



# Multiple perpetrator rape: A critical review of existing explanatory theories



Teresa da Silva<sup>a,\*,1</sup>, Jessica Woodhams<sup>a</sup>, Leigh Harkins<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 2000 Simcoe Street North, Oshawa, ON L1H 7K4, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Although multiple perpetrator rape is a relatively under-researched area, a few authors have proposed theories to try to explain this complex phenomenon. The majority of these theories only examined some factors that are believed to play a part in multiple perpetrator rape (e.g., socio-cultural factors and group processes). The most recent and comprehensive model proposed is the Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending. This article critically examines this theory and the factors and processes that are suggested as contributing to multiple perpetrator rape (i.e., individual, socio-cultural and situational factors including the interactions between them). Some evidence is found to support this model although further research is needed to fully test it.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the appearance of the first academic papers on multiple perpetrator rape (MPR)<sup>2</sup> in the 1950s, a few theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. Some of them were based on what was already known at the time about sexual violence in general, whereas, others were tentative, proposing new ideas. These theories were influenced by the dominant psychological and sociological theories of their era. As time progressed they have developed from simple individual or sociological explanations to theories that integrate various factors to explain this complex phenomenon. The most recent and comprehensive explanatory theory of MPR was proposed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013). It is the Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending (MPSO), which states that various factors play a role in MPR and emphasizes the effects of group processes. Some of these proposed factors and processes had previously been identified as

relevant in MPR by earlier explanatory theories (i.e., the psychodynamic theory, sociological theory of group rape, feminist theories and theories of power, control and male bonding). This article critically examines the Multi-Factorial Theory of MPSO and the factors and processes that this model and earlier theories suggested as contributing to MPR by considering if there is empirical evidence supporting the role of these factors in MPR. It is important to construct, develop and evaluate theories because they help guide research and practice. As Ward, Polaschek, and Beech (2006) eloquently stated: “Theories are usefully construed as cognitive tools that provide clinicians and researchers with maps to navigate their way through the complexities of clinical practice.” (p. 10).

## 2. Overview of early explanatory models of MPR

One of the earliest theories proposed to explain MPR was psychodynamic in nature (Amir, 1971; Blanchard, 1959). In this theory, a central factor is the existence of homosexual feelings of the group members for one another. Sanday (2007) referred to the term *polymorphous sexuality*, used by Freud, to indicate diffuse sexual interest with numerous objects. According to her, this means that some men who engage in such behavior can experience sexual desire for one another. Nevertheless, the fear of being considered homosexual can produce a tension between polymorphous sexual desire and expected heterosexuality. By taking part in a MPR, men are able to overcome this tension such that: “the brothers vent their interest in one another through the body of a woman.” (Sanday, 2007, p. 42). In summary, the psychodynamic theory suggests that, by participating in a MPR, men assure themselves of their heterosexuality and hide the actual object of their desire, in order to

\* Corresponding author at: University of Coventry, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Priory Road, Coventry CV1 5FB, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 24 7688 8019.

E-mail addresses: tds097@bham.ac.uk, ab8217@coventry.ac.uk (T. da Silva), j.woodhams@bham.ac.uk (J. Woodhams), Leigh.Harkins@uoit.ca (L. Harkins).

<sup>1</sup> Present address: University of Coventry, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Priory Road, Coventry CV1 5FB, United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> This term was proposed by Horvath and Kelly (2009) as an overarching term for any sexual assault committed by multiple perpetrators and includes a broad range of sexual offences.

maintain their standing in the male hierarchy as superior heterosexual men (Sanday, 2007).

At the time that he carried out his study of lone and MPR, Amir (1971) acknowledged that the psychodynamic theory was the main explanation for MPR. According to Amir, this approach was speculative; therefore, he suggested an alternative sociological theory of MPR. He called it a *sociological theory of group rape*. Amir (1971) tried to integrate various factors that he considered essential to understanding MPR, which had not been examined in this context before. He associated MPR with adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who he believed had a tendency for actual or latent aggressive behavior, and were at a stage in their development associated with heightened sexual desires and sexual experimentation. The other contributory factors that he proposed were group processes; negative/stereotypical attitudes toward women and sexual identity; a precipitating event (e.g., a crisis in the group structure or available victims); and situational factors and a person in the group such as a leader that facilitated the mobilization of the other members. Amir (1971) was the first author in the MPR literature to not only write about the important role that group processes and dynamics play in this sort of sexual offending, but also to highlight that it is a combination of various factors that make this type of sexual assault possible. This not only contrasted with the psychodynamic theory but also with other explanatory theories of MPR that began to emerge at that time, which placed a great emphasis, almost exclusively, on socio-cultural factors such as masculine ideology of dominance and power (e.g., the feminist theories).

In the 1970s, sexual aggression became a relevant issue for the feminist movement. For some authors (Brownmiller, 1975; Donat & D'Emilio, 1992; Russell, 1975), rape was seen as a means to dominate and control women, enforcing gender roles and maintaining male dominance. Brownmiller (1975) was one of the first feminist authors to examine MPR. As with lone rape, she saw it as an act where men retain power and control over women: "When men rape in pairs or in gangs, the sheer physical advantage of their position is clear-cut and unquestionable. No simple conquest of man over woman, group rape is the conquest of men over Woman" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 187).

Several authors throughout the years have examined MPR based on various feminist perspectives (Franklin, 2004; Lees, 2002; Sanday, 2007). For example, Lees (2002), who analyzed cases of MPR in a community survey, viewed this type of sexual assault as an extreme form of normative masculinity, which boosts male dominance and solidarity. These views, and specifically Brownmiller's (1975) work, led to a great deal of empirical research of various feminist ideas and some of these views have been integrated into different theoretical frameworks to understand sexual assault (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992).

Themes of power, control and male bonding were also associated to MPR by other authors (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Scully & Marolla, 1985). Groth and Birnbaum (1979) viewed MPR as a multi-determined act where factors such as power, control, camaraderie and validation of masculinity are present. Additionally, they believed that there are also factors involved that are present in lone rape such as power and anger. Furthermore, these authors highlighted that the experience of rapport, camaraderie and cooperation with co-offenders is one of the unique dynamics in MPR. Not only are they participating in a group activity, they are also validating themselves.

Scully and Marolla (1985) also associated MPR to male camaraderie. In their sample of rapists, they found that the perpetrators of MPR regarded rape as an adventure or recreational activity. They saw it as a challenge to be able to "perform" in that situation and it was a source of reward. Themes of power, control, and dominance were also identified as being present.

These earlier theories differed from each other in the factors that they proposed played a crucial role in MPR. For example, while Blanchard (1959) considered that individual factors, such as sexual interests were central to MPR, the feminist theories highlighted socio-cultural factors such as negative and stereotypical attitudes toward

women. Only Amir's (1971) theory included an interaction of various factors similar to those proposed by the most recent theory of MPR developed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013).

### 3. Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending (MPSO)

Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) proposed a conceptual framework of MPR which was developed from the combination of two theories of human violent behavior. The first theory arose from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work related to the need for etiological models to consider factors at each level of an ecological model, in order to successfully reach a comprehensive explanation. These levels include ontogenic, micro-, exo-, and macro-levels. The second theory was the Proximal Confluence Model (White & Kowalski, 1998), which considers that violence is due to the interaction of two or more people and the contextual environment.

Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) proposed that it is necessary to consider multiple factors when conceptualizing MPR, which include the interaction of the individual, as well as the sociocultural and situational contexts where the assault occurred. A multi-factorial model of MPSO was, therefore, constructed by them which is an adaptation of White and Kowalski's (1998) Proximal Confluence Model. Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg (2004) had previously adapted White and Kowalski's model to develop their multi-factorial model of war time rape. This model of war time rape also influenced the conceptualization of Harkins and Dixon's (2010, 2013) model of MPSO. Essentially, Harkins and Dixon's (2010, 2013) model proposes that various factors (individual, socio-cultural and situational) and the interaction between them play a role in different types of MPR (see Fig. 1).

#### 3.1. Individual factors

Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) proposed that numerous individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits, developmental factors and sexual preferences) contribute to whether a person takes part in an act of sexual aggression. They highlighted two factors which they believed increase the probability of a person engaging in sexual violence. These are deviant sexual interests and leadership traits. It was suggested by them that in some situations, it is likely that deviant sexual interests interacting with other risk factors may increase the probability of a MPR. This could be especially likely for the initiation of MPRs against children (e.g., child sex rings). Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) also considered that some MPRs would not take place without the presence of a person in the group with leadership traits who is able to influence the offending behavior of the group.

##### 3.1.1. Earlier explanatory theories of MPR

Some of the earlier explanatory theories of MPR also considered that individual factors played a role in this type of sexual assault. For example, the psychodynamic theory (Blanchard, 1959; Sanday, 2007) proposed that sexual preferences (i.e., homosexual feelings of the group members for one another) were a central factor. Amir (1971), on the other hand, highlighted other individual factors such as age (adolescence), belonging to a lower socio-economic group, having a tendency for aggressive behavior and heightened sexual desires related to the adolescent stage of development. Even though feminist theories considered that MPR can be found in all male communities, some authors (Lees, 2002) stated that it is more evident in adolescence as it coincides with the development of the "masculine" identity. Groth and Birnbaum (1979) whose perspective was related to the theories of power, control and male camaraderie suggested that perpetrators of MPR could have a range of negative feelings such as inadequacy and vulnerability and those related to humiliation and frustration. In relation to leadership traits, most of the earlier theories underlined the importance of a leader

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