it is argued that a more dynamic explanatory platform is required to account for both the continuity and discontinuity of sexual aggression over time. In the current article, the key underlying assumptions about rape and sexual aggression are examined. Second, the necessity for a theory specifically explaining this behavior over and above a general explanation of crime and violence is explained. Third, contemporary explanatory models of sexual aggression are reviewed and compared. Finally, the current state of knowledge regarding the developmental life course (DLC) of rape and sexual aggression is described and contrasted with these contemporary models.

2. Rape and sexual aggression against women

As part of this article, the reviewed explanatory theories of rape and sexual aggression will be limited to situations where the perpetrator is an adult male and the victim an adult female. While rape and sexual aggression are certainly not limited to instances involving an adult male perpetrator and an adult female victim (e.g., see Felson, 2002), this review focuses on this specific phenomena and we do not implicitly suggest that the conclusions drawn also apply to other instances.¹ Aside

¹ While a key objective is to examine the application of the developmental life-course perspective for the description, explanation and prevention of rape and sexual aggression, the decision to focus on these situations should not be interpreted as if this framework is irrelevant for other manifestations. Indeed, the factors that contribute for the onset and developmental course of rape and sexual aggression of women, may both overlap and differ from those of sexual aggression of children (e.g., Lee, Jackson, Pattison & Ward, 2002; Lussier, Leclerc, Cale & Proulx, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2008). Given space limitations, it was decided for this article to focus exclusively on rape and sexual aggression perpetrated by men against women.

from the highly-sensitive, emotionally laden, and sociopolitical aspects underpinning the phenomena, the term rape and sexual aggression remain controversial among social scientists for several reasons. From a legal standpoint, the terms 'rape' and 'sexual aggression' are considered misleading and problematic because they conflate acts in which the gravity, legality and moral acceptability differ dramatically (e.g., Bryden & Grier, 2011). Furthermore, until the 1980s, in North America, men who raped their wives were generally exempt from legal punishment (e.g., Martin, Taft & Resick, 2007). In fact, legal definitions of rape or "rape laws" are rarely used by social scientists for measurement purposes given that they greatly vary across jurisdictions and are often difficult to reconcile with behavioral issues of force and consent, more specifically with respect to marital rape (e.g., Basile, 2002; Baumeister, et al., 2002). In the scientific literature, sexual aggression includes a wide array of behaviors that have been referred to as sexual assault, rape, marital rape, date rape, sexual coercion, and sexual violence. In fact, the field of research has been hampered by the presence of various definitions and operationalization when referring to these harmful behaviors (e.g., Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps & Giusti, 1992). Therefore, many social scientists have come to view rape as a set of behaviors implying that there was vaginal intercourse involved in the absence of the victim's consent and some degree of force used by the assailant (e.g., Koss, 1993a). Rape can occur between strangers, acquaintances, intimate partners, dating partners, spouse, and family members (e.g., Casey & Nurius, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Sexual assault refers to situations where an individual forces another person, against their will, to engage in some form of sexual contact. Unlike rape, sexual assault is not limited to situations where the perpetrator primarily attempts to or engages in sexual intercourse with the victim and includes a broad range of sexual behaviors. Sexual coercion is generally understood where non-physical tactics are used by the perpetrator, such as the abuse of power and authority, psychological pressure and deceitful tactics (e.g., Koss et al., 1987). Sexual aggression, therefore, encompasses any and all situations where the perpetrator has sexual contact with a victim without their consent, using tactics including, but not limited to physical force, threats, manipulation, or pressure (e.g., Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987).² Researchers often suggest that sexual aggression reflects a continuum of behavioral manifestations, but that continuum has been rarely conceptually defined, explicitly presented, and empirically examined (e.g., see Koss, Abbey, Campbell, Cook et al., 2007; Muehlenhard et al., 1992).

2.1. Theoretical specificity of rape and sexual aggression against women

Theories of rape and sexual aggression against women have evolved considerably over the years. The evolution of these theories has been accompanied by several debates and controversies about the key underlying mechanisms responsible for rape and sexual aggression (e.g., Adler, 1984; Briere & Malamuth, 1983; Harris, Mazerolle, & Knight, 2009; Langevin, 1985; Lussier, Proulx & LeBlanc, 2005b). Lussier et al. (2005a, 2005b) highlighted the presence of three main theoretical perspectives. The first perspective, and also the most longstanding and influential among the scientific community, involves specialized theories of rape and sexual aggression (e.g., Abel et al., 1987; Groth & Burgess, 1977). According to these theories, sexual aggressors of women

² Note that several researchers understand and define sexual coercion the same way as others understand and define sexual aggression (e.g., Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait & Alvi, 2001).

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