The Learning Curve
Annual Academic Journal
Psychology Department, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi

Role of Self-esteem in the Reporting of Sexual Assault

Himani Singh
BA (Hons) Psychology, Lady Shri Ram College for Women
Manuscript 676 submitted on March 5, 2013 and sent for review on March 12, 2013. Correspondence may be sent to the author at himani.singh235@gmail.com.

Role of Self-esteem in the Reporting of Sexual Assault

Sexual assault in adults is an assault of a sexual nature on a person, or any sexual act committed without consent. This includes rape (such as forced vaginal, anal or oral penetration), or the torture of the victim in a sexual manner. Wyatt's (1992) definition of sexual assault includes "(a) complete rape-unwanted sexual intercourse. More specifically, rape is involuntary penetration of the vagina or anus by the penis or another object against the victim's will and consent; and (b) attempted rape-attempted penetration of the vagina or anus by the penis or another object against the victim's will and consent."

In the United States, there are about 207,754 victims or sexual assault (RAINN). In Mexico, 14993 rape cases were reported in 2010. In the United Kingdom, 15934 cases of rape were reported in 2010. With 24,206 cases in 2011, rape cases jumped to incredible increase in India of 873 % from 1971 when the oldest case of rape was first recorded by NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau, 2012). Over 414 cases of rape were reported in the national capital Delhi itself in 2010 (National Crime Records Bureau, 2011), while Mumbai followed it with 194 such incidents. In 2011, Delhi reported 568 such cases, while Mumbai reported 218 (National Crime Records Bureau, 2012). The State of World Population Report suggests that in India, a rape is committed every 54 minutes.

Sexual assault is one of the least-reported of all violent crimes in the world. The term 'reporting' is used to refer to the act of discussing sexual assault with the police, or another formal agency, to formally record the experience (Fisher et al., 2003). In the United States, nearly 54% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police (RAINN). The Pentagon estimates that 80% to 90% of sexual assaults go unreported in the United States. One study estimates that only one to four rapes in every 10 committed are actually reported to the police (Clark and Lewis, 1977), though most studies estimate that between 25 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1972) and 50 percent (Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, 1974) of actual and attempted rapes are reported. A 2007 government report in England says "Estimates from research suggest that between 75 and 95 percent of rape crimes are never reported to the police". Estimates for India are that only 1 in 69 cases is actually reported.

Thus, the problem is clearly not limited to a particular country or city, but rather rape is one of the most common forms of violent crime prevalent across the world, and if the statistics are to be believed, one of the most underreported as well. There is a vast hidden population of women who never reveal their victimization to the police. Since 1970, social scientists have inquired into a number of possible causes for women's lack of reporting, ranging from the fears, beliefs, and characteristics of the women themselves, to the nature of the relationship

between the victim and the rapist, and the characteristics of the particular rape (Williams, 1984). A number of possible reasons have been systematically investigated. Some rape victims fear retaliation from their rapist. Some wish to avoid the stigma attached to rape prosecution (Amir, 1971). Victims may be reluctant to report because they feel embarrassed and ashamed (Macdonald, 1971) or because they fear rejection from their spouse and/or family (Eg., Katz and Mazur, 1979). There may also be practical issues involved. As mentioned in Williams (1984), a victim may not have the time to participate in criminal prosecution, especially if she is employed (Amir, 1971), or she may lack confidence in the ability of the criminal justice system to apprehend or punish her rapist (McDermott, 1979).

However, there might be a systematic variation in the personal factors associated with victims that lead to them not reporting sexual assault against them. Research has found that victims might blame themselves for being raped, or fear they will be blamed by family, friends, and especially the police (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1974; Weis and Borges, 1973). The victim's race, age, marital status, and relationship to the rapist are the factors believed to most strongly influence feelings of self-blame and the resulting decision not to report (Williams, 1984). However, studies investigating these factors have produced many results that are in contrast with each other. For instance, McDermott (1979) found that married or previously married victims were more likely to report rape by a stranger, while Russell (1980) found that married women were least likely to report in all types of rape.

In addition, there are several additional factors that also have a role to play in whether or not the victim reports the sexual assault. The relationship between the victim and the rapist has been found to be an important factor in the decision to report (Amir, 1971). A woman who knows her rapist, which is the case in a number of such incidents, may feel that she provoked the attack by encouraging the rapist in some way or that no crime occurred in the first place. She may fear that others will not believe she was raped if she knew the man (Weis and Borges, 1973). Studies have also established that characteristics of both the victims and the perpetrator may influence reporting, while this may also be influenced by the characteristics of the assault itself.

Reporting sexual assault to the police is also associated with high levels of anger toward the assailant (Ruch & Coyne, 1990), low levels of fear that the police will respond in a negative way (Fisher et al., 2000), sustaining an assault-related injury (Felson, Messner, & Hoskin, 1999), use of force by the perpetrator, the use of a weapon by the perpetrator (Koss & Harvey, 1991), the presence of multiple perpetrators (Gidycz & Koss, 1987), use of active resistance (Ruch et al., 2000), and less familiarity with the attacker (Greenfeld et al., 1998). (See Orkowski and Gydicz, 2012)

For instance, Linda S. Williams collected data from 246 female rape victims about the details of the assault, whether the victim reported or not, whether she obtained assistance and other information such as victim's resistance, feelings and social support. Based on cross-tabular analysis and test of significance (chi square), she found that of all the factors under investigation in a classic rape situation, defined by her as one in which (1) the victim is raped in public, abducted from a public place, or raped by an assailant who entered her home by force or without her consent. (2) The assailant is a stranger to the victim. (3) The victim is threatened with, or subjected to, a high degree of force. (4) The victim is seriously injured. (5) The victim resists physically and verbally, the most important factor influencing reporting was the relationship between the rapist and the victim. According to her, a close relationship usually results in a less violent assault, which in turn means less likelihood of injury and medical treatment. Thus women who are raped by someone they know are more likely to lack the evidence which allows them to perceive themselves as true victims of a violent crime. Sex-role socialization encourages this type of rape victim to see herself as a possible contributor to her own victimization.

Another study by Neville and Pugh (1997) on factors influencing reporting of sexual assault by African-American women found that 3 kinds of barriers emerged to reporting behaviours: (a) negative consequences/social influences (Eg., "I believe I would suffer embarrassment if I report") (b) police concerns (Eg., "I thought the police would think it was my fault") and (c) culture-specific factors (Eg., "I felt the police was insensitive to the needs of Black women"). Amongst those who didn't report, social consequences had a significant role to play along with personal perceptions.

In a study by Anders and Christopher (2011), data were constructed from the police reports of 440 adult women who reported a rape to a police department located in a southwestern U.S. city between 1998 and 2004. The study variables were coded based on the rape survivors' and the other involved parties' (e.g., witnesses) descriptions of the assault. Survivors' final prosecution decisions were related to overall support from social ecologies. As hypothesized, rape survivors' final decisions to aid in case prosecution were predicted by support from the three social ecologies: family, friends, social service providers, and police.

Smith and Cook (2008) discovered that the behaviors and attitudes of parents around discussing sexuality create a powerful climate that may influence what, if anything, young women reveal to their parents about their sexual experiences, including rape. Women who received inhibiting messages generally did not disclose to parents.

Considering the fact that underreporting of sexual assault is extremely common, and myriad of factors are involved in determining the reporting behavior of victims, it becomes important both from a legal and well-being based perspective that the factors that may function as barriers to reporting need to be investigated. Three common factors that have been found to emerge in recent research and theoretical considerations are that of victims' Self-esteem, self-blame or feeling of guilt and perceived social stigma. While the influence of self-blame and social-stigma on reporting behavior has been studied in some detail, research has been somewhat lacking when it comes to Self-esteem. However, all three have been recognized as important indicators a victims decision to report

The term Self-esteem comes from a Greek word meaning "reverence for self." The term 'Self-esteem' was coined by William James. Self-esteem is defined as the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and being worthy of happiness (Nathaniel Branden, 1969). According to Branden, Self-esteem is the sum of self-confidence (a feeling of personal capacity) and self-respect (a feeling of personal worth).

However, the construct of Self-esteem (or self-concept) dates back to William James, in the late 19th century, who, in his work *Principles of Psychology*, studied the splitting of our "global self" into "knower self" and "known self". According to James (1890), from this splitting, Self-esteem is born. James conducted studies of Self-esteem based on introspection. According to him, Self-esteem is an affective phenomenon. He saw Self-esteem as a dynamic process affected by successes and failures and thus open to enhancement, and investigated the connection between Self-esteem, values, success and competence. In 1963, Robert White developed a psychodynamic approach to the study of Self-esteem. Like James, White sees Self-esteem as a developmental phenomenon, but more so in that Self-esteem develops gradually being affected by and in turn effecting experience and behavior.

Morris Rosenberg took a socio-cultural approach to the study of Self-esteem in 1965. According to him, Self-esteem is defined as "an attitude (either positive or negative) that we have about ourselves". In this view, Self-esteem is a product of the influences of culture, society, family and interpersonal relationships (Rosenberg, 1979). The amount of Self-esteem an individual has in proportional to the degree to which they positively measure up to a core set of self values. Rosenberg links Self-esteem to anxiety and depression. This theory is based on

the analysis of data taken from large sample group of 5000 subjects. Feelings/beliefs about worthiness are central to this approach. Carl Rogers, the greatest exponent of humanistic psychology, postulated that his principles about unconditional positive regard and self-acceptance as the best way to improve Self-esteem.

Self-esteem has been included as one of the four dimensions that comprise core self-evaluations, one's fundamental appraisal of oneself, along with locus of control, neuroticism, and self-efficacy. The concept of core self-evaluations was analysed by Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997), several work outcomes, specifically, job satisfaction and job performance have been discovered to be predicted by it. Self-esteem may, in fact, be one of the most essential core self-evaluation dimensions because it is the overall value one feels about oneself as a person.

Research has shown that experience of sexual assault can result in a decline in the victim's Self-esteem. The trauma of sexual assault and the resultant victimization can produce feelings of being weak and unworthy (Coates and Winston, 1983) and totally helpless, powerless and out of control (Peterson and Seligman, 1983). It follows that lowered Self-esteem might result from feelings of helplessness and loss of control (Murphy et al, 1988).

Murphy et al (1988) conducted a longitudinal research wherein they studied Self-esteem in a group of 204 rape victims. They were administered the Self-Report Inventory which assesses Self-esteem as one of the components and also administered different self-report tests over different time intervals (1 month, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, 18 months, 2 years). Data analyses using t tests and ANOVA over the 7 time intervals indicated that a rape experience has a significant impact on a victim's Self-esteem. In addition, a clear time course was also found-in the first weeks after the assault, victims have lower Self-esteem as compared to non-victims. Most of these differences decrease over time so that there appear to be few differences between and non-victims after 1 year.

Sexual assault can typically lead to the violation of safety, belongingness and esteem needs. Therefore, it is possible that the individual's Self-esteem is diminished. Since social conditions provide support and opportunity to fulfill basic needs, it is possible that the social stigma and blame directed towards the victim may impede his/her Self-esteem.

An integration of Terror Management Theory and Attachment Theory hypothesizes that Self-esteem develops as a child realizes that anxiety reduces as its needs are met by the caregiver, resulting in the evolution of their 'worldview' and the inextricable correlation between Self-esteem and good relationships (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). When Self-esteem is weak, this underlying anxiety can instigate defensive behavior to threats in contingent domains. Thus, a sexual assault victim is likely to experience poor Self-esteem due to the decline in the quality of social relations often experienced as a result of stigma, self-blame and blame assigned by society to the victim as a consequence of sexual assault. Also, after the occurrence of assault, positive regard is hardly ever experienced by the victim. The victim's notions of self-worth are also affected as a consequence of sexual assault which may result in a decline in Self-esteem

There has been surprisingly little research focusing on the impact of sexual assault on Self-esteem of victims. However, there have been a few studies that compare victims to matched samples of non-victims and find substantial negative effects of rape on various aspects of women's lives, including work life, family life, Self-esteem, sexual functioning, and romantic relationships (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Resick, 1981).

Katz (1991) studied victims of rape who were referred by rape crisis centers or who responded to an advertisement for participants. Women raped by non-strangers blamed themselves more, had lower self-concepts and had higher levels of psychological distress. It has also been found that women who were date raped displayed lower

levels of sexual and other Self-esteem (Shapiro & Shwartz, 1997).

There could be many causes to this decline in Self-esteem and self-concept. Damage to a woman's reputation may also serve as input to recalibrate victims' self-perceptions of attractiveness and mate value (Perilloux et al, 2011). Another could be the lack of control and helplessness experienced by victims during the incident and afterwards. Still further, feeling of self-blame and feeling stupid or having made bad choices and even social stigma could lead to a decline in Self-esteem.

Thus, it has been found that victims' Self-esteem tends to decline after experiencing sexual assault. This decline in Self-esteem has been shown to be linked to underreporting of assault (Amir, 1971; Williams, 1984). Thus, it is possible to infer that Self-esteem tends to influence reporting behavior of victims. A victim with low Self-esteem would likely possess less confidence and thus, would be less likely to report. At the same time, there might be feelings of low self-worth leading to victims not reporting since they don't see themselves as 'worth it' or don't think there is much point in pursuing this. All of this could contribute to underreporting.

While specific theories postulate different origins of the process of decline in Self-esteem in victims, there is an understanding that this decline regardless of its origin does have a role to play in underreporting of sexual assault.

However, much more research is required to establish the exact role and the extent of the role played by the victim's Self-esteem in the reporting of assault.

References

Amir, Menachem 1971 Patterns in Forcible Rape. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Anders, Mary C. and Christopher, Scott F. (2011) A Socioecological Model of Rape Survivors' Decisions to Aid in Case Prosecution *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2011 35: 92

Branden, N. (1969). *The Psychology of Self-esteem*. New York: Bantam.

Burgess, Ann W., and Lynda L. Holmstrom 1974 "Crisis and counselling requests of rape victims." Nursing Research 23(3):196-202.

Coates, D.,& Winston, T. (1983). Counteracting the deviance of depression: Peer support groups for victims. Journal of Social Issues 39169-194

Felson, R. B., Messner, S. F., & Hoskin, A. (1999). The victim–offender relationship and call the police in assaults. *Criminology, 37*, 931-947. \

Fisher, B., Cullen, F.T., & Turner, M.G. (2000). Extent and Nature of the Sexual Victimization of College Women: A National-Level Analysis. Final Report. National Institute of Justice.

Greenfeld, L. A., Rand, M. R., Craven, D., Klaus, P. A., Perkins, C. A., Ringel, C., et al. (1998). *Violence by intimates: Analysis of data on crimes by current or former spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Katz, Sedelle, and Mary Ann Mazur (1979) Understanding the Rape Victim: A Synthesis of Research Findings. New York: Wiley.

James, Willims (1980) The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1 Dover Publications; Reprint edition (June 1, 1950)

Judge, T. A., Locke, E. A., & Durham, C. C. (1997). The dispositional causes of job satisfaction: A core evaluations approach. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 19,* 151-188

Koss, M. P., Gidycz, C. A., & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The scope of rape: Incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of higher education students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *55*, 162-170.

Koss, M. P., & Harvey, M. R. (1991). *The rape victim: Clinical and community interventions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage

Lorenne M. G. Clark & Debra J. Lewis (1977) Rape: The price of coercive sexuality. Toronto: Women's Press

Macdonald, John M. 1971 Rape Offenders and Their Victims. Springfield, IL: Thomas.

McDermott, M. Joan 1979 Rape Victimization in 26 American Cities. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service, U.S. Government Printing Office.

Mikulincer M, Florian V, Hirschberger G. (2003) The existential function of close relationships: introducing death into the science of love. Pers Soc Psychol Rev. 2003;7(1):20-40.

National Crime Records Bureau (2011, 12) Crime Statistics Report

Neville, Helena A. and Pugh, Aalece O. (1997) General and Culture-specific Factors Influencing African American Women's Reporting Patterns and Perceived Social Support Following Sexual Assault : An Exploratory Investigation *Violence Against Women* 1997 3: 361

Orchowski, Lindsay M. and Gidycz, Christine A. (2012) To Whom Do College Women Confide Following Sexual Assault? A Prospective Study of Predictors of Sexual Assault Disclosure and Social Reactions *Violence Against Women* 2012 18: 264 originally published online 23 April 2012

Peterson, C. and Seligman, M.E.P. (1984). Causal explanations as a risk factor for depression: Theory and evidence. Psychological Review, 91, 347-374.

Alloy, L.B., Peterson, C., Abramson, L.Y., and Seligman, M.E.P. (1984). Attributional style and the generality of learned helplessness. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46, 681-687.

Resick, Patricia A. (1993) The Psychological Impact of Rape *Interpers Violence* 1993 8: 223

Rosenberg, M, (1979). Conceiving the Self. USA: Basic Books

Ruch, L. R., & Coyne, B. J. (1990, August). *Reporting sexual assault to the police: A discriminant analysis*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Washington, DC.

Ruch, L. R., Coyne, B. J., & Perrone, P. A. (2000). *Reporting sexual assault to the police in Hawaii* (NCJ 188264). Washington, DC: National Criminal Justice Reference Service.

Russell, Mary 1980 "Rape victims and police reporting." Canada's Mental Health 28(2):14-16.

Weis, Kurt, and Sandra Borges 1973 "Victimology and rape: The case of the legitimate victim." Issues in Criminology 8(2):71-115.

Shapiro, Brenda L. and Schwarz, Conrad J. (1997) Date Rape : Its Relationship to Trauma Symptoms and Sexual Self-esteem *J Interpers Violence* 1997 12: 407

Smith, Sharon G. and Cook, Sarah L. (2008) Disclosing Sexual Assault to Parents : The Influence of Parental Messages About Sex *Violence Against Women* 2008 14: 1326

White, Robert. (1963) Ego and Reality in Psychoanalytic Theory. International Universities Press

Williams, Linda S. (1984) The Classic Rape: When Do Victims Report? Social Problems, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Apr., 1984), pp. 459-467

Wyatt, Gail E.; Guthrie, Donald; Notgrass, Cindy M. (1992) Differential effects of women's child sexual abuse and subsequent sexual revictimization. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, Vol 60(2), Apr 1992, 167-173

About the Author

Himani Singh is a B.A (Hons) Psychology, Year II student at Lady Shri Ram College for Women. She has an active interest in various social scientific fields, especially psychology, politics and sociology. Within psychology, she is interested in the fields of social psychology and organizational behavior, which she hopes to be able to pursue on a professional level. An added interest is in the fields of social work and research.