

Article 26

Rape Culture Revisited: Concepts and Action for Counselors Helping Survivors

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Leigh A. Green, Melissa Gaa, Rebel I. Mercado, Laura Dawson-Fend,
and Amanda M. Partin

Green, Leigh A., is an assistant professor at West Texas A&M University. She is currently researching cultural effects on survivors of rape, in addition to the changing dynamics in veteran transition.

Gaa, Melissa, is an assistant professor at Tarleton State University. Her research interests include women, LGBT issues, and feminist techniques in counseling.

Mercado, Rebel I., is a doctoral candidate at Texas Tech University. Her dissertation topic covers women's issues in counseling.

Dawson-Fend, Laura, is an assistant professor at Eastern New Mexico University. She is currently researching sex trafficking and law enforcement relationships.

Partin, Amanda M., is a graduate student at Eastern New Mexico University.

Abstract

According to Elwood et al. (2011), between 1995 and 2003, over 1.3 million female adolescents experienced at least one rape. When discussing rape with a victim, it is important for the counselor to avoid secondarily traumatizing them. When counselors educate themselves on rape culture in order to better understand client psyche, they can provide more effective treatment to clients. This article discusses in-depth information about rape culture, highlights principles of advocating for sexual assault survivors, and explains feminist counseling techniques that can help build a counselor-client relationship and empower and identify strengths in the client.

Rape culture is characterized by prevalent attitudes and practices that normalize sexual assault and lend to the creation of an environment in which the chance of a rape occurring is dramatically increased (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1991; Herman, 1984). In September 2014, at Texas Tech University, the Texas Epsilon Chapter of Phi Delta Theta displayed a banner at a weekend party with the phrase "No Means Yes, Yes Means

Anal” along with a sprinkler shaped like a woman’s vagina (Ursch, 2014). The president of the fraternity issued a statement apologizing for the error in judgment indicating that these actions do not represent a general attitude of tolerance or belief in the acceptance of sexual assault by their members (Ursch, 2014). If the banner is not a representation of a general attitude toward women held by the Texas Epsilon Chapter of Phi Delta Theta, then the banner may be indicative of a more pervasive rape culture in the United States. The primary purpose of this article is to create a discussion among counselors and other professionals about the Texas Tech incident and other examples of a rape culture across the country.

It is important that counselors educate themselves on rape culture in order to better understand client psyche and provide more effective treatment to clients who present to counseling. Counselor training programs tend to focus on the aftermath emotions, such as guilt, shame, and avoidance, and less on the culture of rape, how it perpetuates these feelings, and how it affects our clients—both men and women. It is vital that counselors understand the different facets of rape culture and how this culture impacts clients who seek treatment. This article provides in-depth information about rape culture with substantive information regarding how it is perpetuated through the media, language, and attitudes about sexual assault. Secondly, the authors highlight the principles of advocating for sexual assault survivors and offer resources to help with counselor advocacy. Lastly, feminist counseling techniques will be explained that comprise the many aspects of a client’s life, including social, cultural, economic, familial, and political dimensions. It is within these dimensions that rape culture enables survivors to self-blame by normalizing and excusing sexual assault. Rape permeates many aspects of the survivor’s life and through increased counselor understanding and advocacy, and an increased repertoire of techniques, counselors can better support clients in their recovery and adjustment.

Rape Statistics

According to Elwood et al. (2011), over 1.3 million female adolescents experienced at least one rape between 1995 and 2003. This number does not include males, nor does it include other sexual assaults such as coercion and molestation. Risk factors associated with sexual assault include women with a household income of less than \$50,000 per year and women under the age of 25 (Black et al., 2011). Approximately one in six women and one in 33 men in the United States have experienced an attempted or completed rape at some time in their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Furthermore, approximately one in two women and one in five men reported experiencing other forms of sexual violence in their lifetime (Black et al., 2010). Elwood et al. (2011) also noted that post-traumatic stress disorder has been shown to increase an adolescent’s risk of additional sexual assault. In the article, Elwood et al. go on to state that “individuals who reported PTSD were almost four times the risk of experiencing a new rape than individuals without PTSD” (p. 171).

Rape Culture

In May 2014, in Santa Barbara, California, Elliot Rodgers killed six students and left behind video and written manifestos stating that he wanted to kill sorority women due to feelings of rejection by this group. Part of his manifesto was as follows:

For the last eight years of my life, since I hit puberty, I've been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires, all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection and sex and love to other men, never to me. (Rucker, 2014)

Some may say that this is just the ramblings of someone who is affected by mental illness. In fact, public comments following media coverage of Rodgers referenced him as “the usual, whackos with guns,” “crazy,” and “spoiled brat” (Rucker, 2014). However, the belief that sex was owed to him just for being a man is actually part of an overarching societal acceptance that women are commodities (Hirschman & Stern, 1994). This belief is part of what makes up the term known as rape culture. Rape culture has often been used to model behavior within social groups and includes survivor blaming, sexual objectification, and trivializing rape. There is disagreement over what the definition of rape culture is and to what degree any given society meets the criteria to be considered a rape culture (Roze, 2012; Sommers, 2010). Rape culture has been suggested to correlate with other social factors and behaviors such as rape myths, increased incidences of racism, homophobia, ageism, classism, religious intolerance, and other forms of discrimination (Aosved & Long, 2006; Suarez, 2010). In addition to normalizing sexual assault, rape culture includes the idea that rape is inevitable, that the rape survivor was “asking for it,” or that consent is assumed. Blaming the survivor is often one of the outcomes of a rape culture.

Thus, American culture “produces rapists when it encourages the socialization of men to subscribe to values of control and dominance, callousness and competitiveness, and anger and aggression and when it discourages the expression by men of vulnerability, sharing, and cooperation” (Herman, 1984, p. 49). In America, the focus is on teaching individuals, primarily women, how to avoid being raped rather than teaching both men and women the value of consent. When the news broke about the young man who purposefully went looking to shoot down women because he believed they owed him sex, the common comments linked to these media reports were blaming him for being “crazy” (Vega, Gard, Vojtech, Keohane, & Berardi, 2014). However, when people hear about a woman being raped, thoughts such as, “she should've known better than to walk through the park alone at night,” “she was probably drunk and changed her mind after the fact,” and “she was probably asking for it,” represent the commonality of rape culture. These thoughts continue to perpetuate victim blaming by completely removing responsibility from the perpetrator. It is the survivor's responsibility to prove that his or her actions and reputation did not facilitate the rape. Victim blaming is not as automatically associated with other violent crimes. Rape is one of the only crimes in which the victim is first questioned as to how they made themselves the victim, as opposed to other crimes such as burglary, identity theft, and even murder.

Judgments based on rape culture, against women in particular, are frequently illustrated in the media. For example, in August 2012, in Steubenville, Ohio, two high

school football players were charged with raping a young girl at a party (Almasy, 2013). The girl was intoxicated, unconscious, and was unaware of the rape until pictures and videos surfaced through social media. The two boys had taken her to several different parties and had raped her many times over the course of several hours. When the story made headlines, people started blaming the girl—saying that she got herself into trouble by being too drunk. A lawyer for one of the boys also argued that because the victim was unconscious, no one really knew whether she wanted to have sex or not. The media also focused on how this charge against the two young men was going to ruin their promising futures in college athletics, while there was no coverage about how this experience could affect the female victim. In fact, the added victim-blaming of the young girl included opinions such as (1) she got herself into trouble by being drunk, (2) she really was asking for it, (3) and she is ruining two promising young men's lives.

In a similar case in Maryville, Missouri, a 15-year-old girl reported having sex with a 17-year-old football player (Draper, 2013). She said it was not consensual while he said it was consensual. The charges against the football player were later dropped because of insufficient evidence and witness refusal to cooperate. During this time, the victim and her family “allegedly endured a barrage of threats which ultimately drove them from the town” (Slifer, 2013, para. 19). Both of these cases highlight similar issues as they relate to how society and the media portray survivors of sexual or alleged sexual assault. These implicit messages make the trauma all the more painful. As counselors, we need to be aware of this rape culture and how these messages can hinder the recovery of survivors. Counselors can serve as advocates to help survivors better understand rape culture and decrease self-blame. The trauma related to a sexual assault is difficult for survivors to cope with, without adding the stigmatization that survivors are responsible for the rape event itself.

Advocacy for Survivors

When working within a society of rape culture, advocacy for survivors is critical for their growth and success in treatment. Advocacy has many facets, including awareness, changing attitudes, and empowerment to help facilitate the answer within society. Sexual assault advocacy must start with awareness. Sexual assault has become a public health epidemic that continues to harm both men and women, yet it still remains largely unnoticed by most Americans (Carmody, 2006). By advocating for clients, counselors are revealing the truth about sexual assault and the important role of sexual assault advocacy and advocacy groups. Despite the critical importance of advocacy, Carmody (2006) suggested that many barriers currently exist in sexual assault agencies that impede the ultimate goals of survivor support and sexual assault eradication. Issues with funding, staffing, law enforcement, uniformity, and education are all described as reasons why sexual assault advocates struggle to meet the needs of survivors within their community.

Funding is a common issue faced by many organizations. A lack of funding for sexual assault advocacy groups means that survivors must wait for variable amounts of time or travel varying distances to receive survivor support that is separate from the criminal justice system. Related to decreased funding is limited staffing. This issue also results in survivors having to wait following an attack or after their disclosure to receive

the emotional support needed. In addition, limited staffing has resulted in language barriers (Carmody, 2006). With increased funding, agencies could employ bilingual community members who can communicate with other survivors who prefer to speak in their native language (Carmody, 2006).

Many advocates indicated that a lack of uniformity, both inside and among agencies, between counties, and between public protective service branches limits their effectiveness and their ability to support survivors. Many survivor advocates have suggested that having a state or nationwide procedure for addressing sexual assault would be beneficial (Carmody, 2006). For example, some areas of the country allow anonymous reporting, while others may require polygraph tests in order to proceed with a criminal investigation (Carmody, 2006). There are many approaches to addressing the legal and emotional needs of a survivor; however, some communicate support while others communicate suspicion.

Advocates also indicated that public education curriculum can be problematic in its efforts to inform community members and their children about sexual assault. While some schools embrace sexual assault awareness, others reject such issues and deny trainings in this area to the school system (Carmody, 2006). This issue could be particularly salient in areas of the country where sexual health and education are not included in the school curriculum.

Once these barriers have been mitigated, counselors can begin advocacy efforts through campaigns to increase prosocial attitudes and behaviors with respect to sexual assault and bystander involvement. In addition, both male and female populations should be educated about the effects of stereotypical gender biases as well as the role that communicating and interpreting consent can have in sexual assault. These variables, used in conjunction, may decrease the incidence of sexual assault, as well as promote the welfare and worth of the survivor (Carmody, 2006). To increase awareness, public campaigns indicating the rates of sexual assault should be widely advertised.

Sexual assault education, then, is the process of changing existing attitudes among society that sex is power, thus further decreasing the rape culture. Goals of an educational program are far-reaching and comprehensive. First, programs can help foster a society in which a girl or woman is not shamed for making a choice that she later regrets—where she does not have to defend herself against “crying rape” and thus facilitating a dynamic shift in society’s interaction with rape survivors. Second, programs can help create a society that understands women often feel pressured and fear for their physical safety when they say “yes” but do not want to engage in sexual activity. Third, programs can help create a society where men realize that consent given when in an altered mental state (e.g., drugs or alcohol) is not consent. Fourth, programs can help create a society where women do not perceive their sexual attractiveness as their most easily accessed source of power. Next, programs can help create a society where men do not think in terms of “sexual conquest” but respect, affection, admiration, and even love and intimacy. Lastly, programs can help create a society where promiscuity in men is not considered to be normal or even admirable, and promiscuity in women is not considered to be shameful.

One idea of awareness education is to introduce visual representations of prosocial behavior with respect to sexual assault intervention. Katz, Olin, Herman, and DuBois (2013) found that willingness to help others at risk for sexual assault increased among college students who were exposed to “Know Your Power” posters, which depict

possible sexual assault or violent situations in which others notice and intervene in order to promote the safety of the potential survivor. The researchers also found that willingness to help further increased when the posters depicted familiar people and situations. This research suggests that bystander effects decrease when individuals are exposed to prosocial models (Katz et al., 2013). Perhaps this effect could also be found through the use of public service announcements and billboards. This appears to be a relatively unexplored area of sexual assault advocacy.

The second fundamental part in sexual assault advocacy is encouraging understanding of the importance of sexual consent. In American culture, men are assumed to frequently desire sex while women are assumed to be more rigid and selective about sex. This stereotypical belief suggests that a male's sexual consent is implied and it is a female's job to overtly communicate consent or nonconsent. Males who accept such gender stereotypes may inaccurately perceive a lack of rejection as sexual consent (Jozkowski Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). Encouraging the public, males and females alike, to require verbal communication of consent could decrease the rates of coerced sexual assault and thereby further the cause of sexual assault advocacy. Individuals often use consent signals, such as putting hair behind an ear, biting a lip, or batting eyelashes, that are less explicit than verbalization, while some individuals use no response to signal their consent (Jozkowski et al., 2014). The ambiguous nature of communication and interpretation of consent may be a contributing factor to sexual assault, particularly coerced sexual interactions.

Jozkowski et al. (2014), suggested that sexual assault advocacy groups should educate the public that a lack of "no" is not sufficient to establish consent. Furthermore, the researchers found that college students' definitions of sexual consent were largely marked by either an agreement or permission. Only 16% of college students indicated verbal cues that consent meant saying "yes" to sex (Jozkowski et al., 2014). Other indicators of consent consisted of nonverbal cues and a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues, such as moving closer and starting to touch the other person and telling them they wanted to have sex, respectively. The most frequent response of college students, 26%, indicated that they would make the first move or initiate the behavior to begin sexual contact (Jozkowski et al., 2014). This finding may be related to gender stereotypes in that males and females communicate and perceive sexual consent in different ways. These gender differences are also an important aspect related to consent. Males are more likely to rely on nonverbal cues to communicate and interpret sexual consent, while females are more likely to rely on verbal cues to communicate and interpret sexual consent (Jozkowski et al., 2014).

In response to the literature and increased sexual assaults on college campuses, California passed SB 967 which defines when consent is given for a sexual encounter. In the bill, "affirmative consent means affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity" (California S. Res. 967, 2014). Lawmakers and advocates claim that the change "provide(s) consistency across campuses and challenge the notion that survivors must have resisted assault in order to have valid complaints" (Lin, 2014, para. 7). Critics claim that the legislation is "overreaching and sends universities into murky, unfamiliar legal waters" (Lin, 2014, para. 8). Regardless of the outcome, strides are being made to increase the proactive stance of consent among those engaging in sexual behavior.

In conclusion, advocating against sexual assault is currently a need that can help empower victims and overcome barrier issues with funding, staffing, law enforcement, uniformity, and education (Carmody, 2006). In conjunction with providing support for victims, advocacy groups must also address barrier issues. Positive changes in these areas will allow survivor advocates to more effectively do their job. While trying to address the barriers, sexual assault advocacy groups should focus on educating the public about the incidence and prevalence of sexual assault and violence, gender differences in communication and interpretation of consent, and the impact of gender stereotypes. It will also be imperative to provide the public with prosocial models via campaigns that promote community intervention against sexual assault. While education can be used as advocacy for the public, counselors can use their knowledge and skills in feminist techniques to support clients in their recovery.

Feminist Counseling and Counselors Role

A feminist counseling approach maintains equality and fairness for everyone while attempting to liberate men and women from dysfunctional, power-imbalanced roles. This holistic approach considers all factors influencing individuals, including social, cultural, economic, political, and family. Despite some belief that a feminist approach is specifically designed for women, feminist counseling can be used with any client. Oppression and/or power imbalance is not always experienced by one gender. Oppression and power imbalance can weigh heavily on an individual's experience and ability to deal with traumatic experiences. Williams and Barber (2004) purported that power is a main influence on the development of a person's psyche. An individual's experience with oppression is how they learn about themselves and others.

Feminist counseling allows all people, regardless of gender, to freely express themselves in healthy ways that may not always be the societal expectation. This approach helps clients become free from personal barriers and develop skills to attain goals. Feminist counseling maintains a commitment for social change to benefit both the client and community. A feminist approach examines the greater context of a person's life, not just internal conflicts and concerns (Williams & Barber, 2004).

Feminist counseling can be implemented in all aspects of counseling, including family, career, assessment, crises, research, and training (Evans, Kincade, Marbley, & Seem, 2005). Counselors working with sexual assault and rape victims can employ a feminist approach to help build a counselor-client relationship, empower, and identify strengths. Counselors empower their clients by recognizing strengths, examining societal and cultural expectations, and creating skills to overcome barriers. One of the main tenets of feminist therapy is empowerment. Therefore, counselors recognize disempowering forces and work towards empowerment of the client.

Mental health professionals utilizing a feminist approach believe in an egalitarian relationship with their client. Counselors applying feminist techniques are more likely to self-disclose than others using different counseling techniques (Corsini & Wedding, 2005). This self-disclosure is viewed as a significant part of therapy in helping to create an equal relationship. Furthermore, the equality and understanding environment created between the counselor and client may enhance the therapeutic outcome.

Counselors recognize sexism as well as many other facets (economic, cultural, social, familial, etc.) that can affect clients' behaviors and attitudes. Sexism is not singled out as the main effect on behaviors and counselors recognize the influence of external issues on clients' well-being. Counselors utilizing feminist therapy focus on external context and individual differences (Williams & Barber, 2004).

Most importantly, feminist therapy does not blame victims. Counselors accept and validate their clients' experiences and feelings. Clients must never feel they are blamed for situations such as rape or sexual assault. Counselors incorporating feminist therapy actively involve themselves in ending oppression while respecting differences. Advocacy plays a large role in feminist therapy with both the counselor and the client.

Feminist Technique

There are many aspects to applying feminist technique in counseling. More specifically, feminist counseling includes power, empowerment, valuing and affirming, equality, consideration of all facets of a client's life, examination of societal beliefs and influence on clients, individual differences, and collaboration (Evans et al., 2005; Whalen et al., 2004; Williams & Barber, 2004). Counselors using this approach focus on individual experiences and external influences. Counselors understand that each client's sexual assault or rape experiences differ from others' and that each individual's coping skills and reaction may vary.

Utilizing a feminist technique, counselors recognize the many aspects of their client's life, including social, cultural, economic, familial, and political. Counselors understand there are many different factors influencing a client's behavior and attitude. Societal norms are challenged and counselors refuse to encourage clients to adjust to these expectations. Instead, counselor and client strive for change rather than adjustment. Clients are not encouraged to "adjust" to the circumstances and societal beliefs, but rather to promote social justice and change towards a positive and healthy acceptance.

There is a collaboration between counselor and client with an emphasis on equality between the two. Because of this collaboration, communication and understanding between the counselor and client is more emphasized (Williams & Barber, 2004). The counselor is understanding and accepting of the client as well as valuing and affirming of diversity. The counselor seeks to empower the client and focus on personal validation by addressing negative self-concepts clients have learned over time. Counselors may focus on client strengths, assuming the client is a capable healthy person who is experiencing difficulty (Whalen et al., 2004).

This approach understands individual differences and how experience has influenced clients. Societal and cultural experiences shape individual behaviors and attitudes. A consideration of these experiences is necessary to progress through therapy. The counselor-client relationship is open and understanding of these individual differences. This enables a stronger therapeutic relationship.

A feminist technique can be beneficial to working with rape and sexual assault victims. This technique enables counselors to view each client's experience individually while bringing forth client strengths and empowerment. This process allows counselors and clients to build a trusting, safe environment for therapy. Clients are able to openly

explore their experience and examine external factors influencing their behaviors and attitudes.

How Counselors Can Impact the Rape Culture

As discussed, rape culture is characterized by prevalent attitudes and practices that normalize sexual assault. Counselors who want to encourage change on a macro level regarding the culture of rape must begin with the socialization of boys and girls to know that everyone is entitled to control over their own bodies, that rape is not allowed, and that verbal consent is necessary from both parties. Furthermore, a conversation must take place not only within the counseling profession but with the general public about the prevalence of rape culture and the steps needed in order to change from a culture of terror to one of mutual respect and empathy. To effectively help survivors of rape, counselors need to be educated on the prevalence of rape culture, which translates to the underlying psyche of clients that present to counseling. Truly understanding that the treatment of sexual assault survivors is not only about the aftermath emotions, such as guilt, shame, and avoidance, but also about the culture of rape, how it perpetuates these feelings, and how it affects our clients, both men and women, is critical for success. Educating counselors allows them to empower and advocate for clients. In addition to understanding and advocacy, utilization of feminist techniques when working with sexual assault survivors empowers, affirms, and interrupts the acceptance of societal beliefs about sexual trauma. Feminist techniques create a strong model not only for the women who have experienced sexual assault, but for all victims and perpetrators alike. Feminist techniques attempt to create an egalitarian environment in which the client is the expert on themselves and the counselor models mutual respect and limited power differentials. Feminist techniques allow counselors to open a conversation about rape culture in a way that is empathic to both men and women allowing both genders to take their place in creating change. Without both genders working together to create change, there is little real hope of success, however, if both genders will agree and actively work to end the culture of rape, then a culture of true equality will be within reach.

In addition to understanding rape culture, advocating against it, and using feminist techniques with survivors, future research in this area needs to focus on the effectiveness of prevention programming. Many new initiatives (e.g., California SB 967), and old initiatives, need to gain further empirical data to support them. One such area would be to determine what effect the programs presented on college campuses that encourage affirmative consent and individual rights in a sexual encounter have on the rates of sexual violence. This type of research study is key to building momentum and financial support for future advocacy.

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