

**Understanding Sexual Assault:
The Ways in which Young Women Conceptualize
Sexual Violence**

by

Sheila Wong

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APPROVAL

Name: Sheila Wong
Degree: Master of Arts (Sociology)
Title of Thesis: *“Understanding Sexual Assault: The Ways in Which Young Women Conceptualize Sexual Violence”*
Examining Committee:

Dr. Kathleen Millar
Chair
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dr. Wendy Chan
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dr. Ann Travers
Supervisor
Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dr. Joan Brockman
External Examiner
Professor, Department of Criminology
Simon Fraser University

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Abstract

This thesis examines how women interact with rape myth portrayals of sexual assault in their everyday lives. Guided by a modified radical feminist framework, my research posits that sexual assault and rape myths limit women's autonomy and self-actualization. Between February and June, 2013, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 young women in Metro Vancouver and inquired about their thoughts and attitudes towards sexual violence. The findings of this project indicate that women both resist and internalize rape myth attitudes and beliefs, mainly due to the simultaneous presence of dominant and countercultural (feminist) ideologies in contemporary society. Several emerging possibilities for social change are suggested.

Keywords: Rape myths, sexual assault, rape, semi-structured interview, radical feminism, gender

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

In Canada, as well as many other countries all over the world, sexual assault is still a widespread concern for women. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (2008), for example, approximately one in three women in the world have experienced some form of sexual violence (as cited in Bohner et al. 2009). Furthermore, statistical studies and surveys indicate that sexual assaults are most often committed by men against women (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010). These gendered trends reflect the ways in which women are subordinated within the patriarchal system (Bryson, 2003).

Indeed, patriarchal societies tend to justify sexual violence against women by means of rape myths, which are persistent attitudes and false beliefs that rationalize, deny, or trivialize female sexual victimization (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Burt, 1980). Examples of rape myths include, but are not limited to, “only bad girls get raped” (Burt, 1980, p. 217), “the victim lied about the assault” (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007, p. 731), and “rapists are mentally ill” (Garland, 2009, p. 19). Rape myths are heteronormative in that they often assume the perpetrator to be male and the victim to be female. Other forms of sexual assault, such as male sexual victimization, are rarely acknowledged within this narrow conceptual framework (Rumney, 2008; Weiss, 2010).

Rape myths are also intertwined with prevailing stereotypes about race and class. For instance, the dominant culture tends to depict black or aboriginal women as promiscuous and deviant (White et al. 1998; Maier, 2008; Neville et al. 2004; Donovan & Williams, 2002). Thus, racialized women are more likely to be accused of “asking for it” or have their experiences of sexual violence dismissed by legal authorities (Razack, 1994; Stevenson et al. 2009; Foley et al. 1995). The same trend exists for class categories, in which working/lower class women tend to be blamed for sexual assault (Skeggs, 1997; Philips, 2009). Racialized men or men from working/lower class backgrounds, on the other hand, are more likely to be depicted as perpetrators of sexual

violence (Moorti, 2002; Duru, 2004; George & Martinez, 2002; Benedict, 1992). In other words, rape myths also reflect other simultaneous, interlocking dimensions of inequality.

These dominant attitudes and beliefs can be transmitted through numerous channels, ranging from popular media outlets to legal institutions (Franiuk et al. 2008; Brinson, 1992; Cuklanz, 2000; Flood & Pease, 2009; Anderson, 2010). This ubiquitous presence of rape myths can have tremendous impact on women's everyday lives (Madriz, 1997). As a manifestation of misogynic discourses, rape myths are geared towards scaring or shunning women into rigid gender and sexual roles (Ryan, 2011; Shechory & Idisis, 2006; Chapleau et al. 2007). For instance, women may become irrationally preoccupied with their personal safety, or use rape myths as cautionary tales on how to avoid sexual victimization (Ryan, 2011; Madriz, 1997, Stanko, 1995). This reinforces the idea that women are passive, vulnerable, and helpless on their own (King & Roberts, 2011).

Studies on this subject matter suggest that rape myths exert considerable influence on women's conceptualizations of sexual assault and the choices that they make in their everyday lives (Day, 1994; Gardner, 1990; Madriz, 1997). For instance, Madriz's (1997) study found that many women employed a variety of safety strategies, such as avoiding going out alone, wearing baggy clothing to avoid unwanted attention, and/or carrying pepper spray for self-defence purposes. These safety strategies correspond with rape myths that depict women's non-traditional behaviours, such as binge drinking or wearing revealing clothing, as triggers for sexual assault.

Justification of Research

While there are a considerable number of research studies on women's attitudes and beliefs towards sexual assault, they tend to employ quantitative research methods such as standardized questionnaires (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Shechory & Idisis, 2006; Franiuk et al. 2008). In quantifying things such as rape myth attitudes, I argue that much of women's voices are re/misinterpreted or even silenced. For instance, two participants may give the same rating on a rape myth acceptance scale, but their justification behind that rating may be very different. Furthermore, research studies tend to focus on how rape myths perpetuate "secondary victimization", in which sexual assault victims are stigmatized by society (Kreisel, 2009; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Campbell et al. 2001; Belknap, 1996; Schuller et al., 2010). There is a

distinct lack of qualitative research studies dedicated to exploring women's thoughts about sexual assault in their everyday lives, especially in relation to prevalent rape myths.

A qualitative examination of women's interactions with rape myths in their everyday lives will prove fruitful in several ways. First, the results of this study may help reveal previously unnoticed factors that influence rape myth attitudes and/or help elaborate results from quantitative studies. The scope of this project will also contribute to the growing body of qualitative research literature on the effects and/or prevalence of rape myths outside of the immediate context of sexual assault. Lastly, this thesis project aims to re-establish the importance of exploring women's agency and subjective interpretations, especially when it comes to gendered topics such as sexual violence.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how young women conceptualize sexual assault in their everyday lives, especially in relation to rape myths. Rather than examining the ways in which hegemonic ideologies or large-scale societal structures unilaterally affect individuals, I take a bottom-up approach and emphasize women's personal thoughts and subjective interpretations of sexual violence. Thus, my project constructs women as active agents, constantly interpreting, reacting to, and making sense of their surroundings.

Research Questions

As mentioned above, I am primarily concerned with how young women interact with dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault, and whether or not their subsequent understandings of sexual assault have any impact on their everyday lives. In other words, how do women navigate a society that is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses, and how much awareness and agency is involved in this process? Assuming that individuals have the agency to internalize, resist, or negotiate even the most powerful social norms, how women experience and react to rape myths will play an equally paramount role in determining the effects of these beliefs and attitudes. Thus, I will also explore the potential (dis)connection between women's personal ideas of sexual assault and prominent rape myth attitudes and beliefs.

Definition of Key Terms

Throughout this thesis report, I make repeated references to some terms pertaining to sexual violence and its surrounding discourses. In this section, I will explain and clarify these terms within the context of my research topic.

Patriarchy: Patriarchy refers to “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (Lerner, 1986, p. 239). This term conceptualizes instances of women’s oppression, such as the gendered pattern of sexual assault, as a product of societal structures and systems rather than individual, isolated incidents.

Sexual assault: While the term “rape” carries the connotation of vaginal intercourse, the term “sexual assault” includes “the phenomenon of rape, attempted rape, rape by threat of force, and coercion” (Garland, 2009, p. 4). Sexual assault thus refers to any form of sexual violence, such as anal penetration or non-penetrative acts, as well as attempts to commit such acts.

Rape myth: Heteronormative attitudes and beliefs that trivialize, justify, or deny male sexual aggression against women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). These myths tend to excuse the male perpetrator’s actions by placing the blame onto the female victim.

Rape culture: An environment that justifies sexual assault and promotes rape myth attitudes/beliefs (Burnett et al. 2009; Boswell & Spade, 1996).

Heteronormativity: Defined by Berlant and Warner (1998) as “the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged” (p. 548). Rape myths are heteronormative in that they depict sexual coercion as a strictly heterosexual phenomenon, with the man as the sexual aggressor and the woman as the recipient of unwanted sexual attention.

Hegemonic discourses: Forms of communication that serve the interests of ruling groups in society. In the context of this paper, rape myths are an example of a

hegemonic discourse, as they (i.e. rape myths) help to maintain dominant sexual and gender relations.

Dominant sex/gender roles: Stereotypes that reinforce the gender hierarchy by conceptualizing men as sexually aggressive and powerful and women as passive and obsequious (King & Roberts, 2011). Rape myths reinforce the gender dichotomy, in which women are viewed in relation to and subordinate to men, by portraying sexual assault as rightful sanction for deviating from these hegemonic feminine norms.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter Two presents an overarching account of existing academic literature on sexual assault and rape myths in North American societies. This chapter focuses on scholarly analyses of rape myths and how these attitudes and beliefs can affect women in various ways, such as inhibiting recovery from sexual assault or preventing women from achieving their full potentials.

Chapter Three details the theoretical and methodological frameworks that guide this research project. The theoretical framework consists of radical feminist theory, intersectionality, as well as Hunter's (2006) notion of fluid-essentialism and Connell's (1995) hierarchical framework of masculinities. In terms of methodological framework, the social constructivist grounded theory is utilised to ensure that this project is data-driven and reflexive in every step.

Chapter Four provides a brief qualitative overview of the research findings in accordance with three overarching interview topics: personal attitudes towards sexual assault, interactions with dominant portrayals of sexual assault, and potential impacts on the everyday life. Significant themes within each topic are located and discussed within this chapter.

Chapter Five offers a qualitative analysis of key themes and findings in this study regarding young women's awareness of and interactions with dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault in their everyday lives. Women's attitudes and beliefs towards sexual assault are simultaneously influenced by a variety of potentially

conflicting factors, such as personal mindset/interpretations, socialization agents, recent events, and countercultural ideologies. Furthermore, some participants' contradicting thoughts about sexual assault indicate that attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault are fluid and multilayered.

Chapter Six summarizes central themes, discusses potential limitations of the study, and suggests directions for future research on this subject matter.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

The sexual revolution and onset of second wave feminism in the 1960s has prompted an interest in studying women's issues within a female-oriented academic setting (Hunter, 2006; Bryson, 2003). In particular, radical feminists argue that scholars need to help dispel the current sense of normalcy in regards to gender inequality by exposing the ways in which patriarchal ideologies are embedded within the social structure (Millett, 1990). In regards to sexual assault and rape myths, then, it is important to examine the social climates in which rape myths thrive, and explore how women navigate these spheres. While there is a growing body of qualitative research studies on this subject matter, it is not enough to provide a detailed picture of the processes by which women come to formulate their attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault in patriarchal societies.

The majority of existing research studies on the effects of rape myths tends to be of a quantitative nature, with their focus on establishing potential causal relationships between rape culture and individual attitudes towards sexual assault. Standardized questionnaires, such as the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, are most commonly employed to examine individual rape myth attitudes (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Shechory & Idisis, 2006 Franiuk et al. 2008). Such studies tend to skim over discussions of agency on behalf of the participants, as well as their subjective interpretations of rape myths and sexual assault, mainly due to the impersonal nature of standardized questionnaires and other quantitative research methods.

Before we can explore women's attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault, it is important to examine the existing literature on sexual assault in regards to occurrence rates, existing discourses, and potential impacts on women. Since rape myths tend to depict an inaccurate picture of sexual assault, I will briefly summarize existing statistical studies on sexual assault occurrence rates in Canada. Then, I will examine scholarly discussions on rape myths and how these dominant discourses are manifested within a variety of social settings, such as mass media and the criminal

justice system. Finally, I will review the research literature on how women, within the immediate context of sexual assault and also everyday situations, can be affected by rape myth attitudes and beliefs

Sexual assault in Canada

In 1983, the Canadian Criminal Code reformed the laws around sexual violence and replaced the legal term “rape” with “sexual assault” (Los, 1994). The reasoning is that “rape” tends to carry the biased connotation of forced vaginal intercourse and assume the perpetrator to be male and victim to be female (Garland, 2009; Belknap, 1996; Los, 1994). Sexual assault, on the other hand, refers to any form of sexual violence, such as anal penetration or non-penetrative acts (Garland, 2009). Legally, sexual assault is included in the Canadian Criminal Code under the category of assault, which is the non-consensual, purposeful application of (in this case, sexual) force onto another individual (Goldsmith, 1993). There are three levels of sexual assault as defined by the Canadian Criminal Code, ranging from level 1 sexual assault in which the victim displays little to no physical injuries, to level 3, in which the victim is severely physically injured from the attack (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

The concept of consent plays a prominent role in distinguishing between sexual assault and other legal forms of sexual activity, such as bondage. In the Canadian Criminal Code, "consent" is legally defined as "the voluntary agreement of the complainant to engage in the sexual activity in question" (Lazar, 2010, p. 330). If the victim was asleep or unconscious at the time of the attack, then it would qualify as sexual assault due to the lack of consent (Benedet, 2010). In addition, the term "voluntary consent" decrees that there are contexts in which the law can "deem an absence of consent even though the survivor appeared to agree to the sexual activity" (Goldsmith, 1993, p. 3.4). Specifically, the victim cannot give voluntary consent if he or she is threatened, forced, deceived, mentally incapable of consenting, or under the pressure of authority or power (Department of Justice, 2013a). In 1983, the "marital rape exemption", which assumed that marriage implied consent to all sexual activities, was eradicated from the Canadian Criminal Code (Lazar, 2010). The current legal definition of consent thus includes marital rape in the category of sexual assault.

Peaking in the early 1990s, there has been a steady decrease in police-reported sexual assault incidents over the past two decades, with level 3 sexual assault seeing

the greatest decline in reported incidents (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010; Perreault, 2013). For instance, in 1999, sexual assault occurred at a rate of 89 per 100,000 Canadians (Department of Justice, 2013b). This decreased to a rate of 73 per 100,000 Canadians in 2007, accounting for 8% of all reported violent crime (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Police-reported data and victimization data from sources such as the General Social Survey indicate that level 1 sexual assault incidents have consistently accounted for the majority of police-reported sexual crime, with level 3 sexual assault being the least commonly reported (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Brennan, 2012). The same sources also suggest that most sexual assaults are committed by persons known to the victim (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010).

While the decreasing reports of sexual assault seems promising, according to Strange (1995), such statistical trends may not necessarily imply progress in sexual safety. Many studies agree that sexual assault is a severely underreported crime in Canada, especially in comparison to other violent crime (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010; Brennan, 2012). In fact, based on data from the 2004 General Social Survey on Victimization, it is estimated that less than ten percent of sexual assault cases actually get reported to the police (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). A variety of reasons can be attributed to this phenomenon, such as the fear of stigmatization, the possibility of being disbelieved by legal officials, and being unsure if their experience qualifies as “real” sexual assault (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Heath et al. 2011; Flood & Pease, 2009). As Grubb and Harrower (2009) points out, rape myths “reduces the likelihood of reporting the crime as a result of the perceived negative connotations associated with the crime” (p. 64).

Although sexual assault can be perpetuated by and against anyone, women are much more likely to be victims of sexual assault (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010; Benedict 1992; Garland, 2009). For example, according to Statistics Canada, reported cases of female sexual victimization in 2007 were 5.6 times higher than cases of male victimization (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). This gender gap was even more staggering in 2008, in which “the rate of police-reported sexual assault against females was more than 10 times the rate for males, with females accounting for 92% of sexual assault victims in Canada” (Vaillancourt, 2010, p. 8). Perpetrators of sexual assault, on the other hand, tend to be disproportionately men. Police-reported data in 2007, for instance, showed that 97% of the persons accused of sexual assault

were men (Vaillancourt, 2010). These existing data suggests that sexual assault is a gendered crime.

Rape myths

The term “rape myth” was coined by Burt (1980) to describe the “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (p. 217). According to Burt (1980), rape myths stem from hegemonic sexual/gender attitudes that perpetuate traditional sex roles, interpersonal violence, and a general distrust of the opposite sex. While Burt’s (1980) definition highlights the problematic attitudes and beliefs in regards to sexual assault, it does not fully encapsulate the gendered nature of rape myths. In response, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) proposed to define rape myths as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 134). Under this modified definition, it becomes apparent that rape myths are heteronormative, as it excludes other forms of sexual assault, such as male sexual victimization or same-sex sexual assault.

Rape myths are also inextricably related to the patriarchal system. In contemporary North America, men are usually encouraged to be assertive, dominant, and independent while women are socialized to be passive, docile, and domestic (Belknap, 2001; York, 2011). Thus, patriarchal values and attitudes are not byproducts of bigoted individuals, but instead, they are deeply rooted within social institutions (York, 2011). In fact, according to Moyer (1992), such attitudes and beliefs play an important role in maintaining women’s oppression, as it gives men the right to ‘discipline’ women who deviate from the appropriate bounds of femininity. Rape myths, as a manifestation of misogynic discourses that permeate the very core of societal structures, work to excuse male perpetrators and blame female victims for sexual violence (King & Roberts, 2011; Belknap, 2001; Moyer, 1992; Ben-David & Schneider, 2005).

Research literature consistently indicates that men, especially those that hold traditional values, are more likely to endorse rape myth attitudes than women (Weisz & Earls, 1995; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Flood & Pease, 2009; Clarke & Stermac, 2011; York, 2011; Donovan, 2007). In Weisz and Earls’ (1995) study, for instance, male participants were more likely to accept interpersonal violence and rape myths, blame sexual assault victims, and judge the defendant in a hypothetical sexual assault scenario

as innocent. Hilton et al. (2003) also found that men hold more traditional sex role attitudes and are more likely to downplay the seriousness of sexual assault.

In addition to reinforcing inter-gender dichotomies, victim-blaming rape myths further divide women into two binary categories: the “virgin” and the “vamp” (Benedict, 1992). According to Benedict (1992), the “virgin” is the ideal-type woman that is pure, innocent, and behaves within the appropriate bounds of femininity. She is relatively asexual (or at least reserves her sexuality for her male partner), respectable, passive, vulnerable, and domestic (Madriz, 1997; Feinman, 1994). She had done nothing “wrong” to warrant the sexual assault, as she simply had the misfortune of being at the wrong place and at the wrong time (Madriz, 1997). Her perpetrator is usually a monstrous, violent stranger that would have preyed upon any woman (Madriz, 1997). This image of the “ideal” sexual assault victim usually conjures up an image of a stranger lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce on innocent women. In that sense, the victim should be protected from, and not blamed for, the sexual assault.

The “vamp”, in contrast, is the unrelenting, promiscuous woman who somehow incited the sexual attack (Benedict, 1992). As Feinman (1994) states, the “deserving” victim is usually depicted as a lustful, shameless creature that defiantly participate in ‘non-feminine’ activities, such as drinking profusely, wearing revealing clothing, or having casual sex. She is also strong and independent, meaning that she does not need or want to rely on men (Madriz, 1997). Unlike the “virgin”, the “vamp” is usually “attacked by one of her disreputable friends or by a disreputable stranger, exaggerated or fabricated the nature of the attack” (Madriz, 1997, p. 88). In other words, according to this line of thought, the attack was entirely preventable on her part. Indeed, rape myths tend to blame sexual assault victims by slotting them into the “vamp” category, condemning their actions and behaviours as the “trigger” for the sexual attack.

According to Benedict (1992), the rape myths “women provoke rape” and “women deserve rape” shift the focus of sexual assault from the perpetrator onto the female victim. The victim’s actions prior, during, and after the attack are often placed under scrutiny while the perpetrator is largely hidden from view. For example, if the woman was wearing a revealing outfit or is considered to be attractive, then she may be accused of enticing the perpetrator. This is related to the rape myth “only loose women are victimized” (Benedict, 1992, p. 16), which claims that “proper” women would not be in sexual-assault prone situations. Rape myths, in portraying sexual assault victims as

“vamps”, thus give a false impression that sexual assault only happens to “bad” women (Garland, 2009; Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). There are situations, however, in which “good” women are still blamed. As Madriz (1997) explains, some sexual assault victims may be categorized as “good yet stupid”, in that they made a careless “mistake”, such as going out without the company of a trustworthy man. They may not be blamed as severely as women labeled as “vamps”, but the attack may nevertheless be considered their responsibility.

Certain groups of women are more likely to be accused of “deserving it” than other groups. Specifically, racialized women are most vulnerable to rape myth attitudes, mostly due to persistent racial stereotypes (White et al. 1998; Maier, 2008; Neville et al. 2004; Philips, 2009). For instance, the stereotype of black women as hypersexual “jezebels” implies that they are “unrapeable” (Donovan & Williams, 2002). Similarly, the colonial construct of Aboriginal women as “squaws”, immoral and sexually unrestrained beings, means that Aboriginal sexual assault victims are often slotted into the “bad girl” category by default (Razack, 2002; Neville et al. 2004; Ullman & Brecklin, 2002). Indeed, research studies indicate that sexual assaults involving racialized victims are more likely to be doubted or even outright dismissed (Donovan, 2007; Stevenson et al. 2009; Foley et al. 1995; Willis, 1992).

In addition to race, class inequalities also influence the ways in which sexual assault victims are perceived and subsequently treated. According to Skeggs (1997), the working class culture is often conceptualized as uncivilized, violent, and disorderly, especially in contrast to the middle-class culture. These stereotypes, instead of invoking sympathy and concern towards working class women, may be used to dismiss their experiences of sexual violence (Philips, 2009). The idea is that, since working class women live in such chaotic and violent environments, they should just accept their fate. Subsequently, working class sexual assault victims are often excluded from the “ideal victim” category and perceived as unworthy of societal protection (Philips, 2009). This form of class prejudice is interconnected with race. For instance, black women are often assumed to be poor and welfare-dependant (Rahimi & Liston, 2011).

Since sexual assault is unwanted sexual violence, there also exists a rape myth that accuses women of secretly desiring the attack (Benedict, 1992). If it is “real” sexual assault, according to rape myth logic, the victim will demonstrate extreme resistance to the attack, such as struggle or fight back, to “prove” her lack of consent (Randall, 2010,

p. 418). If there are no visible injuries, and she remained silent or motionless during the attack, then her experience may be dismissed as “sex gone wrong” (Gavey & Gow, 2001). This idea is largely supported by another rape myth that depicts violent stranger rape as the only legitimate form of sexual assault. In response, scholars contend that it is unreasonable to use the lack of physical resistance as “proof” of consent, since some victims may not resist out of fear of retaliation by the perpetrator (Anderson, 2010; Randall, 2010). Some sexual assault victims may also dissociate themselves, both involuntarily and voluntarily, to cope with this horrifying experience (Anderson, 2010; Randall, 2010).

Similar to the rape myths about sexual assault victims, the rape myths about perpetrators also contain assumptions about race and class. In particular, the popular “stranger in the dark” scenario usually depicts a “dark-skinned man who haunts us from the shadows of alleys and public parks” (Madriz, 1997, p. 97). This rape myth corresponds with racial stereotypes which portray racialized men (especially if they are from the working or lower class) as hypersexual, primitive, and sexually impulsive (Moorti, 2002). In response, sexual assault cases involving black and/or working to lower class perpetrators receive much more media coverage than any other kinds of sexual assault (Meyers, 1997; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). This not only perpetuates the idea that poor minority groups are more likely to commit sexual assault, but it also leads “to the widely held misconception that most rapes are committed by racialized men against white women, or by lower class men against higher class women” (Benedict, 1992, p. 15). Thus, women are caught between the battle grounds of race, class, and gender.

Furthermore, by constructing the perpetrator as a shady, dangerous, racialized Other, this rape myth implies that perpetrators belong to a very specific demographic. Research literature, however, strongly suggests that perpetrators of sexual violence can come from any group within our society (Benedict, 1992; Garland, 2009; Belknap, 2001, Cuklanz, 2000). In fact, repeated studies show that perpetrators are often people acquainted with the victim in some manner, such as friends, coworkers, or ex-partners (Benedict, 1992; Cuklanz, 2000; Garland, 2009; Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010). Lastly, this rape myth portrays sexual assault as isolated “freak” incidents rather than an implication of wider societal problems such as the culture of masculinity, gender inequality, or the social control of women.

Rape Myths in the Media

While popular media and news media are supposed to represent the fictional/non-fictional divide, studies indicate that they reinforce rape myths and depict sexual assault in the same problematic manner (Franiuk et al. 2008; Berridge, 2011; Moorti, 2002; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). For instance, popular media tend to reinforce rape myths that portray violent, stranger rape as the most "authentic" form of sexual assault. Meanwhile, news reports often overreport violent stranger rape cases and neglect other, more common forms of sexual assault such as nonviolent acquaintance rape (Meloy & Miller, 2009; Bufkin & Schholz, 2000). Thus, the media culture plays an important role in reinforcing hegemonic ideologies while trivializing, neglecting, or marginalizing any alternative beliefs and attitudes (Meyers, 1997).

Sexual assault victims in popular media are likely to be blamed for the attack if they were participating in non-traditional activities, such as binge drinking or wearing revealing clothing, at the time of the attack (Brinson, 1992; Berridge, 2011). For example, in an episode from the *Beverly Hills* series, the main character was blamed for wearing a revealing dress at a Halloween party (Berridge, 2011). At the end of the episode, she was seen wearing a long cloak that covered her entire body so that she would not attract anymore unwanted attention from men. These storylines rarely discuss "the potential dangers of normative constructions of gendered sexuality that promote male sexual dominance and female sexual submission" (Berridge, 2011, p. 473). In addition to individualizing sexual assault, these depictions present the victims' behaviours as the trigger for sexual assault.

The same trend exists in news media, as Sampert's (2010) study on Canadian newspapers in 2002 found that sexual assault victims' behaviours prior to the attack were often discussed in unnecessary detail. News outlets are also more likely to blame sexual assault victims if they knew the perpetrator, as it gives the impression that they associated themselves with the wrong crowd (Ardevini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). News media may also use a victim's bad reputation, such as having a drug habit or criminal record, to either cast doubt on her story or to blame her for the attack (Sampert, 2010). For example, in reporting a sexual assault case involving a 19 year old woman and a 42 year old taxi driver, some newspapers identified the victim as a sex worker, while others mentioned that she suffered from depression (Sampert, 2010). This

perpetuates the rape myth that women are likely to make false sexual assault allegations, as well as the rape myth that claims only “bad” women get sexually assaulted.

Furthermore, research literature indicates that popular media tend to reinforce rape myths that depict perpetrators of sexual assault as male, violent, crazy, perverted, sadistic, and psychologically disturbed (Madriz, 1997; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). In doing so, the perpetrator’s actions are attributed to individual biology, giving the impression that certain people are “born” to be sexually violent. Thus, they stand in opposition to the “normal” men in society, who would (supposedly) never do such horrid things. As Moorti (2002) notes, prime time television often “rewrite sexual assault as a battle between men” (p. 115). Specifically, the battle is between the inherently evil, perverted perpetrator, who represents “bad” masculinity, and the normal, warm hearted man, who represents hegemonic masculinity (Berridge, 2011). This dual representation of masculinity separates perpetrators of sexual violence from “normal” men, denouncing them as masculinity gone wrong (Berridge, 2011).

Rape myth attitudes and beliefs are inextricably tied to other hegemonic relations within our society, such as race and class. Specifically, the North American news industry supports the status quo by representing white, middle- to upper-class values and beliefs (Moorti, 2002; Meyers, 1997). Studies show that white, upper class victims are more likely to receive press attention and sympathy, especially if the case involved racialized perpetrators (Wriggins, 1983; Davis, 1981; Madriz, 1997). This trivializes the experiences of working class or racialized victims, giving the (false) impression that only rich, white women require societal protection (Ardevini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Madriz, 1997).

The well-known Central Park Jogger case is illustrative of this class/racial bias. On April 19, 1989, a white female jogger in Central Park was violently raped by whom many believed to be a few black and Hispanic teenagers (Davis, 2006). The case incited moral panic, as news outlets immediately attempted to explain this brutal attack within the context of the suspects’ race and class (Moorti, 2002; Welch et al. 2002). They invited experts to discuss the inner-city culture of Harlem and how the social location could be a cause for the sexual assault (Moorti, 2002). Instead of examining prevalent gender/sexual norms that govern men and women’s status in society, news media “looked for answers in race, drugs, class, and in the ghetto’s ‘culture of violence’”

(Benedict, 1992, p. 208). The general assumption was that "these" racialized groups are a danger to "us", the rest of civil society. Meanwhile, most of the news reports focused extensively on the victim's upper class background, highlighting her prestigious occupation as a Wall Street investment banker (Moorti, 2002). Ironically, thirteen years later, it was discovered that the true perpetrator of the incident was a lone, white, serial rapist and convicted murderer (Davis, 2006).

The current media trends are based on hegemonic ideologies and also sensationalism. As a business industry, the news media's main goal is to appeal to the audience, meaning that controversial, violent, or unusual crimes are more likely to be covered (Kitzinger, 2009; Meyers, 1997). As Cuklanz (1996) notes, this focus on sensationalism creates a skewed picture of reality, as the audience may come to believe that some events are more common than others. Thus, news media tend to overreport violent stranger rape, such as the Central Park Jogger case, or false rape allegation cases (Meyers, 1997; Kitzinger, 2009; Sampert, 2010).

Similarly, television programmes prioritize entertainment values over educational values or accuracy (Cuklanz, 2000). Thus, the discussion of sexual assault is often reduced to individualistic explanations/solutions. For instance, according to Moorti (2002), the popular *Oprah Winfrey Show* made several attempts to address rape myths by inviting female sexual assault victims on the show to share their experiences. Despite having good intentions, Winfrey's focus on individual stories and perspectives actually made it difficult to discuss sexual assault in a wider societal context (Moorti, 2002). Berridge's (2011) study also found that, in teenage programmes, sexual assault is usually framed as a "young woman's personal problem" (p. 478). In the examined episodes, the focus was often on the victims' actions prior to the attack, such as the way they dressed or acted (Berridge, 2011). This individualization of sexual assault reinforces the belief that the victim could have prevented the attack.

Most research literature agree that media portrayals of sexual assault, both fictional and nonfictional accounts, can reinforce and/or construct rape myth attitudes in individuals (Franiuk et al. 2008; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Emmers-Sommer et al. 2006). For instance, Dexter et al.'s (1997) study suggests that repeated exposure to media portrayals of female sexual victimization may prompt individuals to trivialize sexual assault victims' experiences in real life. This may be due to the fact that television programmes often reinforce the "real rape" script, which is the

idea that sexual assault is almost always violent, unexpected, and committed by strangers (Dexter et al. 1997; Ryan, 2011; Emmers-Somer et al. 2006). Thus, experiences that do not fit in with this rigid conceptualization of sexual assault may be trivialized or dismissed. As Franiuk et al. (2008) contends, dominant media coverage of sexual assault has potentially devastating real-world consequences.

The social control of women

Rape myths and Sexual Assault Victims

Many sexual assault victims do not go to the police for help because they fear judgment and stigmatization. As Belknap (1996) says, revealing one's victimization may expose the victim to public attitudes and beliefs in regards to sexual assault. In many cases, sexual assault victims, instead of receiving much needed social and legal support, are bombarded with intrusive comments, interrogation, and blame (Madigan & Gamble, 1991; Kreisel, 2009; Johnson & Dawson, 2011). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "second rape" or "secondary victimization", in which the sexual assault victim is victimized twice: first by the perpetrator, and second by their friends, family, social services, and/or criminal justice officials (Campbell et al. 2001; Belknap, 1996).

The Canadian criminal justice system is, unfortunately, quite susceptible to rape myth ideologies. Schuller et al. (2010) posits that Canada has an alarmingly high amount of attrition of sexual assault cases, mainly due to prevailing rape myth attitudes and beliefs. L'Heureux-Dube (2001), a former justice on the Supreme Court of Canada, contends that the Supreme Court of Canada is susceptible to the following rape myths through its treatment of sexual assault victims:

- Perpetrators of sexual violence are almost always a stranger
- Women who have a sexual history have less credibility as witnesses
- Sexual assault victims will always struggle physically during the attack
- If the woman is not 'hysterical' after the attack, then it is likely not a real sexual assault
- Women with a sexual history are more likely to have consented to the attack
- Women say 'no' when they really mean 'yes'
- Women "ask for it" when they dress or act inappropriately

- Women have rape fantasies and are thus likely to make false allegations

The research literature in this area generally agree with L'Heureux-Dube (2001) in that rape myths exert tremendous influence on how sexual assault victims are treated in the Canadian criminal justice system (Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Randall, 2010; Kreisel, 2009; McIntyre et al. 2000). For instance, in the court room, sexual assault cases that do not adhere to rape myth assumptions are less likely to be taken seriously by judges and juries (Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Flood & Pease, 2009; McIntyre et al. 2000).

The prevalence of rape myths can make it difficult for victims to bring their case forward (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). For instance, the idea that women will always struggle during the attack means that the lack of visible injuries may be taken as a sign for complicity and even consent (Randall, 2010; Benedet, 2010). The same thing applies to marital rape which, despite being legally defined as sexual assault in 1983, still gets dismissed by some Canadian courts (Randall, 2008). Historically, marital rape cases have often been conceptualized as “bad” or “unwanted” sex instead of sexual assault (Lazar, 2010). This is both due to rape myths and also the “presumption of continuous consent in spousal relationships” (Randall, 2008, p. 112). Other forms of sexual assault, such as non-violent, acquaintance/spousal rape may be interpreted as simple misunderstandings or miscommunication (Lazar, 2010).

In addition, women who do not conform to the image of the “authentic” sexual assault victim, as perpetuated by rape myths, are more likely to be doubted or blamed by police officials (Randall, 2010; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Flood & Pease, 2009; Anderson, 2010). Since the creation of “rape shield laws”, it is technically forbidden to bring a sexual assault victim’s sexual history and reputation into the trial (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Under circumstances in which the victim’s sexual history may be crucial to the case, however, exceptions can be made (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). In fact, research literature shows that, using this loophole in the law, victims’ sexual histories are often brought in as ‘evidence’ to attack their character and discredit their testimonies (Randall, 2008; Randall, 2010; Ardivini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Johnson & Dawson, 2011).

Within this discussion of sexual history and credibility, it should be no surprise that sexual assault victims who work in the sex trade are frequently marginalized and scrutinized. The traditional emphasis on female chastity and ‘purity’ means that sex workers who have experienced sexual assault are either trivialized, accused of lying, or

blamed for putting themselves at risk (Burt, 1980; Benedict, 1992; Gilchrist, 2010). There is even a belief that it is *impossible* to sexually assault sex workers due to the nature of their vocation (Sullivan, 2007; Cotton et al. 2002). As a result, sex workers receive little to no legal protection, especially in societies where sex work is criminalized. Indeed, research literature shows that the police are less likely to take the case seriously if the victim is a sex worker, and even if the case makes it to court, the accused is rarely charged or convicted (Sullivan, 2007; Scutt, 1994; Jordon, 2004).

This ideology of sexual credibility also extends to issues of class and race. Racialized sexual assault victims, such as black or Aboriginal women, tend to receive less legal support in the criminal justice system (White et al. 1998; Foley et al. 1995). In Dylan et al.'s (2008) study, for instance, many Aboriginal sexual assault victims “described the police contact as marked by disrespect, dismissal, and professional failure” (p. 684). In one case, a police officer simply left the participant to her own devices after stating that they did not believe her story (Dylan et al. 2008). On the other hand, the police force usually exert more effort into cases involving white victims, such as arriving at the scene of the crime faster or performing more follow-up work (Howerton, 2006). A similar pattern can be observed in the class hierarchy, in which working class women's reports of sexual assault are more likely to be dismissed (Philips, 2009).

The intersectional relationship between class, race, and discourses on sexual history can result in various degrees of disadvantages for sexual assault victims. The case of the murder of Pamela George and the missing women from Downtown Eastside serves as a grave reminder that there are social hierarchies even within sexual assault victimhood. In both instances, the legal force were reluctant to take action because the victims were mostly aboriginal, homeless or belonged to a lower class, and worked in the sex trade (Razack, 2002; Gilchrist, 2010). With the latter case, there was an assumption that the missing women have simply moved to other areas to ply their (sex) trade, or that they are responsible for the risks of living/working in the dangerous side of town (Jiwani & Young, 2006; Gilchrist, 2010). This suggests that sexual assault victims who belong to a lower class or racialized group, and/or have a complicated sexual history (such as working in the sex trade) are viewed as having low credibility and thus devalued. This also reinforces the idea that women who deviate from dominant norms, such as partaking in sex work, are unworthy of societal protection.

Indeed, scholars argue that rape myths act as a mechanism of social control in that it punishes female sexual assault victims for transgressing the appropriate bounds of femininity. In locating the victim's behaviour as the catalyst for sexual assault, the crime is effectively individualized and depoliticized, meaning that the cause and solution of sexual violence is now aimed at the (female) victim (Meloy & Miller, 2009; Randall, 2010). Thus, sexual assault victims are more likely to blame themselves for the attack if they internalize these rape myths or interact with individuals that hold rape myth attitudes (Flood & Pease, 2009; McIntyre et al. 2000; Randall, 2010; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Danne, 2009). This may cause self-devaluation and/or long-term psychological and emotional distress (Flood & Pease, 2009; Danne, 2009).

Rape myths and women's everyday lives

Some scholars contend that rape myths also function as a tool of social control for women in their everyday lives (Madriz, 1997; Stanko, 1995; Warr, 1984; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Specifically, rape myths perpetuate the fear of sexual assault with misconceptions about the crime, thus prompting self-regulatory behaviours. For instance, the "real rape" rape myth that depicts sexual assault as brutally violent stranger rape may prompt some women to avoid going out alone at night (Gorden & Riger, 1989; Madriz, 1997). As Day (1994) posits, this is one of the most effective forms of social control, since it convinces women to "internalize value constructs that demands women's self-restriction" (p. 746). The fear of sexual assault gives women incentive to follow traditional gender norms "for their own sake" (Madriz, 1997; Day, 1994).

Indeed, research literature consistently indicates that women fear sexual assault much more than men (Stanko, 1995; Schafer et al. 2006; Warr, 1984; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Riger & Gordon, 1981). Warr's (1984) study found that women of all ages showed high levels of fear for sexual assault, with young women between the ages of 19-35 expressing the most fear (Warr, 1984). In fact, many women considered sexual assault to be as serious as murder (Warr, 1984). Fisher and Sloan III (2003) also found that college women, in comparison to college men, were almost three times more afraid of sexual assault on campus at night. Although it is true that women are more likely to be victims of sexual assault, their concerns do not necessarily correspond with actual victimization rates (Madriz, 1997). For instance, women tend to be more wary of stranger rape, even though acquaintance rape is the most common form of sexual assault

(Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997; Wilcox et al., 2006; Scott; 2003). As Schafer et al. (2006) explains, the degree of fear is largely connected to women's *perceived* risk of victimization.

As a result of this heightened sense of fear, many women consciously constrain their behaviours, significantly reducing their quality of life (Fisher & Sloan III, 2003; Stanko, 1995; Belknap, 1996; Riger & Gorden, 1981). As Gardner (1990) points out, many women are literally scared into policing their activities in public in ways that men can never imagine. For instance, in response to the belief that sexual assault is most likely to occur in secluded, outdoor areas, one of the common precautions is to be accompanied by a trusted male companion when venturing outside the safety of one's home (Gardner, 1990; Day, 1994; Madriz, 1997). In other words, they seek protection from men in order to avoid sexual violence from other men. Some women may employ other creative strategies when they must go out alone, such as leaving men's clothing in their car to create the illusion of a male companion (Day, 1994).

Some women are also mindful of their appearance and apparel choices. As Gardner (1990) notes, due to the fear of sexual victimization, some women may feel pressured to behave in sexually undesirable ways. One female participant in Madriz's (1997) study, for instance, explained that she would wear baggy clothes to avoid any unwanted sexual attention on the streets. In Gardner's (1990) study, as well, almost every woman mentioned attempts to avoid "provocative" clothing that might be interpreted as "inviting" sexual advances, opting instead for masculine or gender-neutral clothes. This corresponds with rape myths that depict perpetrators as lust-driven monsters that cannot control themselves once they are sexually aroused (Madriz, 1997). As a result, women are tasked with the responsibility of dressing and acting in ways that will not "tempt" men.

Considering how rape myths act as a mechanism for social control, it is no coincidence that these prescribed 'safety strategies' perpetuate a "rhetoric of limited competence, that is, a series of presentational strategies that project dependency and lack of skill" (Gardner, 1990, p. 316). Ironically, studies show that constrained behaviour actually makes women feel more fearful of crime, since it reminds them of the risk of victimization (Ferraro, 1996; Fisher & Sloan III, 2003). The combined effects of rape myths, traditional gender norms, and fear of sexual assault serve to restrict women's autonomy and prevent them from fully participating in society (Day, 1994). As Madriz

(1997) points out, these oppressive societal structures “feeds into the notion that women and men are not entitled to the same rights” (Madriz, 1997, p. 15). While men are usually positioned as the active protector or the perpetrator, women are socialized to feel and act weak and passive (York, 2011; Berrington & Jones, 2002; Day, 1994).

From the moment of birth, women and girls are taught to feel extremely vulnerable to sexual violence (Belknap, 1996). Such messages are transmitted to women through many channels, with the most notable sources being family, friends, and the media (Belknap, 1996). For example, little girls are often taught to be wary of strangers and dress conservatively, lest anything ‘bad’ happens to them (Garland, 2009; Madriz, 1997; Berrington & Jones, 2002). Children’s stories, such as the Little Red Riding Hood, are also filled with vivid images of dangerous men lurking in the shadows, providing warnings on what may happen to ‘deviant’ little girls. As Berrington and Jones (2002) notes, these popular messages are rooted in the belief that women are responsible for avoiding sexual assault, especially since the perpetrators are supposedly uncontrollable and unpredictable beings.

The media also plays an important role in promoting the feminized fear of sexual assault. The sensationalist, biased nature of news reports are problematic in that it “enhances women’s fears and leaves misleading impressions of both the crime and how it might be dealt with” (Gorden & Riger, 1989, p. 28). According to Dowler (2006), news media tend to present fear in three ways: interviewing female community members to propel feelings of unease among the neighbourhood, broadcast police warnings on sexual assault cases, and depicting perpetrators as wild and uncontrollable. These characteristics correspond with rape myths that normalize stranger rape, as well as the idea that women are in constant risk of sexual assault (Berrington & Jones, 2002).

As Meyers (1997) points out, news media often “warn women about what actions and locations are unsafe, influencing decisions about where to go, what to wear, how to act, how late to stay out” (p. 3). Indeed, it is quite common for victim-blaming news reports to fit in ‘warnings’ for their female viewers. For example, in a news report on a sexual assault case involving date rape drugs, women were advised to guard their drinks at social events (Sampert, 2010). While it is true that the news media is quite fixated on sensationalism in general, Dowler’s (2006) study show that sexual assault cases are much more likely to present fear than other non-sex crime stories. Thus, the perpetuation of fear of sexual assault cannot be explained by news culture alone.

Other supposedly well-intentioned safety campaigns, such as safety tips from the police or security telephones on university grounds, also contribute to women's fear of sexual assault. Similar to the media, traditional safety campaigns are usually based on the assumption that sexual assault is violent and perpetuated by strangers (Madriz, 1997; Stanko, 1995; Gardner, 1990). In most cases, women are advised to avoid certain behaviours or public spaces for their own good. For instance, in 1994, a sergeant from Melbourne's detective unit warned women not to go out alone at night, despite the fact that most sexual assaults are committed by persons familiar to the victim (Stanko, 1995).

Some scholars argue that women's fear of sexual victimization is so strong that it may lead to a fear of crime in general (Madriz, 1997; Stanko, 1995; Warr, 1984). According to Stanko (1995), fear of crime is "associated with about being outside the home, probably in an urban area, alone and potentially vulnerable to personal harm" (p. 48). It is argued that sexual assault acts as a "master offense" for many women, in that the fear of sexual assault may perpetuate a general fear of crime (Warr, 1984). While victims of sexual assault are disproportionately women, men are more likely to be victims of all other types of crime, such as homicide and physical assault (Ferraro, 1996; Vaillancourt, 2010). Thus, one would logically expect men to exhibit more fear of crime and/or violence in general. Research studies, however, consistently indicate that women's overall level of fear of crime is much higher than men's fear (Fisher & Sloan, 2003; Ferraro, 1996; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Stanko, 1995; Warr, 1984). If women's fear of sexual assault do in fact translate into a general fear of crime, then this disproportionate gap may be explained (Schefer et al. 2006).

In general, research literature supports the "shadow of sexual assault hypothesis", another term used by scholars to describe sexual assault as a "master offense" for women. Women with a higher level of fear of sexual assault are more likely to express heightened fears of crime and victimization, especially for offenses that involve face-to-face interaction (Fisher & Sloan III, 2003; Ferraro, 1996; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Robbs et al. 2009). Indeed, when Robbs et al. (2009) factored out the fear of sexual assault, women's fear of crime was no higher than of men. According to Ferraro (1996), when women consider the possibility of victimization, "they also contemplate the likelihood that sexual assault will accompany a given offense" (p. 686). This helps explain why men and women report comparable fear of property crime, but women have a much higher fear of personal crime, such as sexual assault (Schafer et

al. 2006; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Dobbs et al. 2009). For some women, the general fear of crime may ultimately be the fear of sexual assault.

Conclusion

As the research literature shows, rape myths both justify and promote sexual violence against women. These dominant attitudes and beliefs reflect the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to shape individuals' life chances. Specifically, racialized women from working/lower class backgrounds are much more likely to be perceived as untrustworthy, deviant, and disposable (Razack, 2002; Foley et al. 1995; Dylan et al. 2008; Madriz, 1997). While white, upper-class sexual assault victims may still experience secondary victimization because of their gender, their race and class status will rarely be used to dismiss or trivialize their experiences (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997). This shows that sexual assault trends and rape myths are intertwined with various social hierarchies and dominant cultural norms. Instead of addressing sexual violence on an institutional level, however, women are often tasked with the responsibility of 'preventing' sexual assault.

Some feminist scholars argue that sexual assault and rape myths serve as mechanisms of social control to keep women in their place (Madriz 1997; Meloy & Miller, 2009). For instance, women are often warned to avoid going out unless they are accompanied by a trusted male companion, perpetuating the idea that women cannot be independent or fully participate in the society. It is important, however, to note that women are not unilaterally or uniformly affected by rape myths and/or the fear of victimization. The fact that women react to the fear of sexual assault in various ways indicates their agency and creativity in the face of these oppressive structures (Madriz, 1997; Stanko, 1995).

Chapter 3.

Theory and Methods

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the theoretical framework of this study, which is radical feminism integrated with Hunter's (2006) concept of fluid-essentialism and Connell's (1995) hierarchical framework of masculinities. Specifically, this theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of studying women's issues at the grass roots level in order to understand the complex effects of patriarchal ideologies. The second section details this study's methodological framework, especially in relation to the social constructivist grounded theory. Methods of data collection, organization, coding, and analysis are also discussed. Finally, this chapter critically explores some methodological issues that arose during this project.

Theoretical Framework

This study takes on a modified radical feminist stance to examine the ways in which women interact with contemporary dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault. As a woman-centered approach, radical feminism examines the ways in which patriarchal ideologies are embedded within various social structures. To give a brief historical background, radical feminism emerged in the late 1960s to the early 1970s in response to a number of movements, including the Civil Rights, New Left, and anti-war movements (Bryson, 2003; Ullman, 2010). In the midst of these large social movements, some women found themselves experiencing "second class" treatment due to male-dominated epistemologies, organizational structures, and goals of the New Left (Donovan, 2012). As Bryson (2003) notes, the social oppression of woman is not something unknown to most women, but "it was not until the late 1960s that they began to be formulated as self-conscious theory" (p. 163). Indeed, radical feminism aims to carve out a space for women's voices that would enable them to fully participate within society (Donovan, 2012; Hunter, 2006; Bryson, 2003).

The "radical" in radical feminism, contrary to common conceptualizations of the term, refers to "foundation" or "basis". In other words, the theory's ultimate goal is to

tackle what they perceive to be the root, or basis, of women's subordination: patriarchy (Moore, 2006; Donovan, 2012). Radical feminism views consciousness-raising as the first step to women's liberation (Hunter, 2006). Specifically, women need to understand that their current situation is not "natural" and they have the ability to perpetuate *or* hinder the system of oppression. This is especially important because cultural, academic, language and other forms of knowledge and ideologies are often riddled with male biases (Bryson, 2003). For some radical feminists, that means women are often conceptualizing their experience from a masculine framework, making it difficult for them to fully achieve consciousness of their situations.

To address this issue, it is necessary to establish the significance of women's experiences and perspectives (Bryson, 2003). In other words, women's voices matter and should have a place in academia. It is important to note, however, that for radical feminism, recovering women's voices within male dominated institutions is certainly important, but it is not the end goal. Since radical feminists believe that women's oppression stems from the very core of the societal structure, revolutionary changes are needed to fully correct the situation (Donovan, 2012). This may be another reason why radical feminism is often depicted as extreme and unlikeable, because it proposes changing the entire system instead of reforming specific parts of it.

Radical feminist theory's primary focus on patriarchy may actually prompt us to explore women's experiences in numerous social arenas, rather than focusing on a particular one. For instance, Marxist feminists concentrate on the capitalist system and how it affects women's experiences in the workforce (Rafter & Natalizia, 1981; Bandarage, 1984). Eco-feminists, on the other hand, look towards environmental issues and women's bodily autonomies (Moore, 2006). In comparison, radical feminists examine the influence of male power in public spheres, such as politics and paid workforces, as well as private spheres, such as the institution of the family, because the patriarchal system is embedded within the very foundation of our society (Bryson, 2003).

Furthermore, in order to maintain the gender status quo, the dominant culture perpetuates patriarchal ideologies which condition, or at least encourages, individuals to act in ways that privilege men and subordinate women (Donovan, 2012). This socialization process is present from the very moment of birth. As Bryson (2003) puts it:

"Patriarchy is primarily maintained by a process of conditioning which starts with childhood socialization within the family and is reinforced by education, literature and

religion to such an extent that its values are internalized by men and women alike; for some women this leads to self-hatred, self-rejection and an acceptance of inferiority” (p.166).

In other words, patriarchy is a two-way street in that it is a larger system outside of any one person, but at the same time, it must be perpetuated through individuals in order to survive (Hunter, 2006). As discussed in the literature review chapter, rape myths help perpetuate the gender status quo by scaring or shaming women (not limited to sexual assault victims) into behaving in conservative ways, such as relying on men for protection or avoid going out alone at night (Stanko, 1995; Berrington & Jones, 2002).

The phrase “the personal is political”, coined by radical feminist Carol Hanisch in 1969, helped illuminate the idea that many “personal” gender-related problems such as sexual assault should be addressed “not at the individual level but rather, collectively as problems rooted in social and political institutions” (Mann, 2012, p. 79). Prior to the modern women’s movements, the dominant narrative viewed sexual violence as rare individual acts that are committed by a small number of abnormal men (Bryson, 2003; Mann, 2012; Ullman, 2010). Radical feminists helped problematize this line of thinking, arguing that the gendered patterns of sexual assault are a reflection of current unequal gender relations (Primorac, 1998; Mann, 2012). Sexual assault is thus viewed as a *political act* in that it is utilized by patriarchal societies to help keep women in check (Bryson, 2003). In other words, sexual violence against women is more complex than a simple, individual act of uncontrollable lust.

According to radical feminism, men commit sexual assault in order to achieve power and to perpetuate the system of male dominance by keeping women in a constant state of fear of sexual assault (Ullman, 2010). Of course, not all men are perpetrators of sexual violence, but men as a group do enjoy the privileges that come from women’s social oppression (Bryson, 2003). As Hunter (2006) notes, the patriarchal system tolerates and even encourages negative sanctions (physical or non-physical) towards individuals who deviate from dominant social norms. This helps explain why rape myths are geared towards blaming (female) sexual assault victims who participate in nontraditional behaviours. The patriarchal ideologies in rape myths and the act of sexual assault work together to hinder women’s participation within society, as it encourages them to depend on men for protection.

While radical feminism provides the bulk of my theoretical foundation, I do not agree with everything it entails. In emphasizing the importance of recovering women’s

voices, some radical feminists end up reinforcing the biological binary between men and women, thus homogenizing the two groups and pitting them against each other. As Bryson (2003) contends, radical feminism attempts to unit all women into a common sisterhood by framing women's oppression as transcending all other identity categories such as class, race, and ethnicity. Thus, radical feminism is sometimes labeled as guilty of essentialism, in that they neglect intra-sexual differences that are just as significant when it comes to women's experiences (Donovan, 2012; Bryson, 2003; Mann, 2012).

In response, I will integrate an intersectional analysis in my theoretical framework. Emerging out of the work of black feminists, intersectionality argues that second wave feminism's essentialist lens is reproducing the same patterns of inequalities that they have sworn to eradicate (Bilge, 2010; Collins, 1990). Specifically, white women's perspectives and concerns were often generalized as *all* women's experiences (Bilge, 2010; Collins, 1990). To essentialize (and 'whitewash') women's issues is to ignore the ways in which race, class, and gender simultaneously affect people's lives (Mann, 2012; Glenn, 2002). Thus, intersectionality acknowledges various interlocking dimensions of inequality (Bilge, 2010; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Mann, 2012). It encourages questions like "how race is 'gendered' and how gender is 'racialized' and how both are linked to the continuities and transformations of social class" (Davis, 2008, p. 71). In doing so, intersectionality urges feminists to acknowledge and address women's diverse experiences of marginalization and domination (Mann, 2012).

While radical feminism argues that sexual assault and rape myths target all women, intersectionality points out that some women, depending on their social positions, may be more or less impacted (Mann, 2012). Indeed, studies indicate that the sexual victimization rates for racialized women are much higher than non-racialized women (Ardevini-Brooker & Caringella-Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). Yet, as discussed in the literature review chapter, poor and/or racialized women are more likely to be blamed for or accused of inciting sexual violence (Donovan, 2007; Stevenson et al. 2009; Philips, 2009; Rahimi & Liston, 2011). Meanwhile, white women are usually defaulted into the 'innocent' category unless proven otherwise (Ardevini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). Similarly, poor and/or racialized men are more likely to be stereotyped as vicious sex offenders while white, upper class men are usually given the benefit of the doubt (Meyers, 1997; Grover & Soothill, 1996; Benedict, 1992).

From the above discussion, it is apparent that society is not only patriarchal, but it is also heteronormative, elitist, and racist. As Mann (2012) notes, societal reactions to sexual violence is often based on gendered, racialized, and class-based ideologies. Integrating an intersectional analysis will help connect the gendered patterns of sexual violence with other existing dimensions of privilege and inequality, such as race and class. It will also help acknowledge the complex ways in which women conceptualize sexual violence in relation to their various social positions. For instance, a white, upper class woman may have very different perspectives and attitudes about sexual violence than a black, working class woman.

Similarly, some radical feminists homogenize men by contending that all men benefit from patriarchy and thus, they collectively try to protect the status quo by subordinating women. Sexual assault, then, is committed out of men's antagonism and contempt for women (Bryson, 2003). This view rejects the possibility of male allies because it portrays men as inherently oppressive, violent and power-hungry (Ulllyman, 2010; Donovan, 2012). It does not take into account the diversity of experiences when it comes to male privileges, nor does it fathom the possibility that men could also suffer from a patriarchal society (Bryson, 2003). Indeed, there is an important difference between contesting male *power* and men as a group. Here, I borrow Hunter's (2006) concept of "fluid-essentialism" and Connell's (1995) hierarchical framework of masculinities to help frame my project's perspective in relation to men's involvement with sexual assault in contemporary society.

According to Hunter (2006), patriarchy can be viewed through two general perspectives: rigid-essentialism and fluid-essentialism. Rigid-essentialism assumes that patriarchy is a system caused by men's unrestrained, oppressive nature (Hunter, 2006). This perspective shares the assumptions of radical feminism, in that it reinforces the male/female binary. Fluid-essentialism, on the other hand, asserts that our notions of masculinities are not a product of biology, but instead, they result from the socialization process within patriarchal societies (Hunter, 2006). As Hunter (2006) puts it:

"Patriarchy oppresses, but not to the advantage of anyone, and actually to the detriment of all life on this planet, and although it oppresses us individual insofar as we are in it, the immediate source of that oppression is not external for collectively speaking, it is in us as well" (p. 156).

Indeed, the fact that young boys are often pressured to conform to dominant gender roles shows that the patriarchal system is not some utopia for men's natural desires and

wishes. Furthermore, society's tendency to punish non-conforming individuals applies to both women *and* men (Bryson, 2003). Under this view, patriarchy is conceptualized as an overarching force that oppresses both men and women, as it constrains us within these narrow gender categories and hinders our true potential as individuals.

Connell's (1995) hierarchical framework of masculinities is related to "fluid-essentialism", though she focuses more on men's continuous, active performance of hegemonic masculinity. While it is true that in patriarchal societies, masculinity is usually viewed as superior to femininity, there also exist intra-sex hierarchies (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Kay & Jeffries, 2010). In particular, "hegemonic masculinity" stands at the top as the ideal, desirable form of masculinity in a patriarchal society. This is the form of masculinity that promotes male power and the subsequent oppression of women (McCarry, 2010). In contemporary Western culture, hegemonic masculinity is usually defined by the following elements: heterosexuality, homophobia, strength, rationality, control, aggressive and conservatism (Connell & Wood, 2005; Tharinger, 2008; Connell, 2005; McCarry, 2010; Kay & Jeffries, 2010).

According to this perspective, individuals consent to the concept of hegemonic masculinity due to the benefits associated with it (McCarry, 2010). For example, the "masculine" feature of competitiveness can get you into positions of power in many contemporary societies. For many boys and men, this makes hegemonic masculinity appealing and worthwhile to strive for (Bartholomaeus, 2012). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) notes, even though only a small minority actually manage to achieve the hegemonic masculine status, it is still a normative concept for the majority of men. Men who deviate too much from these dominant gender norms or fall into other categories of masculinity, such as subordinate masculinities and complicit masculinities, may face social stigma, ridicule, and even physical violence (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Tharinger, 2008; Bartholomaeus, 2012).

Since hegemonic masculinity is not an inherited or innate status/identity, it needs to be earned by performing one's gender properly. This form of masculinity influences the type of sports boys and men choose to play, the kind of work they do, and even when and how they exert dominance over women (Mills, 2001). According to Weaver et al. (2010), because hegemonic masculinity is an achieved status, it can be lost or taken away. In other words, the hegemonic masculine identity must be continually maintained and reinforced. The maintenance methods for proving or restoring one's manhood must

involve some sort of risk, be difficult to accomplish, and is visible to others (Weaver et al. 2010). This is a process that can last a lifetime, as men compete against each other in all arenas with their masculine status at stake.

As mentioned, heterosexuality and homophobia are crucial elements of hegemonic masculinity. As a result, young men may be “encouraged into a normative gender role which will further perpetuate misogynist and homophobic attitudes” (McCarry, 2010, p. 20). For instance, boys are encouraged to lash out against other, ‘feminine’ boys (i.e. less masculine or less aggressive) and girls and women (Mills, 2001; Kay & Jeffries, 2010). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) contend, women’s obedience or support can play an important role in upholding the dominant masculine status. The domination of women and homosexual men can be a demonstration of one’s heterosexuality, as well as hegemonic masculinity (Kay & Jeffries, 2010). As Catlett et al. (2010) points out, violence against women is “functional as a reassertion of heterosexual masculinity” (p. 109). The notion of hegemonic masculinity is thus grounded within larger social issues, such as heterosexism, homophobia, and sexism.

By conceptualizing masculinity as a fluid, cultural-dependent entity, Hunter’s (2006) concept of fluid-essentialism and Connell’s (1995) hierarchical framework of masculinities can be used to expand the subject of sexual assault much further beyond individual lust or hatred towards women. Hunter (2006) and Connell (1995) frame masculinity as a product of socialization rather than biology. Like women, from the moment of birth, men are socialized into these rigid gender roles and punished if they behave otherwise. This indicates that men also have something to lose in the patriarchal system, in that they are under constant pressure to perform (or at least try to perform) hegemonic masculinity. Sexual violence against women or non-hegemonic men may be construed as “performances” to assert their dominant role within society. This perspective opens up new possibilities of social change, as it suggests that patriarchy is oppressive towards everyone to varying degrees, even the group that it is supposed to benefit.

Radical feminism, intersectionality, as well as Hunter (2006) and Connell’s (1995) work come together to formulate my theoretical framework for this thesis project. Radical feminism attributes women’s issues, such as sexual violence and rape myths, to patriarchal norms and ideologies that are deeply embedded within the societal structure. Intersectionality, on the other hand, takes into account the ways in which gender

interacts with other identity categories, such as race and class. Thus, people's viewpoints or experiences may vary according to their complex social positions. Similarly, many men fall through the cracks in the patriarchal system. For instance, gay, bisexual or gender nonconforming men (in conventional terms) may be marginalized, trivialized, or even face violent retaliation for not conforming to the system. Hunter (2006) and Connell's (1995) ideas imply that the abolishment of patriarchy can benefit both men and women.

While my thesis project frames sexual assault as an act of social control and male dominance, it is important to note that sexual assault probably happens for many more reasons. I am also not arguing that sexual assault only happens within patriarchal societies, but I do argue that the current patterns of sexual assault is related to the societal structure. I analyze sexual assault as an issue of patriarchy because prevalent rape myths and statistics, as discussed in detail in the literature review section, indicate that women are often at the receiving ends of sexual violence and other forms of gender and sexual oppression. For instance, rape myths are often used to normalize and trivialize sexual violence against women.

Methodological Framework

My study employs a qualitative methodological approach to explore the ways in which young women navigate dominant discourses pertaining to sexual assault. This section begins with a discussion on qualitative methodology and how it relates to my research focus. The discussion then turns to social constructivist grounded theory, which is a branch of the grounded theory approach, and how it is used to guide this project. Following this, I highlight my method of data collection and analysis, concluding with an overview of potential limitations to this methodological approach.

Qualitative Research and the Social Constructivist Grounded Theory

This project takes on a qualitative research stance as opposed to quantitative or other research approaches. According to Mason (2002), qualitative research usually contains the following characteristics:

- An interpretive philosophical position concerned with understanding the social world in a complex manner

- Methods of data generation that “are both flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced” (p. 3)
- Methods of analysis, explanation, and argument which are comprehensive and situated within the rich, nuanced data

The qualitative research method is applicable to this study because my research questions are exploratory in nature. Specifically, I am concerned with women’s interpretations, reactions, and interactions with personal and dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault in their everyday lives. My methods of data collection and analysis, guided by the social constructivist grounded theory, will also reflect this emphasis on flexibility and reflexivity.

Social constructivist grounded theory is a branch of the larger grounded theory approach. Developed and introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as a response to deductive, positivist methodologies, the grounded theory approach is relatively new to academia (Cooney, 2010). As Mason (2002) notes, grounded theory is a strategy of inquiry in which “explanation and theory are grounded directly from the emerging analysis of the data” (p.180). Rather than coming up with a hypothesis and then conducting research to prove or disprove it, the grounded theory approach emphasizes in deriving theoretical explanations from themes and patterns that emerge out of the data. It is an inductive model of inquiry in that it prioritizes the contents of the data, as well as analyzes said data from a grounded perspective.

The social constructivist grounded theory approach, developed by Kathy Charmaz, takes the basic principles of grounded theory and adds the caveat that “the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). In other words, meanings, as well as knowledge, are constantly being (re)produced and altered in relation to the individual’s interaction with his/her environment. The research design, as well as the researcher’s role within the study, is thus part of this process by which participants come to understand their social realities. As Charmaz (2008) argues, researchers need to analyze the research data within “the studied specific circumstances of the research process” (p. 398). The social constructivist grounded theory approach thus conceptualizes knowledge construction as a fluid and dynamic process that is context-dependent.

This data-driven approach will help me maintain self-awareness and reflexivity as a researcher who is as much immersed within the study as the participant. As Charmaz (2006) points out, it is not possible to become a 'blank slate' interviewer who has no prior knowledge or presumptions about the subject matter. In this case, I am entering this study as a young woman with a feminist perspective. This may affect the research process in a number of ways. For instance, the participants may assume that I have experienced sexual assault, or that I hold feminist views in regards to sexual violence. In response, they may try to give 'agreeable' answers (i.e. anti-rape culture) so that I will not be offended and/or judge them negatively. At the same time, because I am quite similar to the target participant pool, they may feel more comfortable opening up and expressing their thoughts about sexual violence.

My theoretical framework and personal expectations may also affect the ways in which I analyze data. For instance, my radical feminist perspective may limit my focus to issues pertaining to patriarchy and neglect other potentially relevant areas. I may also attempt to 'fit' the participants' responses within the radical feminist framework, as well as the existing pool of feminist literature on rape myths and sexual violence. Thus, it is important for me to remain reflexive and take a bottom-up approach to analyzing the participants' responses. Indeed, the generated data will be very much grounded in the unique circumstances of the interview. Rather than attempting to "uncover" the ways in which participants understand sexual assault, I will conceptualize and analyze the interview sessions as an ongoing process of knowledge construction for both the participant and me.

With these theoretical and methodological frameworks in mind, I chose to employ semi-structured interviews as my method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews are, according to Whiting (2008), in-depth interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives and stories through open, direct, and verbal questions (p. 36). While there is a set of predetermined open-ended questions and/or topics, participants are given room to express themselves and elaborate on issues that they deem important, thus allowing "all participants to be asked the same questions within a flexible framework" (Dearnley, 2005, p. 22). Semi-structured interviews are thus well-suited for my underlying research goal, which is to give women a voice in discussing their own experiences and related thoughts or interpretations

Methods

Data Collection

My data sources consisted of interview data with young women in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia. Between late January and March in 2013, I employed the snowball sampling method and also visited several undergraduate courses in the sociology and women and gender studies department to recruit study participants. With the latter method, after giving a brief introduction to my study, I left behind a signup sheet (see Appendix-A) where potential participants could write down their names and email addresses so that I could contact them later, as well as business cards so that they could contact me on their own. From February to June in 2013, I conducted 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews that lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Most interviews were conducted in privately booked study rooms at Bennett Library and Belzberg Library.

While the target age range of the participant pool was stated as 19 to 30 years old, the participants were predominantly in their early to mid 20s. Due to this specific age range, as well as my method of participant recruitment, most participants were fulltime postsecondary students or have some postsecondary educational background. When asked to identify their racial/ethnic background, the majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian Canadian, having lived in Canada (especially Vancouver) most of their lives. In regards to class, it should be noted that I did not get to ask every participant about their class status, partly because there seemed to be some discomfort with that topic. Still, the available participant responses indicated that the group was mostly from the upper working or middle class. The ability to pay tuition or rent was used to estimate their class status. For instance, participants from the upper working class usually had to apply for student loans to pay their tuition, but they were still able to devote a lot of time to their studies.

The interview schedule (see Appendix-C) was used to guide the interview sessions, though the order and format of the questions were sometimes adjusted accordingly. After a series of warm-up discussion topics, the participants were asked to brainstorm their ideas/thoughts in regards to sexual assault. The discussion focus then turned to hegemonic ideologies and the dominant culture, as I asked the participants to vocalize their thoughts on media portrayals of sexual assault, as well as some listed

rape myths (see Appendix-D). I also asked them to reflect on the processes by which they came to their particular understandings of sexual violence. The participants were then inquired if these understandings have any influence on their everyday lives. Since these discussion topics can be quite 'heavy', I wrapped up the interviews with a brief discussion on social change and what society can do to address the current problem of sexual assault.

Data Organization and Analysis

Almost all of the interviews were transcribed, with one exception in which the participant did not wish to have the interview session recorded. From the transcription stage, all participants' real names were replaced with pseudonyms. In the coding stage, any other identifying information (such as location of workplaces or specific experiences) were either omitted or summarized briefly. As Creswell (2009) points out, other than theoretical sampling, another main characteristic of the grounded theory approach is the "constant comparison of data with emerging categories" (p. 13). Thus, I engaged in a process of continuous reorganization/refinement of the designated codes, concepts, and categories of my data until I locate relevant patterns and themes.

In the first coding stage, in order to locate general themes and patterns, the transcribed interview data was organized in accordance with the interview questions. In other words, the interview questions were transformed into distinctive categories to locate general themes and patterns, as well as potentially relevant outlier responses. A few examples of the categories included: conceptualizations of the 'typical' sexual assault victim and perpetrator, thoughts on media portrayals of sexual assault, and reactions towards the list of rape myths. The second stage of coding, on the other hand, was more comprehensive, as I located key themes and patterns throughout the rich interview data. This included a variety of coding strategies, such as examining individual participant responses for (in)consistencies or comparing categorical patterns to obtain a wider picture of the responses.

During the analysis stage, it was particularly important that I remained reflexive of my research, since "any analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture, and situation" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 131). My research analysis needed to take into account both the data generation process and the resulting data. Indeed, the location, timing, and atmosphere of the interview sessions may have affected the participants' responses.

Instead of simply examining the participants' responses, I also took into account my contributions, reactions, and so forth in the exchange.

Utilizing the social constructivist grounded theory's data-driven approach, I re-evaluated and revised the designated codes and located patterns throughout various stages in order to conjure plausible theories/conclusions in relation to my research questions. Re-reading the reviewed research literature and conducting further research also helped contextualize the interview results in relation to the existing body of research on this subject matter.

Chapter 4.

Overview of Results

This chapter provides an overview of the general themes and patterns located in the interview data. The discussion in this section is organized into a few overarching categories. Specifically, the categories cover the participants' thoughts about sexual assault, reactions towards the list of rape myths they were shown, opinions on media portrayals of sexual violence, impacts of personal/dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault on their everyday lives, the influence of socialization, and their ideas towards social change on this subject matter. I also discuss the (dis)connection between personal opinions and dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault, as well as the demonstration of agency and awareness.

Personal thoughts about sexual assault

Sexual Assault in General

The first section of the interview focused on participants' ideas about sexual assault victims, perpetrators, and scenarios. By "scenarios", I refer to situations or settings in which sexual assault happens. After a broad discussion on sexual assault, the participants were usually asked if they felt there is such a thing as a "typical" sexual assault perpetrator, victim, or scenario. In most cases, the initial discussions revolved around defining sexual assault and distinguishing it from sexual harassment and rape.

The participants were divided on whether or not non-physical acts, such as verbal harassment, should count as sexual assault. Half of the participants defined sexual assault as physical sexual acts, ranging from unwanted touching to forceful penetration. This definition corresponds with the legal definition of sexual assault, which stresses the "non-consensual" aspect of the act (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Lazar, 2010). In addition to non-consensual physical acts, the other half of the participants also included non-physical acts, such as making sexually explicit comments or gestures. The term "verbal sexual assault" was used a few times to describe the act of making unwanted sexual comments to induce feelings of discomfort or violation.

Many participants also attempted to differentiate between sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. As discussed in the literature review chapter, since “rape” has historically been associated with heterosexual penetrative sexual assault, it has been legally replaced by the term “sexual assault” (Los, 1994). Yet the interview data suggests that the two terms are commonly used to describe different degrees of sexual violence. For most participants, sexual assault refers to all forms of sexual violence, including rape. Rape, on the other hand, represents the gravest form of sexual assault, which is forced intercourse or penetration of any bodily orifice. Acts such as unwanted touching would thus count as sexual assault but not rape. There was some difficulty in differentiating between sexual assault and sexual harassment, since the majority of participants included milder acts such as unwanted touching in the former category. In the end, “sexual harassment” was defined as any non-physical types of sexual assault.

The fact that most participants defined sexual assault in such a manner has several potential implications. The legal definition of sexual assault, as well as the laws related to sexual violence, may not be common or accessible knowledge to the public. While legal texts, such as the Canadian Criminal Code, are available on the internet and other channels, there are few known resources to help the public understand, process, and apply this kind of technical knowledge (Newman & Doherty, 2008).

So there are two layers of obstacles in understanding the laws and legal conceptualizations of sexual assault. First, people are not usually educated on legal issues, such as the criminal code definition of sexual assault. Even if they do seek out such information, they may not have the resources/background knowledge available to comprehend and apply this information in their everyday lives. Second, some scholars argue that contemporary legal frameworks are often based on the male lens (Lillian, 2007; Longworth, 2010). Thus, there may be a disconnection between male (i.e. patriarchal institutions) and female conceptualizations of sexual assault. While the Canadian criminal justice system defines sexual assault as violent, physical acts, the participants of this study defined sexual assault as any acts that violate the individual’s sexual integrity, hence the inclusion of verbal and emotional components.

Perpetrators of Sexual Assault

About half of the group disagreed with the idea of a “typical perpetrator”, arguing that anyone, regardless of their class or race, has the capability to commit sex crimes. A

few participants in this group, however, did note that men seem to have a higher statistical likelihood of doing so. The other half of the participants had more detailed profiles in mind, generally perceiving the typical perpetrator to be an early 20s to middle aged white man. Some adjectives were used to describe the typical perpetrator, such as greasy (in both appearance and behaviour), gross, sketchy, selfish, opportunistic, and predatory. A few participants also envisioned the perpetrator as a young, club-going guy with no respect for women's bodies and/or as someone with a troublesome sense of entitlement.

According to Madriz (1997), the dominant culture tends to depict perpetrators as monstrous beings who are either mentally ill or have an uncontrollable sex drive. This excuses the perpetrator's actions and also disconnects the attack from the rest of society. In response, I asked the participants if they felt perpetrators are inherently different from the rest of the population. Interestingly, most of the participants did not share this view. While quite a few participants pointed out the possibility of biological causes, social upbringing was believed to be the most important factor. For instance, some participants suggested that perpetrators of sexual assault may not have been taught to respect other people's boundaries, properly read social cues, or any form of social decency. The resulting warped sense of entitlement may prompt them to commit sexual assault. In addition, some participants noted that our current culture frames men as sexually aggressive beings that will do anything for immediate sexual gratification. This promotes the idea that it is "natural" and "understandable" for men to commit sexual violence against women.

Sexual Assault Victim

The participants' opinions were also divided on the idea of a "typical" sexual assault victim. One group felt that, while anyone can be a victim of sexual assault, women are statistically more likely to be attacked. They also insisted that there is no set trend or pattern to sexual assault victimhood. One participant supported her belief with her volunteer experiences at a sexual assault organization. She explained that all kinds of people come in for help and thus, she knows from firsthand experience that anyone can become a victim of sexual assault.

The other group's images of a typical sexual assault victim aligned with Benedict's (1992) virgin/vamp dichotomy. In general, the typical sexual assault victim

was envisioned as a woman in her late teens to young adulthood. The woman may also visibly appear to be defenceless and passive, thus making her an easy target for perpetrators. This is similar to the image of the “virgin”, the innocent woman who is vulnerable, conservative, and had the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time (Benedict, 1992). A few participants, on the other hand, imagined the typical victim as a frequent party-goer, drinks a lot of alcohol, and/or wears revealing clothing. This corresponds with the image of the “vamp”, who engages in the mentioned non-traditional behaviours (Benedict, 1992). While Benedict (1992) argues that the virgin/vamp labels are often used to assign or lift blame from the victim, the participants’ comments were purely descriptive. The subject of “blame” will be discussed more thoroughly in a later section.

Sexual Assault Scenarios

A quarter of the participants believed there are no typical sexual assault scenarios because it can happen anywhere. The rest of the participants, on the other hand, described some potential situations that may be more "prone" to sexual assault. Many participants felt that alcohol consumption can raise the likelihood of sexual assault because it makes the (potential) victim mentally and physically vulnerable. Furthermore, perpetrators may take advantage of women in these settings by slipping date rape drugs in their drinks or claiming that they consented even though they were intoxicated. Lastly, it was pointed out that certain behaviours, such as persistent sexual advances, are perceived to be acceptable or even expected in drinking environments.

The discussion on sexual assault scenarios was often framed around acquaintance rape, which many participants believed to be the most common form of sexual assault. Most participants associated acquaintance rape with date rape or sexual violence within a romantic relationship. The common theme seems to be that the victim trusted the wrong person, whether it’s a date, a family member, or a person in power. This is surprisingly accurate, as studies indicate that acquaintance rape account for the majority of sexual assault reports (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010). This suggests that dominant portrayals of sexual assault, such as the popular image of “stranger danger”, may not necessarily translate into common knowledge. As will be discussed later on, most of the participants credited their

knowledge of sexual violence to postsecondary courses and sexual assault related campaigns.

Attitudes and Perspective List

As a by-product of the patriarchal culture, rape myths serve a variety of purposes that ultimately contribute to women's subordination. In general, rape myths perpetuate problematic attitudes and false beliefs that justify male-perpetuated sexual assault against women (Moyer, 1992; Lonsway & Fizergald, 1994). For instance, sexual assault victims' non-traditional behaviours may be identified as the "trigger" for the attack (Benedict, 1992; Cuklanz, 2000; Garland, 2009).

For this section of the interview, I asked the participants to read and discuss a list of popular rape myths (see Appendix 4). I was aware that some participants may internalize these ideas and hold them to be true, so I decided to title the list "Attitudes and Perspectives on Sexual Assault" instead of "Rape Myths". In addition, even hegemonic ideologies like rape myths can be interpreted in numerous ways depending on the individual. Thus, in the context of the interview, it would be a bit premature to call them rape myths before the participants are given a chance to discuss their thoughts about them.

Most participants disagreed with the majority of the items on the list and only partially agreed with some of them. The participants' discussions proved to be much more complex than expected, and even when they agreed with some of the rape myths, their reasons were often quite different from the myths' embedded meanings and ideologies, as well as feminist analysis of these myths.

Myths about Sexual Assault Victimhood

Most participants firmly disagreed with the victim-blaming rape myths on the list, which state that women are to blame for the sexual attack if they were outside at night, wore revealing clothing, or were intoxicated at the time of the assault. The general reasoning was that, regardless of their behaviours, the victims should never be blamed for the attack. According to some participants, to argue that women should "protect themselves" by avoiding these non-traditional behaviours is to strip them of their basic human rights.

A few participants believed that these attitudes and beliefs are slowly fading away with time and effort, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of campaigns such as SlutWalk, which is an annual walk dedicated to end “slut-shaming”. The movement was inspired by an incident that happened in 2011, in which “a representative of the Toronto Police gave shocking insight into the Force’s view of sexual assault by stating: “women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized”” (Slutwalk Toronto, n.d.). As some participants commented, this social movement incited some much needed discussion about the effects of rape culture, patriarchy, and female empowerment (Ringrose & Renold, 2012).

The rape myth about women’s drinking behaviour, on the other hand, sparked some divided views among the participants. Like the other related myths, the general consensus among the participants was that intoxication does not imply consent. There were a few participants, however, who felt that the woman is at least partially responsible because she willingly put herself at risk by drinking excessively. A few other participants struggled with this rape myth, claiming that women should not be *blamed* for the attack, but they still need to protect themselves in this “scary world”. As we can see, agreement with rape myths does not mean that the individual agree with all of the embedded assumptions, blame attributions, and dominant ideologies.

Participants also struggled to clarify what does or does not qualify as sexual assault in this context. Most participants felt that it is sexual assault if a sober person (male or female) knowingly takes advantage of a woman’s drunken state. “Drunk sex”, in which the woman is simply a bit tipsy and initiated or went along with the sexual advances, however, would not count as sexual assault.

“So if she is drunk to the point ofnot mentally being there, she is incapable of giving consent? Then that’s rape. [...] Yeah so if you’re both four beers in, and you have sex and you both say ‘yeah! Let’s do this!’ And you wake up in the morning and think ‘oh shit, I really wish I hadn’t done that’. That’s not rape. That’s not even sexual assault.”

- Myuria (Interview)

“I think that if you’re drunk. And....you...have sex with someone....and then you just regret it afterwards....you know, I don’t, I don’t believe that that’s assault because I don’t believe that the other person was purposely trying to....to violate you that way.”

- Rutee (Interview)

It was argued that in such cases, it would be unfair to accuse men of sexual assault. For some participants, this situation becomes even more controversial when both parties were drunk during the sexual encounter. For many participants, factoring

alcohol into the subject of sexual assault produces a variety of grey areas that cannot be easily deconstructed. The choice to consume alcohol, the extent of intoxication, the definition of “informed consent”, and whether or not both parties were drunk; all have to be taken into account to distinguish between “drunk sex” and “sexual assault”.

The two rape myths on the list, “young, attractive women are more likely to get sexually assaulted” and “men cannot be sexually assaulted against their will”, allude to the idea that sexual assault is a lust-fueled act, usually perpetrated by men against women. This contains heteronormative assumptions, as well as the belief that women are more at risk for sexual assault (Benedict, 1992). Most participants disagreed with both rape myths, on the basis that no one is immune to sexual assault. A few participants also argued that sexual assault is committed out of the need for power instead of sexual gratification, and perpetrators pick their victims based on their vulnerability rather than their appearance, age, or gender. A number of participants noted that they have male friends or acquaintances that have been sexually assaulted and thus, contrary to the rape myth, male sexual victimization can and does occur. There was also frustration expressed by the participants at this perspective, since it implies that men are so sexually hungry that any kind of sex is wanted.

Rape Myths about Sexual Assault

The list of rape myths depicts sexual assault as violent, stranger-perpetuated, and involving vaginal penetration. As media studies indicate, this is the dominant portrayal of sexual assault in contemporary North American societies (Meloy & Miller, 2009; Bufkin & Schholz, 2000; Ryan, 2011; Emmers-Somer et al. 2006). Many participants, however, were aware that sexual assault is actually more likely to be committed by people that you know, such as your friends or family. Furthermore, almost all participants dismissed the idea that vaginal penetration defines “real” sexual assault. This is consistent with the previous discussion where participants argued against the idea that men cannot be sexually assaulted.

The majority of the participants felt that violent sexual attacks are *possible* but it would be an exaggeration to say that it is the norm. Some participants also pointed out that the victim may not resist for a few reasons. For instance, the victim may be too afraid to move or she/he may fear retaliation from the perpetrator. In addition, it may be physiologically difficult to fight back if date rape drugs or alcohol are involved.

Existing research literature supports this idea in that, while it is “natural” to want to fight back against something unwanted, sexual assault victims may not do so for a variety of reasons, such as those listed by the participants (Anderson, 2010; Randall, 2010).

Rape Myths about the Perpetrator

In contemporary North American societies, perpetrators of sexual violence are either stereotyped as heinous monsters or innocent men at the mercy of their overpowering (but normal) male sex drive. As Madriz (1997) notes, these former rape myth help alleviate the perpetrator’s responsibility for the attack by asserting that they have no control over their actions. Most participants dismissed this stereotypical profile of perpetrators and asserted that any one is just as likely to commit sexual assault. As discussed earlier, some participants did feel that there is something inherently amiss about perpetrators, but the source is probably social and not biological.

On the other hand, the perpetrator’s actions may be justified as normal male behaviour. The rape myth, “sexual assault often happens when men misread cues from women and think that they are interested in them”, makes sexual assault appear as an innocent mistake on the man’s part. Another related rape myth in the list implies that men have such strong sex drives that they cannot control themselves the moment they become sexually aroused (Benedict, 1992). While a few participants felt that men, either due to social or biological reasons, may be on a different wavelength than women, most disagreed with the idea that sexually aggressive behaviours are “normal” for men. Many participants contended that men have full control (and responsibility) of their actions.

In both of the discussed rape myth depictions, the perpetrator is assumed to be male. Again, all participants argued that sexual assault can be committed by any one and in a variety of ways not limited to vaginal penetration. A few participants added that women-perpetuated sexual assault (especially against another woman) definitely happens, but it is probably rarer than male-perpetuated sexual assault. Interestingly, prior to this conversation, one participant had never even considered the idea of same-sex sexual assault because she could not imagine a woman inflicting such harm against another woman. Upon contemplating the subject matter, she arrived at the conclusion that same-sex sexual assault is certainly a possibility. This shows that dominant

conceptualizations of sexual assault, even when internalized, can be refuted through critical thinking and informed discussions.

Media

Research studies indicate that mainstream media portrayals of sexual assault tend to reinforce hegemonic gender norms and ideologies that contribute to women's oppression (Moorti, 2002; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Kitzinger, 2009; Meyers, 1997). According to numerous quantitative studies, exposure to biased media portrayals of sexual assault can reinforce rape myth attitudes (Franiuk et al. 2008; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011). The interview data, however, shows that most of the participants exhibited both awareness and resistance to dominant media portrayals of sexual assault. This indicates that mainstream media is not the only source of values/beliefs for young women in contemporary society. Furthermore, the participants' discussions suggest that the viewers' personal mindset and interpretations can alter the impact of mainstream media, once again disputing the supposed top-down relationship between the dominant culture and young women.

Most participants felt that mainstream media, such as news media and popular media, often present sexual assault in stereotypical ways. For instance, one participant brought up a particular episode in an American sitcom called *New Girl*, in which a man was sexually assaulted by his female superior but he "really enjoyed it". This reinforces the idea that men cannot be sexually assaulted because they welcome all sexual attention. In addition, a few participants mentioned that sexual assault victims in television shows, such as *Law and Order*, often engage in 'deviant' behaviours at the time of the attack, such as wearing revealing clothing or drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. They also noted that sexual assault is sometimes portrayed as sexy, glorifying, and even empowering for the (usually male) perpetrator.

Some participants also pointed out that news media tend to engage in victim-blaming behaviours. For instance, the news reporter may discuss unnecessary information about the victim, implying that his/her actions somehow triggered the attack. Correspondingly, news media studies consistently indicate that sexual assault victims' nontraditional behaviours are often reported in unnecessary detail, thus casting doubt on their story or blaming them for the attack (Sampert, 2010; Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). Some participants used the Steubenville case as an example of how

news media engage in victim-blaming. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but many participants were frustrated at mainstream media's portrayal of that particular case. Recent events such as the Steubenville case seemed to have much influence on participants' immediate thoughts about sexual assault.

In addition to victim-blaming, quite a few participants observed that the news media distorts reality by focusing on rare or stereotypical sexual assault cases. Specifically, news media tend to report cases that fit the "stranger in the dark" narrative, in which the attack was perpetrated by stranger(s) and was extremely violent or disturbing. It was also pointed out that cases involving young, female victims tend to receive the most news coverage while male sexual victimization is rarely reported. Once again, the participants' accounts corresponded with research literature on this subject matter (Kitzinger, 2009; Meyers, 1997; Sampert, 2010).

On the other hand, approximately a quarter of participants felt that the news media culture tries *too hard* to be objective, often resulting in oversimplified reports that do not actually educate the viewer. As one participant pointed out, since the term "sexual assault" covers a wide range of actions, it has virtually no meaning when used in news reports. In addition, news media tend to report sexual assault on a case by case basis, neglecting its full potential to promote social change on this subject matter.

Impact on Everyday Life

The interview data suggests that rape myth beliefs exert considerable influence on young women's everyday lives. For most participants in this study, this meant taking safety precautions to protect themselves against sexual assault, especially stranger-rape. Some participants openly acknowledged that stranger-rape probably occurs much less frequently than acquaintance-rape, but they cannot discard such concerns when out in public. Indeed, scholars argue that the fear of (stranger-perpetuated) sexual assault has prompted many women to monitor their own behaviors and exercise precautionary strategies in both public and private arenas (Gardner, 1990; Fisher & Sloan III, 2003; Stanko, 1995; Belknap, 1996). The safety strategies listed by the participants also aligned with related research studies (Madriz, 1997; Gardner, 1990; Day, 1994).

Many participants try to avoid "dangerous" areas or going out alone at night. These "dangerous" areas usually refer to quiet, secluded places such as dark alleyways, empty bus stops, sparsely populated streets, or unfamiliar territories in general. The

reasoning is that perpetrators are more likely to commit sexual assault (or other violent crimes) in quiet and dark areas because there are less people around. Thus, some participants try to find friends or acquaintances to accompany them if they have to go out. A few participants always make sure to let people know when they are out so that if anything does go wrong, someone would notice. For some participants, simply being out at night can conjure up uncomfortable feelings and concerns for their sexual safety.

A small portion of the participants carry, or used to carry, self defense weapons such as pocket knives or pepper spray. A few participants stopped carrying these items because they discovered that it is illegal to possess weapons in public. In response, some participants started carrying conventional items that can act as a weapon in the event of an emergency. One participant would sometimes carry her keys between her fingers in a closed fist so that it can act as a stabbing weapon. These precautions imply that the anticipated sexual attack would be violent and sudden, corresponding with the “stranger in the dark” scenario.

For many participants, the most important thing is to be constantly alert to your surroundings so that nobody can take advantage of you. For instance, one participant described a safety strategy called “slicing the pie” that she would use when she has to turn around the corner of a building or wall. Specifically, she would walk further away from the building or wall when she turned the corner so that she could see if there was anyone hiding around the corner ahead of time. Other participants made it a habit to guard their drinks by carrying them with them everywhere they went in order to prevent date rape drugs. One participant noted that, if she needed to go to the bathroom, she would either bring the drink with her or leave it with a trusted friend. A few participants also mentioned that they would not accept drinks from strangers.

The topic of appearance management was also mentioned multiple times. For instance, some participants try to appear more confident in order to discourage potential perpetrators. This includes actions such as actively making eye contact with the people around you or holding your head up high when you walk. For other participants, this meant avoiding revealing clothing that may attract unwanted attention, or doing things that might be misinterpreted as inviting sexual attention. One participant told me that she was cautioned against being too friendly or cheerful to her customers at work, because it might “send the wrong message”. Both Gardner’s (1990) and Madriz’s (1997) study also discuss this strategy of “appearance management”, in which women avoid behaving in

sexually desirable ways. These precautions lend support to the belief that sexual assault is lust-driven and that women can avoid “triggering” sexual assault.

While the interview question was meant to explore whether or not the participants implemented any safety strategies in their everyday lives, some participants interpreted it as an ideological question. These participants discussed how their current attitudes and perspectives have changed their views of sexual assault and, subsequently, how they act in their everyday lives. For instance, after learning about the high rate of sexual assault for women, some participants noted that they are now more mindful of what they say in public. They also have much lower tolerance for rape jokes, because it can be hurtful to people who have actually experienced sexual violence. In other words, they are actively resisting the rape culture in their everyday lives.

Influences of Socialization

According to Belknap (1996), since birth, women are exposed to rape myth attitudes and beliefs through a variety of channels. Indeed, many participants discussed the ways in which major agents of socialization, such as family and friends, influenced (or tried to influence) their attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault. In most cases, they were taught to fear sexual violence and urged to take safety precautions for their own sake. Many participants were also aware that this socialized fear of sexual assault is very much a gendered issue, since the men in their lives don't usually share the same level of concern in regards to sexual assault.

A large portion of participants described their family members (especially parents) as overprotective and concerned for their sexual safety. Some participants told me that when they go out at night, their parents would ask them to come home before it gets too late or offer to drive them home so that they are not stranded in the middle of the night. A few participants' parents also warned them against date rape drugs and the consumption of alcohol. Specifically, they were advised against accepting drinks from strangers, and encouraged to always keep an eye on their own drinks to prevent date rape drugs. Some parents would also use recent events as an opportunity to educate and warn the participants about the dangers of the outside world. For instance, one participant commented that, when she was younger and sexual assault appeared on the news, her mother would tell her not to trust “strange men” and always be aware of her surroundings.

Like family members, peer groups can also contribute to this fear of sexual assault. For instance, one participant enjoys taking long walks at night, but her friends (and family) think she is “crazy” because it is “dangerous”. In essence, she was told that she *should* be afraid at night, which actually did result in her feeling more fearful. Another participant’s best friend would tuck her hair inside her sweater whenever she left her house so that potential perpetrators cannot grab her long hair and drag her away. These (however well-intentioned) gestures reinforce the belief that sexual assault is often committed by strangers in the dark.

The topic of school as a socialization agent, on the other hand, produced some interesting discussions. Most participants felt that K-12 education tend to reinforce rape myth beliefs. For instance, one participant mentioned that in kindergarten, she was taught to always stay within a group and never wander off alone. If someone pulled up with their car and invited them in, she was taught to say no, run away, and try to write down their license plate number. Above all, she was taught to never speak to strangers, because there are “predators” out there. Existing research literature shows that this type of socialization can contribute to the feminized fear of (sexual) victimization (Ferraro, 1989; Riger & Gordon, 1981; Schafer et al., 2006).

Postsecondary education, on the other hand, appears to mediate that fear by teaching students about the actual realities of sexual assault. For some participants, information such as the biased patterns in news reports, rape myth attitudes/beliefs, and statistical studies on sexual assault, helped counter the impacts of rape culture. As a result, some participants became less fearful for their sexual safety and were also less likely to engage in victim-blaming behaviours. By understanding where rape myth attitudes and beliefs came from or why they were not necessarily accurate, the participants were able to mediate the (gendered) fear-mongering effect stemming from these ideas.

Some participants were asked to reflect and discuss how they came to their current understandings of sexual assault. Many participants noted that they had always expressed an interest in feminist issues, or grew up in a non-traditional environment, which prompted them to engage in feminist readings or take related postsecondary courses. Exposure to these kinds of material, in turn, helped reinforce their attitudes towards sexual assault. Thus, it is possible that the participant’s responses would be quite different if they held more conservative viewpoints or majored in disciplines such

as the natural sciences or business. As I will discuss in the conclusion chapter, this self-selection sampling (or volunteer bias) is one of the limitations of this research study.

As mentioned, the participants of this study were predominantly Caucasian Canadian and were attending, or have attended, postsecondary education. According to intersectionality theory, people simultaneously occupy multiple interlocking systems of oppression and privilege (Bilge, 2010; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Mann, 2012). In this case, the participants may hold such countercultural views because of their postsecondary backgrounds and, to a certain extent, their social class. This is not to say that the participants were very wealthy or that they did not struggle with educational expenses. However, studies indicate that higher education is not very accessible to individuals with low socioeconomic status, more so if they are racialized (Le & Miller, 2005; Hall, 2001; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013). For instance, they may be unable to afford the time or money to attend postsecondary courses (Hall, 2001). Thus, the participants may experience gender inequality (as women), but they also have the privilege of attending postsecondary courses to learn about countercultural views and information.

In addition, the participants of this study rarely discussed the ways in which their racial identity influenced their viewpoints or everyday experiences. Furthermore, when asked about the relationship between race and sexual violence, they usually contended that anyone, regardless of their race, is capable of becoming a perpetrator or victim of sexual violence. These “colourblind” responses may be partly due to their white privilege, in that they can afford to overlook race. As McIntosh (1990) notes, white privilege is “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 31). Since white privilege is perceived to be the norm in white settler societies, it is invisible and often taken for granted (Case, 2012; Stewart et al. 2012).

As discussed in the literature review chapter, while white sexual assault victims may still be subjected to victim-blaming because of their gender, their race will rarely be used against them (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997). In fact, they are more likely to be presumed “innocent” and receive more social and legal support (Howerton, 2006; Meyers, 2006). Since these privileges are rather subtle, sexual violence involving white victims may appear to be devoid of any racial elements. Similarly, mainstream media tend to neglect discussions of race and depict sexual violence as a “colourblind” issue that affects all women in the same way (Moorti, 2002; Horeck, 2004). For the

participants, then, race may appear to have little to do with sexual violence. At the very least, they may feel that it is not their 'place' to discuss race. Thus, individuals from racial minority groups may be more likely to discuss race and racialization in relation to sexual violence. For instance, they may bring up the ways in which racialized sexual assault victims are more likely to be blamed or dismissed because of racial stereotypes and/or racism in the criminal justice system (Dylan et al. 2008; White et al. 1998; Maier, 2008; Neville et al. 2004).

Participant's Suggestions for Social Change

Near the end of the interview sessions, I asked the participants if they felt there was anything society could do to address the problem of sexual assault, such as the gendered patterns of sexual assault, stigmatization of victims, or the misconceptions about the crime. This question was intended to 'deescalate' the participants' mindset to more general and impersonal areas, as well as to end the interview on a relatively light and optimistic tone. Participants were free to interpret the interview question on their own terms, and to discuss potential solutions (if they conjured any) on such terms.

Almost all participants suggested educational programs in school settings as one potential solution to many of these issues. This corresponded with their early discussions on how post-secondary education helped change or solidify their views about sexual assault. According to the participants, knowledge can correct misconceptions and counter rape myth attitudes, as well as help prevent future incidents of sexual assault. A variety of educational programs were suggested.

Many thought that educational programs should aim to provide accurate, factual information about sexual assault. This may help prevent the trivialization of non-stranger rape cases, encourage sexual assault victims to bring their cases forward, and promote more open community discussions about sexual violence. In essence, we need to address the issue of secondary victimization, in which sexual assault victims are marginalized, stigmatized, and blamed for the attack (Campbell et al. 2001). Increased public awareness may also result in more resources dedicated to help sexual assault victims recover from the ordeal, such as clinics that specialize in mental trauma or therapy services. Furthermore, such educational programs may prompt (or even actively teach) women to take more practical safety precautions, rather than those based on stereotypical images/beliefs of sexual assault.

Almost half of the participants contended that educational programs should teach people (especially men) that it is wrong to commit sexual assault. In other words, instead of teaching women how to protect themselves, men should be taught not to commit sexual assault. For instance, they need to learn how to recognize clear consent from the other person, that “no” means no, and respect women’s autonomy in general. These strategies would challenge the problem of rape culture within our society, where male sexual aggression is often expected or even encouraged, and women must play as the gatekeeper for both sexes’ sexualities in order to “stay safe”.

Some participants also discussed a variety of campaigns combating rape culture. SlutWalk was praised by the participants for its effectiveness in directing the blame of sexual assault away from the sexual assault victims’ apparel choices. Campaigns that focus on preventing people (especially men) from committing sexual assault were also discussed. One participant posited that famous male figures, such as athletes or celebrities, could act as role models to show that sexual violence is not a prerequisite for being a “real man”. This idea is partly based on the view that sexual assault is an act of (male) power and dominance instead of lust. Another participant discussed an ad campaign called “Don’t Be That Guy”, in which young men are cautioned against proceeding with any sexual activities without clear consent. The participant was particularly impressed with this campaign because they also addressed the issue of same-sex sexual assault instead of just heterosexual, male-perpetuated sexual assault.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the key responses by the participants to the interview questions. The interview data demonstrates how dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault were both resisted and internalized by the participants. They were able to critically challenge rape myths but also found themselves conforming to mainstream ideas about sexual safety. At the same time, it is possible that they were able to do so because of their class and racial privileges. They were exposed to countercultural perspectives partly because they had the privilege of attending postsecondary education. Similarly, their white privilege influenced how they conceptualize the problem of and potential solutions to sexual violence. In the next chapter, I offer an in-depth analysis of the findings from this chapter.

Chapter 5.

Discussion of Key Themes and Findings

This chapter offers a qualitative analysis of the key themes and patterns observed in the interview data. In the previous chapter, I identified and discussed the overarching trends within the participant responses. This chapter examines the participants' contradicting responses, unexpected reactions to rape myths, the increasing popularity of new media as alternative sources of information, the fluidity/flexibility of attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault, as well as discussions pertaining to the culture of masculinity. Within these discussions, connections between larger societal trends and potential implications for social changes are also examined.

Unexpected responses to rape myths

As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the participants disagreed with the list of rape myths. When the participants' reasons did agree with some of the rape myths, their reasons for doing so were often much more complex than I had expected. Prior to the interviews, I thought the participants' interpretations of the rape myths would align with scholarly literature on the subject matter. In hindsight, my perspective may have been limited by (radical) feminist literature to the point where I could not anticipate alternative interpretations of rape myths and sexual violence. Indeed, the participants' agreement with certain rape myths did not necessarily indicate agreement with its underlying ideologies about gender and sexuality.

Many participants struggled with the idea that sexual assault victims are partially responsible for being victimized if they were drunk at the time of the assault. There were discussions on what constituted "drunk sex" and "taking advantage of an intoxicated person", as well as divided opinions on whether or not the victim shared some responsibility for the attack. Some participants felt that the victim deserved a certain degree of blame because of her "careless choice" of drinking too much in an unsafe area. Research literature also indicates that intoxicated victims are likely to be blamed

for the attack for the mentioned reason (Sampert, 2010; Danne, 2009; McIntrye et al. 2000). A few participants were less direct with the blame attribution and instead, exhibited what I call “sympathetic agreement”. They believed that it is completely the perpetrator’s fault for preying on intoxicated women, but it is a sad reality that women need to protect themselves in an unsafe world:

“Um....I think un...unfortunately the way the world is? Women....sh...like I mean, getting drunk in public and not watching your drinks and all that kind of thing, I mean those are just safety precautions? It’s not their fault if, if it happens? But um....and they shouldn’t be...responsible in any way, but... I think we do have to do what we can to try and minimize that? Because we live in a....scary world?”

- Reimi (Interview)

In essence, these participants were very sympathetic towards the hypothetical sexual assault victim, and felt that the attack was in no way her fault. At the same time, however, the participants felt that they (as women) bear some responsibility to protect themselves. Put it another way, women cannot simply remain passive and rely on other people to save them; they have to take active precautions to survive in this “scary world”.

About a quarter of participants believed that virgin women would be more traumatized by sexual assault, but their reasoning did not correspond with feminist analyses of this myth. According to feminist research literature, this rape myth assumes that women’s inherent worth is measured by their virginity (Burt, 1980; Benedict, 1992; Fahs, 2010). This ties in with the sexually oppressive notion that women are supposed to “save themselves” for their future husbands, to which their sexuality belongs (Fahs, 2010). Until then, their sexual purity is “guarded” by the male head of the household, such as the father or older brother. This line of thinking is supported by romanticized notions of the “first time”, the increasing popularity of purity balls and purity rings in which women pledge to save their first time for their husband, as well as the general idea that women are gatekeepers of sexuality for both sexes (Fahs, 2010; Madriz, 1997). Thus, according to this rape myth, virgin victims would be especially devastated by sexual assault because “something important” was taken away from them.

Although a few participants did feel that sexual assault would be particularly devastating if the woman was saving her first time, some participants had a different position on the matter. According to these participants, the lack of information (due to sexual inexperience) may leave a bad first impression of sex for the participant, discouraging from engaging in consensual sexual activities in the future. A sexually

experienced woman would at least understand that sex and sexual assault are very different experiences. As one participant commented:

“Well just if you um...if you’ve never had...if you’re a virgin, you’re probably pretty ignorant towards that whole realm, so not only are you being assaulted, but you’re being assaulted in an entirely novel way? You might not yet know how to deal with that? Whereas if you’re experienced, sexually, okay, you’re being assaulted and that’s terrible. But you know, you know what’s happening *laughs* And you might hate it, but you’re not totally ignorant as to what’s going on?”

- Myuria (Interview)

Furthermore, the sexually inexperienced victim may not understand what is happening during the attack, thus making the experience even more traumatizing. As we can see, while this rape myth is supposed to incite ideologies of female chastity and conservatism, the participants took a very practical approach to the subject matter.

These discussions indicate that women’s interpretation of rape myths may not always align with their intended purposes. Their individual thought processes can “change” the meaning of rape myths and, subsequently, its degree and type of influence. Furthermore, as I will discuss in the following section, women’s pre-existing attitudes and beliefs can affect how they react to, or are affected by, social trends and current events.

The Influence of Current Events and News Reports

While the interviews were conducted within a relatively short period of 5 months, from February to June of 2013, it became quickly apparent that recent events had a profound influence on participants’ thoughts and attitudes towards sexual assault. The events referenced by the participants slowly changed throughout the time period, as they focused on the most well-known sexual assault case(s) at the time of the interviews. Between February and March, a few participants referenced the Delhi gang rape case¹ in their discussions on sexual assault. Although the incident took place two months prior, the court proceedings were receiving widespread press coverage at that time. One participant, when I mentioned the term “perpetrator of sexual assault”, immediately thought of that case. Another participant used the case as an example on what would qualify as “rape”:

1 IBN News. (2013). Delhi gangrape: What happened on the night of December 16, 2012. Retrieved from <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/delhi-gangrape-what-happened-on-the-night-of-december-16-2012/420729-3-244.html>

“Mmm....um....like incidents that they’re like raping, it’s like....like what happened that...in news? In India? How that girl was in the bus? That’s like raping, right?”
- March (Interview)

She noted that incidents such as the Delhi gang rape case would definitely count as “rape” while milder acts such as groping would fall under another category.

From April to June of 2013, the participants’ attention turned to the Steubenville rape case, in which a 16 year-old-girl was sexually assaulted by two 17 year-old Steubenville high students at a local party on August 11, 2012 (Macur, 2013). In the court proceedings on March 17, 2013, the two accused were found guilty on multiple charges and sentenced to a minimum of 1-2 years in a juvenile correction facility, in addition to being registered as sex offenders (Macur, 2013). This case drew worldwide attention, largely due to CNN’s controversial coverage²³, in which the news outlet was heavily criticized for sympathizing with the offenders, lamenting on how their lives are ruined from this point forward, and blaming the victim for being intoxicated at the time of the assault⁴. This case incited a wide range of discussions and public concerns in regards to sexual violence, media ‘objectivity’, and the rape culture.

Some participants used this case to contextualize their opinions on news media, as well as prevalent attitudes towards sexual assault. When asked about their feelings towards media portrayals of sexual assault, a few participants used the Steubenville case as an example of how contemporary news reports are often biased and inaccurate. One participant was particularly frustrated with how CNN, a “respectable” news channel, focused on the two perpetrators’ social statuses as “high school football stars” and reported the case as if *they* were the victims of injustice. Another participant added that

² Almas, S. (2013, March 17) Two teens found guilty in Steubenville rape case. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/17/justice/ohio-steubenville-case/>

³ TheSublimeDegree. (2013, March 17). CNN grieves that guilty verdict ruined ‘promising’ lives of Steubenville rapists. *Youtube*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvUdyNko8LQ>

⁴ Makarechi, K. (2013, March 17) CNN’s Steubenville coverage focuses on effect rape trial will have on rapists, not victim. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kia-makarechi/cnn-steubenville-coverage_b_2896948.html?utm_hp_ref=media

the news would often try to portray the victims in a negative light or dismiss their testimonies:

“And... You know, “Maybe she was just really drunk! And she shouldn’t get drunk next time!” And you know? Like, there was a lot of blame in that story for example, and so..... yeah. I think... I think that’s how they po...portray, like they have ...it’s like “We have to report this, but we’re still going to try and make it look like it was...it wasn’t really a rape case. Kind of.””

- Cloche (Interview)

From the discussions, it seems that individual news reports can influence or reinforce women’s impressions towards news media as a whole. In this case, CNN’s coverage of the Steubenville rape case reinforced the idea that the news media is biased towards reinforcing rape myth attitudes and beliefs.

Research literature indicates that mainstream media, as a major socialization agent, tend to perpetuate existing rape myth attitudes and beliefs (Franiuk et al. 2008; Berridge, 2011; Moorti, 2002; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000). About a quarter of the interview participants were quite aware of this phenomenon and viewed the CNN coverage of the Steubenville rape case as a reflection of our current patriarchal/rape culture. A few participants used the case to support their point that victim-blaming is still common in contemporary societies. For instance, it was pointed out that people are often quick to blame the victim for being drunk, as seen in the Steubenville rape case. While the participants were appalled with this particular case, however, none of them were particularly surprised at the victim-blaming and perpetrator-sympathizing elements.

The participants’ reactions to the Steubenville case are particularly reflective of how the public may react to sexual assault cases or related reports in various ways. For instance, CNN’s coverage of the Steubenville rape case was meant to draw sympathy for the perpetrators, as it focused on how the two young men will now suffer because of the ‘harsh’ verdict (Edwards, 2013). The news report also mentioned that the party was “alcohol-fueled”, implying that the perpetrators were not in the right state of mind and/or the victim should be blamed for being intoxicated (Wemple, 2013).

Instead of successfully altering the framework of the story, the news channel was heavily criticized for engaging in victim-blaming behaviour, as well as sympathizing with the perpetrators. The case soon drew international attention as the clip of the CNN report was uploaded on Youtube and received over a million views (TheSublimeDegree, 2013). Multiple news outlets also reported the ensuing public outrage over this controversial coverage (Wemple, 2013; Knowles, 2013). Over 200,000 people signed

an online petition that requested CNN to apologize for its problematic coverage of the Steubenville rape trial. The creator of the petition, Gabriel Garcia, described the CNN coverage as “disgusting and helps perpetuate a shameful culture in which young people never understand the concept of consent and in which rape victims are blamed and ostracized” (Garcia, 2013).

The ensuing outrage also incited discussions and concerns about the current news media culture⁵⁶ and the prevalence of rape culture in our society⁷. According to Wang (2013) from *Yale Daily News*, the Steubenville rape case “demonstrate[s] the extent of rape culture in our society” and thus, we need to “question how we can hold perpetrators accountable”⁸. A number of academic articles also used the Steubenville case to discuss the effects of mainstream media and social media (Salter, 2013; DeKerseredy et al. 2013; Karaian, 2013). Thus, depending on the audience, the reactions to sexual assault cases may reinforce or challenge the rape culture.

Many participants were consciously aware of the problematic ways in which dominant media culture portrays sexual assault. This critical mindset helped mediate the influence of media on their perspectives and attitudes towards sexual assault. Research studies also indicate that the audiences’ selections and interpretations of media material can affect the ways in which they are (or are not) affected (Brown, 2002; Kim & Rubin, 1997; Swanson, 1987). As Kim and Rubin (1997) note, scepticism towards mainstream media can lead to “avoiding, discounting, and distrusting [media] messages” (p. 111). Indeed, as will be discussed, some participants are so wary of mainstream news media

5 Strasser, A. & Ressler, T. C. (2013, March 18). How the media took sides in the Steubenville case. *Think Progress*. Retrieved from <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/03/18/1732701/media-steubenville/#>

6 Goodale, G. (2013, March 20). Steubenville rape trial: Why media came under fire – and what is at stake. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2013/0320/Steubenville-rape-trial-why-media-came-under-fire-and-what-is-at-stake>

7 Penny, P. (2013, March 19). Steubenville: This is rape culture’s Abu Ghraib moment. *News Statesman*. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/laurie-penny/2013/03/steubenville-rape-cultures-abu-ghraib-moment>

8 Wang, W. (2013, April 6). Wang: Examining rape culture after Steubenville. *Yale Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2013/04/05/wang-examining-rape-culture-after-steubenville/>

that they are turning to social media platforms or other alternative sources for information.

The Drift to Social Media

While mainstream media is still readily consumed by people of all ages, the internet, especially social media, is becoming an increasingly popular source of information (as well as method of communication) for young people (Subrahmanyam et al. 2008; Koff & Moreno, 2013). Indeed, most of the participants expressed that they mainly rely on social media platforms, such as Youtube, Facebook, and Tumblr, for information about current events. For instance, almost all of the participants heard about the Steubenville case on the internet, or saw the CNN report on Youtube, instead of through mainstream news outlets.

During the discussion on media portrayals of sexual assault, more than a quarter of participants stated that they actively avoid watching the news because it is too “depressing”, as it focuses extensively on cases involving injuries or death.

“*Sighs* I don’t really partake in a lot of news? Because I just find it too depressing for the most part? *laughs* I’m like, I shut myself out. If something is important somebody will tell me that I know personally.”

- Miranda (Interview)

“It’s unfortunate but I don’t watch news so much because it’s always so...I mean it’s always good to know what’s happening in the world, but it’s always so negative. Like, oh a house burnt down, oh someone like died.”

- Esther (Interview)

A few participants added that the tone of the news reports can also be problematic. For instance, there are usually victim-blaming elements in sexual assault reports, as demonstrated by CNN’s coverage of the Steubenville case. Lastly, a few participants commented that it is simply much easier and faster to get information from the internet. In fact, one participant does not even own a television in her home, because there is no need for one.

The Steubenville case is also a good example of how new media can play a role in social justice issues. The incident only caught local attention in the first place because the perpetrators and some onlookers posted videos and photographs of the sexual assault on social media platforms such as Twitter, Youtube, and Facebook (Macur & Schweber, 2012). As mentioned, the case then quickly garnered international attention after the controversial CNN report was posted on Youtube. Much of the subsequent

international reactions also occurred on the internet, such as the online petition and dedicated social media sites discussing or protesting against the case proceedings⁹¹⁰.

Since the internet is not monopolized by any country or corporation, it offers valuable space for competing discourses about sexual assault. Some scholars posit that the internet may bring about a new form of social activism, in which people from all over the world can contribute to local or global causes (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Tufekci, 2013). For instance, a few participants mentioned Tumblr as a social activist platform, in which people gather to protest against rape culture. Public forums can also facilitate space for women to freely share information and personal experiences with each other.

On the other hand, some dominant trends within mainstream media can also be replicated in cyberspace, but in a slightly different manner. Media studies found that news reports of sexual assault often contain “warnings” for women on how to avoid sexual assault, thus keeping them in a constant state of fear and self-governance (Dowler, 2006; Meyers, 1997; Sampert, 2010 Sampert, 2010; Belknap, 1996; Berrington & Jones, 2002). Similarly, a few participants mentioned lists of sexual safety tips for women that were being shared on Facebook. These tips include: Always carry with you a visible weapon (or something that can act as a weapon), avoid wearing ponytails, always put up a fight, and act as sexually unappealing as possible in the event of an attack. To an extent, these lists perpetuate the idea that sexual assault is always lurking around the corner for women, and that they must always “prepare for the worst”, so to speak. So while it would be too optimistic to say that the internet is the perfect medium, it is certainly offering a different experience in gathering and sharing information.

The gendered double standard

The feminized fear of sexual assault is a product of hegemonic beliefs/ideologies rather than actual realities of sexual violence (Schafer et al. 2006; Warr, 1984; LaGrange

⁹ CNN's Steubenville verdict coverage was unacceptable. (2013, March 17). In *Facebook* [Communitypage]. Retrieved February 21, 2014, from <https://www.facebook.com/pages/CNNs-Steubenville-Verdict-Coverage-Was-Unacceptable/505885582808002>

¹⁰ Prosecute Steubenville “rape crew”. (2014, January 4). In *Facebook* [Community page]. Retrieved February 21, 2014, from <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Prosecute-Steubenville-Rape-Crew/578879902128440>

& Ferraro, 1989; Riger & Gordon, 1981). In essence, there is a double standard in which women's sexual safety is perceived to be in constant jeopardy while men are supposedly immune to the threat of sexual assault. Consistent with this line of thought, a number of participants indicated they would not engage in the same safety precautions if they were male instead of female. A few participants explained that women may be statistically more likely to be sexually assaulted for a variety of reasons, such as being unable to fight back or resist. Even so, they felt that the feminized fear of sexual assault placed an unfair burden on women's lives.

According to radical feminism, patriarchy is the most fundamental aspect behind women's subordinate position in society (Moore, 2006; Donovan, 2012). As the interview data shows, even private arenas such as familial relationships are, to an extent, governed by these dominant attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, many participants recognized how the gendered double standard was responsible, or at least partly responsible, for their family's overwhelming concern for their sexual safety. Specifically, some participants felt that their loved ones would probably not be as concerned if they were men instead of women.

However, there is also a belief that men are more likely to get involved with gang violence or other violent incidents in general. For participants with male siblings, this double standard becomes quite obvious, as their parents would warn them against sexual violence while cautioning their male siblings about gang violence.

"It's the same thing and for [her younger brother] it's more like, they don't want him to get stabbed or, you know what I mean, attacked by a gang or something like that. [I asked what her parents worry for her] Probably more like sexual attacks."

- Cloche (Interview)

"[I ask about her mother's treatment of her brother] Yeah like she'll, she'll hear stuff on the news about you know, some guy being jumped by a gang of guys or something like that. And she'll sorta be like, "You know~ Just you better keep it...just you know, just cause you're a guy doesn't mean nothing's gonna happen to you.""

- Reimi (Interview)

These gendered concerns correspond with dominant gender stereotypes in which women are depicted as submissive and sexually vulnerable and men as violent, impulsive aggressors (Moyer, 1992; Belknap, 2001; York, 2011).

The very same gender stereotypes are also deeply embedded within many rape myth portrayals of sexual assault. Or rather, rape myths are both a product (and enforcers) of these dominant beliefs/attitudes. For instance, victim-blaming rape myths

discourage women from participating in nontraditional behaviours such as going out alone at night, attending parties, and wearing revealing clothing (Meloy & Miller, 2002; Gorden & Riger, 1989; Madriz, 1997, Day, 1994). This reinforces the idea that “good girls” are safe from sexual assault while “bad girls” deserve to be punished for their defiance. There is also a similar double standard between women and men. Sexually experienced women are often stigmatized as “sluts” and shamed while sexually experienced men are praised and glorified in contemporary society (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Lyons et al. 2011; Aubrey, 2004). Whether it is between or within gender groups, women are pressured to adhere to dominant gender norms and roles.

While this double standard is intended to oppress women by subjecting them to strict gender norms, it can also negatively affect men, albeit in slightly different ways. As mentioned, the concern for men's involvement with gangs is associated with the idea that men are aggressive and physically powerful (Moyer, 1992; Belknap, 2001; York, 2011). Thus, the existence of male sexual assault victims does not fit into the dominant narrative of masculinity (Graham, 2006). Some rape myths go as far as to claim that men cannot be sexually assaulted against their will (Sleath & Bull, 2009). Indeed, due to the heteronormative nature of rape myths, sexual assaults involving female perpetrators and/or male sexual victims are usually marginalized or dismissed (Rumney, 2008; Weiss, 2010).

As a result of these attitudes and beliefs, male sexual assault victims may be reluctant to report their case (making it difficult to estimate the actual victimization rates) and even when they do, studies show that they tend to receive little support from legal and social institutions (Donnelly & Kenyon, 1996; Graham, 2006; Walker et al. 2005; Sleath & Bull, 2009; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). In other words, male sexual assault victims may also be subjected to secondary victimization (Campbell et al. 2001; Belknap, 1996). For instance, if a man was sexually assaulted by a woman, his masculinity may be called into question or he may be accused of 'letting' her overpower him (Sleath & Bull, 2009). According to Connell's (1995) hierarchical frameworks of masculinities, the hegemonic masculine status must be constantly maintained and thus, it can be lost or taken away. In this case, male sexual assault victims may be 'demoted' to more marginalized forms of masculinity. As will be discussed later on, however, even men who conform to the standards of hegemonic masculinity can still be negatively impacted.

According to radical feminism, the ubiquitous presence of patriarchal norms and values make it difficult for women to problematize their current position in society (Millet, 1990; Bryson, 2003). While the participants in this study were actually aware of the gender double standards and actively resisted heteronormative beliefs pertaining to sexual assault, it is important to mention again that they represent a very narrow demographic. As discussed in the previous chapter, most of the participants already have an interest in feminist issues, have taken related postsecondary courses such as women's studies or sociology, and/or engage with feminist readings in their spare time. Since this is a small scale study, it is difficult to gauge whether or not the expressed sentiments or the demonstrated awareness of gender issues are shared amongst the rest of the population. Still, these responses suggest that, despite the prevalent presence of patriarchal norms and values in various societal structures, women may be exposed to multiple perspectives towards sexual assault. Even within a patriarchal system, then, it is still possible to carve out room for alternative perspectives and countercultural beliefs/attitudes.

Contradicting Responses

Radical feminists posit that patriarchal norms and values are deeply embedded within private and public arenas in order to encourage individuals to act in ways that maintain the gender status quo (Bryson, 2003; Hunter, 2006; Millett, 1990; Donovan, 2012). As mentioned, women's high level of perceived risk cannot be justified by sexual victimization rates alone (Madriz, 1997; Schafer et al. 2006). Stanko (1990) uses the term "paradox of fear" to describe the discrepancy between victimization rates and women's high levels of fear in their everyday lives. For some interview participants, this paradox of fear resulted in contradictory responses both within and between discussion topics, as their personal attitudes/perspectives clashed with their fear of sexual violence.

With the former case, the contradictions usually occurred when the participants disagreed with their immediate responses to the interview questions. For instance, during the discussion on sexual assault scenarios, one participant immediately thought of dark alleyways and isolated areas, thus referencing the popular "stranger in the dark" scenario. She then expressed frustration at the "stereotypical" and "biased" nature of these images:

“So....that’s why I’m frustrated with myself. Because I’m like, oh I’m so brainwashed with all these images of what sexual assault could be that I’m not taking into account other images or other, you know, scenarios where it could occur, so....”

- Esther (Interview)

In the case of contradictions between discussion topics, almost all participants agreed that acquaintance rape is far more common than stranger rape. Yet the majority of the participants’ mentioned safety strategies targeted at stranger rape, such as avoid going out alone at night or scanning the environment. This implies that sexual assault is most likely to occur at night by strangers. Thus, there is some contradiction between their words and actions.

These contradictions suggest that women’s heightened fear of sexual assault is related to the fear of stranger rape. Even knowing that acquaintance rape is the most common kind of sexual assault, women may still feel more vulnerable to stranger rape (Warr, 1984). Indeed, Hickman and Meuhlenhard’s (1997) study found that women’s “knowledge about rape did not match their worries or precautionary behaviors relating to rape” (541). In response, Wilcox et al. (2006) posit that stranger rape acts as a “master status” for women. This master status can result in the lingering fears of sexual victimization that cannot be easily brushed aside with knowledge and evidence. This explains why women’s immediate thoughts/concerns usually correspond with stranger-rape scenarios, as evident in some participants’ responses in this study.

The participants’ awareness and reactions to their contradicting responses, on the other hand, illuminates the complex engagements with dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault. A few participants were aware that their fear of stranger rape is probably unjustified by the actual occurrence rates. Still, in the face of these lingering concerns, they chose to take the “better safe than sorry” approach and employ a variety of safety precautions.

“The ...again, this is me uh...internalizing these ideas that you know, only strangers assault you but like, I don’t like being alone when I am in unfamiliar territory?”

- Elena (Interview)

“I mean, like I said, I do feel that I have no experiences with my real life that would justify these images I have of the dark alleyway? Um....but you know, all of a sudden, I start to fear strangers. I start to fear walking alone when um...I don’t think I necessarily should. I don’t think that’s necessarily healthy. But um....you know, it’s sort of this idea that’s propagated, like...um....you gotta be on guard all the time because you can never know what anyone could do.”

- Aerith (Interview)

They may be aware of these images and even actively resist them, but the master status of stranger rape still held considerable influence. For some, the dominant scenarios may manifest as their immediate impressions of sexual assault while for others, they may act as lingering concerns that cannot be dismissed with logic or reason. In any case, there was an active struggle between dominant images and personal attitudes/beliefs in regards to sexual assault.

The disconnection between women's awareness of gender/sexual issues and their lingering fears of stranger rape is also reflective of the current state of society, in which women are often exposed to (and even trapped between) conflicting gender/sexual discourses (Ingis & MacKeogh, 2012). Institutions such as the criminal justice system and news media tend to perpetuate traditional gender roles and rape myth beliefs/attitudes (Campbell et al. 2001; L'Heureux-Dube, 2001; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Randall, 2010; Gorden & Riger, 1989; Berrington & Jones, 2002). However, as noted in the previous section, alternative perspectives can still be observed both within and between societal institutions. Sexual assault campaigns such as SlutWalk and some postsecondary courses are countering these dominant attitudes/beliefs and encouraging women to seek liberation from the narrow bounds of femininity (Ngyuen, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2012). In recent years, some television shows, such as recent Disney feature films, have also started to incorporate feminist discourses in their programmes, though its effectiveness is still being debated (Henderson, 2013; Southard, 2008; Towbin et al. 2003). Thus, women may be simultaneously interacting with (and affected by) these conflicting discourses, resulting in contradicting conceptualizations of sexual assault.

Reactions to rape myths as disabling or empowering?

Feminist scholars argue that rape myths function as a (patriarchal) tool of social control by perpetuating a heightened level of fear within women in their everyday lives (Madriz, 1997; Stanko, 1995; Meloy & Miller, 2002). Indeed, studies indicate that women tend to implement a variety of safety strategies, such as avoiding going out at night or dressing in a sexually unappealing manner (Madriz, 1997; Gardner, 1990; Day, 1994). For the most part, this trend was present in this research study, as the participants' implemented safety strategies corresponded with the examined research literature. These precautions restrict women's activities and confine them within the designated bounds of femininity (Madriz, 1997; Berrington & Jones, 2002; Meloy & Miller, 2002).

Furthermore, existing research literature indicate that safety strategies can actually make women feel increased anxiety and fear, mostly because it reminds them of their 'helplessness' and sexual vulnerability (Ferraro, 1996; Fisher & Sloan III, 2003; Gardner, 1990; Scott, 2003). A few participants admitted that these precautions make them feel a certain degree of fear. For instance, one participant feels a bit of anxiety whenever she engages in precautions such as "slicing the pie", since it reminds her that danger is lurking (literally) around the corner. Some participants also mentioned concerns for other kinds of crime such as mugging, kidnapping, and random violent attacks. This lends some support to the "shadow of sexual assault" hypothesis, in which the fear of sexual assault transforms into a general fear of crime for women in their everyday lives (Fisher & Sloan III, 2003; Ferraro, 1996; Stanko, 1995). Up until this point, it would appear that women's reactions to these safety concerns are a form of self-induced social control.

Yet, some participants interpreted these safety strategies as a form of empowerment rather than social control. In essence, empowerment involves the opportunity to make your own decisions, as well as "the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space" (Rowlands, 2010, p. 102). Adding to the definition of these two processes, Kamal (2011) uses the term "power to" to describe the power to take action and solve problems, and "power within" as the feelings of confidence and self-awareness that allows the individual to affect the power relations in their lives. In other words, the individual needs to be aware of his/her ability to take action.

Some scholars posit that empowerment is not some end-goal that can be achieved once and for all (Morgan & Coombes, 2013, Kasturirangan, 2008). Instead, empowerment is a process in which an individual lives his/her life with "perceived, or actual, control over resources and transformation toward self-determined goals" (Morgan & Coombes, 2013, p. 530). In a way, some of these safety precautions can help facilitate this process. During the interviews, some participants expressed feeling *in* control whenever they engaged in safety strategies such as staying alert or carrying a self defense weapon. Doing so allowed them to feel more capable of handling whatever dangers may come.

"[When asked if these precautions make her feel safer] I guess so? In a sense, cause at least I have some...particular tool I can use if anything happens. You know, you always

want to be hm...at least have one thing or more um...to help you out when you are in places of danger, so.....it makes me feel safer yes.”

- Esther (Interview)

Rather than limiting their freedom, these safety precautions lessened their fear of sexual assault and enabled them to participate more freely in society.

Several participants also mentioned taking self defence classes or martial arts courses as ways to prevent sexual attacks. Studies suggest that self-defence or martial arts training can enhance women’s sense of competence, assertiveness, and empowerment (Weitlauf et al. 2000; Velija et al. 2013; Madden, 1995). McCaughey (1997) argues that self-defence courses reject the idea that women are passive, weak, and vulnerable. It is thus a form of physical empowerment that translates into the empowerment of the soul. This corresponds with the definition of empowerment as both an action (“power to”) and a feeling (“power within”). DeWelde (2003) adds that self-defence courses are a site of resistance for women to (quite literally) fight their way out of traditional gender norms and carve out their own spaces in society. One participant’s description of self-defence reinforces this idea of self-efficiency.

“Self-defence courses are always good regardless? Because you never know what kind of situation you’re gonna end up finding yourself in. And being able to defend yourself is the first means of getting away from somebody who might be wanting to do harm! Doesn’t matter who they are, if they are a mysterious person or you know, somebody you know, like your boyfriend you started dating and he decided he doesn’t like what you’re doing and he’s gonna beat you. If you can fight back.... (Sheila: Yeah.) Then it’s...better than, you know, just sitting in a corner and taking every hit.”

- Miranda (Interview)

During the discussion on social change, several participants also suggested teaching women self-defence skills or martial arts training.

This is not to say that the current state of affairs, such as the socialized fear of sexual assault or the prevalence of rape myth beliefs/attitudes, are inherently empowering for women. However, it would be hasty to immediately label women’s reactions as self-disabling without considering the thought processes and choices involved. The individual’s interpretative processes and reactions may change the intended purpose of hegemonic structures. For instance, rape myths may contain inherently sexist and oppressive discourses, but the individual may interpret the myth in a completely different manner. In this case, while the safety strategies are argued to be inherently disabling, some individuals may have very different experiences and interpretations of their actions. For some women, these safety strategies may even be viewed as empowering, as it gives them the feeling of control and assertiveness.

The Culture of Masculinity

Many participants' discussions on perpetrators of sexual assault coincided with Hunter's (2006) concept of fluid-essentialism and Connell's (1995) hierarchical framework of masculinities, both of which conceptualize masculinity as a product of the social environment. Since it is not a biological entity, the (hegemonic) masculine status must be earned and constantly maintained through a variety of actions such as engaging in aggressive sports, taking risks, and dominating women (Mills, 2001; McCarry, 2010; Bartholomaeus, 2012). In extreme cases, (sexual) violence against women may be "functional as a reassertion of heterosexual masculinity" (Catlett et al. 2010, p. 109). By victimizing women, men at the bottom of the hierarchy can regain some power while men at the top of the hierarchy can maintain it.

Furthermore, studies indicate that male (sexual) entitlement bridges the gap between hegemonic masculinity and sexual aggression (Bouffard, 2010; Hill & Fisher, 2001). In other words, traditional gender attitudes can lead to a sense of entitlement, which may then lead to sexual assault. This relationship is especially pronounced if the individual holds anti-feminist views and/or rape myth attitudes that justifies/trivializes sexual violence (Truman et al. 1996; Bouffard, 2010). Another significant factor is how contemporary societies conceptualize sex and sexuality. As discussed in the literature review chapter, women are often portrayed as gatekeepers of both sexes' sexuality. Within this framework, sex becomes something that "women have and men want" (Burr, 2001, p. 104). Sexual assault may thus occur if the man feels entitled to 'obtain' sex from women, with or without their consent.

During the interviews, some participants pointed out that the culture of male entitlement and contemporary notions of hegemonic masculinity can encourage men to commit sexual violence against women. Specifically, they discussed how little boys are encouraged to strive for the ideal (hegemonic) masculinity. As they grow older, they may feel entitled to use women as a means to such ends.

"Um.....I think that....typically people who commit sexual assault don't....have....respect for....other people? Other women or men that they assault. They just don't...have respect for them. Um....And I think that a lot of times lack of respect comes from...personality traits or from....the way they're raised, the way that you're...brought up to view women or to view um just other people in general."

- Chat (Interview)

“And it’s ...all about a man ...wanting to prove his dominance over women in general. (Sheila: Mhm.) Cause it’s not about sexual arousal usually it’s ...yeah they want what they want.”

- Elena (Interview)

Within these discussions, the participants acknowledged the intersectional relationship between the current gendered trends of sexual assault, rape culture, patriarchal culture, and contemporary conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity.

In addition to refuting the idea of men being inherent oppressors, some participants pointed out the ways in which dominant gender/sexual ideologies can negatively affect men. In terms of rape myths, research literature often focuses on how these beliefs/attitudes help maintain the gender status quo by governing women’s behaviours (Madriz, 1997; Garland, 2009; Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Stanko, 1995; Warr, 1984). For instance, women are often urged to avoid revealing clothes because they may 'tempt' men into committing sexual assault. Yet, a few participants argued that these rape myths are also problematic for men. More specifically, it is an *insult* to men, as it portrays them as primitive animals instead of rational human beings. As one participant said:

“This kind of argument is an insult to men. It means that you’re a crazed animal that cannot control yourself. (Sheila: Yeah?) That you’re like a dog who sees a piece of meat and you just have to go, you know for it.”

- Cloche (Interview)

Another participant had a similar reaction to the rape myth that attributes sexual assault to men’s ‘uncontrollable’ sex drive. In addition to discussing how this line of thinking is socially oppressive to women, she pointed out that it “doesn’t give enough credit to men”, as the men in her life can stop themselves even when they are sexually aroused.

In essence, the participants challenged the culture of masculinity, especially hegemonic masculinity, and implicitly proposed possibilities of forming alliances with men or male-centered groups. While Connell (1995) also discusses the ways in which men can be harmed by patriarchy, she mainly focuses on how men face marginalization if they deviate from hegemonic gender norms (Connell & Wood, 2005; Tharinger, 2008; Connell, 2005; McCarry, 2010; Kay & Jeffries, 2010). The participants, on the other hand, argued that these dominant traits can be harmful to men in a variety of ways. For instance, as discussed above, the belief that men are easily sexually provoked or sex-driven can be ‘insulting’ because it implies that they have no control over their sexual drives or that nothing matters more than sex.

Indeed, some scholars posit that men, regardless of their position in the hierarchy of masculinities, can be negatively affected by patriarchal ideologies. In terms of emotional harm, men are constantly pressured to perform their gender in a very specific manner and negatively sanctioned if they fail to do so (Smith, 2007). In other words, men must demonstrate power and control regardless of circumstances, lest their masculine status be compromised (Morrissey, 2008). As Kaufman (1999) argues, these narrowly defined power relations “causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation not only for women, but also for men” (p. 59).

In addition, there may be physical health implications. As Weaver et al. (2010) notes, one way to obtain/maintain the hegemonic masculine status is to take risks, preferably with an audience involved. Thus, men are more likely than women to engage in dangerous activities, such as participating in bar fights or drinking excessive amounts of alcohol (Helgeson, 1995; Stibbe, 2004). In spite of this, men are *less* likely to seek necessary medical help, partly because they do not want to appear weak or vulnerable (Courtenay, 2000; White, 2002). This helps explain why men have a lower life expectancy than women (Courtenay, 2000; Stibbe, 2004). For instance, between 2007 and 2009, the life expectancy for men is 80 years and 84 years for women (Statistics Canada, 2012).

This perspective, along with the argument that sexual assault is primarily a product of institutionalized sexism instead of ‘evil men’, suggests that both men and women have something to lose in the patriarchal system. Furthermore, the understanding that masculinity is a social construct implies that the current gender norms can be negotiated, transgressed, or even altered. As Martin (1998) posits, “if masculinities and feminities are practices, *everyone* can do both (limited by a few bodily restraints)” (Martin, 1998, p. 474). Thus, recruiting male allies to join the fight against sexual violence or other gendered matters is a viable option, especially since men and women are not constructed as ‘natural enemies’.

According to research literature on male alliances, sexual assault prevention campaigns and programs that focus on men have great potential in preventing sexual assault in a number of ways. By deconstructing the culture of hegemonic masculinity, they may feel less pressured to engage in sexually aggressive behavior to ‘prove’ their manhood, or be more willing to intervene when other men exhibit such behaviour (Fabiano et al. 2010; Hong, 2000). One campaign called “Male Allies Against Sexual

Assault” aims to provide male role models that offer “the counter story to the dominant story of hyper-masculinity and toughness” (Male Allies, n.d.). It is also important for men to become simultaneously aware of their male privilege, as well as the baggage that comes with this privilege (DeKeseredy et al. 2000). Indeed, Casey and Smith’s (2010) study suggests that empathy towards victims of violence, a change in worldview (e.g. realizing that their female loved ones could become victims of violence), as well as “tangible involvement opportunities” (p. 966) may encourage men to become allies and take a stand against female victimization. This alternative perspective of masculinity thus provides a new arena for social change.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the ways in which women’s attitudes and beliefs towards sexual assault are affected by a number of potentially conflicting factors, such as family, friends, school, media, and recent events. Many participants demonstrated awareness to sexual assault related issues, such as the gendered processes of socialization, effects of hegemonic masculinity, and problematic media portrayals of sex crimes. This awareness, as well as their pre-existing mindsets, can influence how they interact with their social environment. For instance, they may avoid mainstream media and turn to new media for information.

Potential directions for social change, especially in relation to sexual assault, were also discussed. In acknowledging how men can be negatively affected in a patriarchal system, regardless of their adherence to hegemonic masculinity, male alliance becomes a feasible option in combating rape culture. Social media platforms and other new media sources, anti-rape campaigns, and certain postsecondary courses are also good places to spread awareness about sexual assault related issues and promote critical feminist viewpoints.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

Radical feminism argues that women's subordination may take many forms, but they can all be traced to one cause: patriarchy (Moore, 2006; Donovan, 2012; Bryson, 2003). In other words, women are experiencing inequality because of how the patriarchal system conceptualizes gender and sexual relations. The gendered pattern of sexual violence is also a form of societal oppression. Statistical studies consistently indicate that sexual assault is predominantly committed by men against women (Brennan & Taylor-Butts; Vaillancourt, 2010; Benedict 1992; Garland, 2009). According to radical feminism, sexual violence acts as a form of social control that helps to keep women in their place (Mann, 2012). The fact that some women are victimized by some men is enough to strike fear into many women's hearts (Belknap, 1996). Rape myths further perpetuate the idea that women need to behave 'appropriately' to prevent sexual victimization (Madriz, 1997; Meloy & Miller, 2002; Stanko, 1995). For instance, some news reports of sexual assault cases may implicitly blame the victims by discussing their nontraditional behaviour in unnecessary detail (Sampert, 2010; Berrington & Jones, 2002). This also serves as a warning to female viewers on what may happen if they act outside the bounds of acceptable femininity (Meyers, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which women interpret and react to rape myth attitudes and beliefs in their everyday lives. I situated this project within the radical feminist perspective by focusing on the importance of recovering women's voices at a grass roots level (Moore, 2006; Donovan, 2012; Hunter, 2006; Bryson, 2003). Instead of examining large scale societal structures or attempting to establish unilateral causal relationships with quantitative methods, this small-scale, qualitative study explored women's attitudes and perspectives as an interactive process that involves both agency and creativity. Attention was also paid to other interlocking dimensions of inequality, such as race and class.

For this study, I conducted 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews with young women, between the ages of 19 to 30, in Metro Vancouver from February to June of

2013. The interviews covered a range of topics, such as the participants' personal opinions towards sexual assault, reactions to rape myths, and potential implications on their everyday lives. In addition, the participants were encouraged to elaborate upon the interview questions and decide which factors played the most significant roles in their lives. This study was also guided by the social constructivist grounded theory, which emphasizes a reflexive, data-driven analysis.

Summary of Findings

The key findings of this study indicate that women's attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault are often multi-layered and simultaneously influenced by a number of factors. At times, the participants of this study struggled between their personal agencies, rape myth attitudes and beliefs, and countercultural (usually feminist) discourses. As a result, many participants demonstrated both resistance and internalization in regards to dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault. Most participants straightforwardly disagreed with rape myth assumptions or other hegemonic presentations of sexual assault. Their internalization of some of these ideas, on the other hand, usually resulted in contradictory answers and behaviours.

In terms of resistance, many participants were aware of the disconnection between rape myths and the realities of sexual assault. For instance, rape myths may promote the "stranger in the dark" scenario, but studies show that acquaintance rape is the most common kind of sexual assault (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008; Vaillancourt, 2010). Most participants used these kinds of knowledge to dismiss rape myths attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, while rape myths tend to individualize sexual assault incidents, the participants often pointed to larger social causes to explain and discuss sexual violence.

Most participants were also aware of the gendered double standard, in which women are viewed as likely targets of sexual assault because of their perceived (sexual) submissiveness (Fisher & Pina, 2013; Burr, 2001). As a result, the participants' family members would often worry for their sexual safety and urge them to take necessary safety precautions. This double standard helps explain why women tend to report heightened levels of fear of sexual assault (Stanko, 1995; Schafer et al. 2006; Warr, 1984; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989). The patterns of sexual assault, rape myth beliefs, and

dominant gender norms all come together to promote a general sense of vulnerability and unease within women.

Despite being aware of these gendered trends within society, some participants were still unable to fully dismiss these prevalent beliefs. For instance, many participants expressed a lingering fear of stranger rape, as reflected by their chosen safety strategies. These contradictory responses reflect the current state of our society, in which women are often exposed to opposing ideologies and discourses in regards to gender and sexuality. Radical feminism argues that women are often exposed to hegemonic ideologies through a variety of social institutions such as family, peer groups, K-12 school, and mainstream media (Bryson, 2003). However, women may still encounter countercultural (especially feminist) viewpoints through sources such as postsecondary courses and social media platforms. Thus, society becomes a battleground of cultural and countercultural ideas (Ingis & MacKeogh, 2012).

As the interview data indicates, however, women demonstrate a tremendous amount of agency and creativity when it comes to interacting with these potentially conflicting ideologies and discourses. In particular, their pre-existing mindsets and awareness influences how they interact with or are affected by their social environment. For instance, the CNN report of the Steubenville rape case was meant to incite sympathy for the two perpetrators, yet the participants were quite critical of the coverage and even used it to problematize contemporary news media culture. Indeed, research literature posits that the individual mindset can determine the extent of influence from media material (Brown, 2002; Kim & Rubin, 1997; Swanson, 1987).

Radical feminism also contends that consciousness-raising can pave the way to social change (Hunter, 2006). In response, quite a few participants commented that exposure to feminist perspectives and information about sexual violence through channels such as feminist websites helped them resist rape myth attitudes and beliefs. Thus, new media, with its increasing popularity among young people, has the potential to incite social activism on both local and global levels (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Tufekci, 2013; Lim, 2013; Satler, 2011). As some participants pointed out, postsecondary courses and anti-rape campaigns, such as SlutWalk, can also introduce alternative frameworks, promote interest in feminist issues, and encourage the public to be critical of rape culture.

Most importantly, women do not need to be alone in this fight. Some participants, as well as scholars, argue that patriarchy is detrimental to both women *and* men. Specifically, the narrow boundaries of hegemonic masculinity can alienate many men. Those who do not fit within the framework of hegemonic masculinity may be marginalized or stigmatized (Connell & Wood, 2005; Tharinger, 2008; Kay & Jeffries, 2010; Graham, 2006). At the same time, abiding with these hegemonic norms can result in emotional and physical harm (Kaufman, 1999; Helgeson, 1995; Stibbe, 2004; Courtenay, 2000). Thus, it becomes a feasible option for men and women to form alliances and fight against rape culture, the culture of masculinity, and other aspects of the patriarchal system.

Limitations of Approach

This study, informed by radical feminism, assumes that women's oppression has patriarchal roots. Had I adopted another feminist theoretical framework, the directions of the research methods and analysis would change accordingly. For instance, Marxist feminism situates women's issues within the capitalist system instead of the patriarchal system (Rafter & Natalizia, 1981; Bandarage, 1984). Rather than analyzing sexual assault as a product of patriarchal ideologies and examining women's experiences at a grass roots level, then, my research would focus on how women's labour and sexuality are exploited by capitalism (Mann, 2010). In response, my research may look to political and legal reforms as potential arenas for social change, as opposed to the current focus on consciousness-raising, anti-rape campaigns, and recruiting male allies. Thus, the focus and purpose of my research, as well as my analysis of the research data, were all contingent on (and in a way, limited by) my theoretical framework and how I conceptualize gender, sexuality, and sexual violence.

In terms of methodological issues, since this qualitative study only enlisted 20 participants, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the rest of the population. Furthermore, as a cross-sectional study, I can only take a "snapshot" of the participants' attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault at that immediate time and place. In other words, their responses to the discussion topics may have some variations had I conducted the interviews at a different time period. For instance, concurrent events such as the Steubenville rape case may influence their perceptions towards sexual violence and the rape culture.

Due to the self-selecting nature of their participation, the majority of the interviewees identified as Caucasian-Canadian and had some postsecondary background, particularly in the social sciences. According to intersectionality theory, it is possible that the results of this study would be very different with a different set of participants, such as those from racialized groups or have no postsecondary educational background. For instance, the participants' white privilege may have encouraged a "colourblind" view of sexual violence, or they may feel uncomfortable discussing race from a privileged social position. Individuals from racialized groups, on the other hand, may be more likely (and willing) to discuss racial and racialization in relation to sexual violence.

Furthermore, the nature of this study may have attracted participants who were already interested in gender/women's issues, thus potentially skewing the responses. In other words, there may have been a volunteer bias, in which those who volunteered to participate in this study may differ from those who declined the invitation (Sackett, 1979). Still, I believe that the results of this study are significant because it shows the complex ways in which some women interact with dominant conceptualizations of sexual assault.

Taking into account the importance of reflexivity, my pre-existing attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence and experiences with feminist literature can be viewed as a kind of limitation. For instance, there were times when I was surprised by the participants' reactions to certain rape myths because it differed from research literature on the subject matter. Hence, I used the term "unexpected" to describe those responses. If I came into the research with a different set of expectations or presumptions, I may have very different interpretations of the interview data.

Lastly, the social constructivist grounded theory posits that the researcher and the research methods may affect the interview outcomes (Charmaz, 2006). As a female postgraduate student in her mid-20s, I am quite similar to the participants. On one hand, this may be viewed as an advantage, since many participants seemed to feel a sense of solidarity with me, based on the assumption that I have similar experiences/viewpoints as a young woman (and they were not necessarily wrong about that). On the other hand, this meant that I often had to urge them to elaborate on topics that they assumed I was already familiar with. While I tried to keep the interview atmosphere as comfortable and open as possible, there was also the possibility that participants refrained from discussing ideas/perspectives that they felt were "disagreeable" to me.

Directions for future research

Since this study was limited to the Metro Vancouver area, it would be interesting to recruit participants from different regions and provinces, such as Alberta or Nova Scotia, to see how much (or little) attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault vary across geographical space. As mentioned in the previous section, it may also be fruitful to ensure a more diverse participant pool. By diverse, I refer to demographics such as race, ethnicity, class, and educational backgrounds. Having a diverse participant pool would help further illuminate the intersectional relationship between women's perspectives towards sexual assault and their social positions and environments. For instance, as discussed in the literature review chapter, racialized women are more likely to be blamed for the attack (White et al. 1998; Stevenson et al. 2009; Foley et al. 1995; Willis, 1992). Thus, future research can examine the influences of racial and ethnic identity on individual perspectives towards sexual assault.

Both research literature and the interview data indicate that internet usage is becoming more and more popular as a source of information and/or method of communication (Subrahmanyam et al. 2008; Koff & Moreno, 2013). This suggests a need for scholars to reconsider their current focus on mainstream media's influences on the next generation of youths. Indeed, it would be worthwhile to further explore the ways in which social media and other internet sources affect young women's attitudes and perspectives towards sexual assault. For instance, do social media sites such as Facebook and Tumblr tend to perpetuate rape myth beliefs and attitudes or do they offer a platform for everyday individuals to counter these views? This can also shed light on the internet's potential in combating the rape culture and other issues pertaining to gender and sexual inequality.

On the topic of social change, I have pointed out that patriarchy, especially the concept of hegemonic masculinity, can also be harmful to men, as it constrains them within a narrow set of standards (Connell, 1995; Bryson, 2003; Bartholomaeus, 2012; Kay & Jeffries, 2010). This sentiment was also shared by a number of interview participants, as they pointed out the problematic aspects of the culture of masculinity. Feminist scholars generally agreed that rape myths work to men's benefit, and research studies do show that men tend to have stronger rape myth attitudes than women (Weisz & Earls, 1995; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Flood & Pease, 2009; Clarke & Stermac,

2011; York, 2011; Donovan, 2007). Yet, as my study shows, agreement with rape myths does not necessarily imply agreement with its inherent assumptions about gender and sexuality. Furthermore, some participants posited that rape myths can be detrimental to men, as it portrays them as sex-driven, mindless beings. Hence, it would be interesting to replicate this study with male participants to explore how they interact with rape myths and whether or not it affects their everyday lives. Exploring men's attitudes and perspectives may open up new areas for discussion and directions for social change, especially in relation to gender and sexuality.

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Appendix A.

Recruitment Signup Sheet

Understanding Sexual Assault: The Ways in which Young Women Interact with Dominant Conceptualizations of Sexual Violence (Sheila Wong)

- The interview looks at how young women (19-30 years old) conceptualize sexual assault. You will **not** be asked about your personal experiences of sexual assault in any way! I just want to know your thoughts/ideas about it

- Time/place of interview will be based on your convenience! E.g. If you have some time between your classes, I can meet you on campus. Or if you have a busy semester, we can meet during semester break or even next semester. Whatever works for you.

- If you are interested in participating, or have a question or comment about the research, **please write down your email** (yay!) so that I can contact you. Don't worry, just because you write down your email **does not** mean you're signing up for anything!

☺ Thank you so much!

Name	Email Address

Appendix B.

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Title of Project: **Understanding Sexual Assault: The Ways in which Young Women Interact with Dominant Conceptualizations of Sexual Violence (DORE Application # 2012s0871)**

Investigators: Sheila Wong, under the supervision of Dr. Wendy Chan

Purpose of the study: This research aims to explore the ways in which young women conceptualize sexual assault in contemporary Canadian society. Specifically, the focus is on the process by which women come to understand the idea of “sexual assault”, and how this understanding may or may not have an impact on their daily lives.

Procedures: You can participate in this study if you are a woman between the ages of 19 to 30. Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to reflect in a semi-structured interview (ranging from 40 to 90 minutes) concerning your thoughts and ideas in relation to sexual assault. At no point during the research will you be asked about your personal accounts of sexual assault.

Risks of Participation: There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. However, you may feel discomfort in answering some of these interview questions. You can decide whether or not to answer any of these questions or to withdraw from the interview at any time with no consequences.

Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge: This study will contribute to the growing body of research on women’s attitudes/perspectives towards sexual assault.

Details relating to your participation: Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question or to end the interview at any time.

While data and excerpts from this interview may be made part of the research report for one of my required courses, **your name will not be used in this report**. Nor will any other information that clearly identifies you be revealed. A pseudonym will be used in the transcripts of the interview instead of your name.

The audio-recording and transcription of this interview will be treated with confidentiality. Audio files, transcripts, and any other digital data from this research will be saved on a USB flash drive and safely stored in a locked drawer in my home when not in use. Paper documents and data, such as field notes and drafts, will also be stored in the locked drawer. When the paper documents and data have been transcribed into digital form, they will be thoroughly destroyed in a paper shredder. Digital data will be retained for five years and then deleted.

If you wish to obtain a copy of your interview or a summary of the research results, you may obtain these by contacting Sheila Wong at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C, V5A 1S6 (by email sswong@sfu.ca or by phone at 604-218-1687).

Any questions, concerns, or complaints regarding this interview can be raised with Dr. Wendy Chan (by email wchane@sfu.ca or by phone at 778-782 4469).

You may also register your questions, concerns, or complaints with Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director Office of Research Ethnics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C, V5A 1S6 (by email hal_weinberg@sfu.ca or by phone at 778-782-6593).

I have read and understood the above details of the study, and I freely consent to participate.

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

I give permission to have the interview audio recorded.

YES _____

NO _____

SIGNATURE: _____

Appendix C.

Interview Schedule

Introduction for All Interviews

Project Description:

“This research aims to explore the ways in which young women conceptualize sexual assault in contemporary Canadian society. Specifically, I am interested in the process by which women come to understand the idea of “sexual assault”, and how this understanding may or may not have an impact on their daily lives.”

Consent Form:

“If you are interested, we can read this consent form together. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask me.”

Key points

- We can stop, stop recording, or take a break at any time you choose.
- You do not need to answer any questions that you don’t want to answer.
- Reminder: There is no right or wrong answer.

0. Warm up Questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
 - How old are you?
 - How would you describe your cultural/racial identity?
- How long have you lived in Vancouver?
 - If born here: Have you traveled to other places recently?
 - If yes: Did you notice any difference from Vancouver?
 - If no: What do you think about Vancouver as a place to live in?
 - If immigrated/moved here from somewhere else: Do you find Vancouver any different from (place of origin)? How so?
- How do you feel about traveling alone at night in Vancouver?
 - Do you ever have any concerns?

A. Personal ideas about sexual assault

- What first comes to your mind (thoughts/images) when you hear the word "sexual assault"?
- What first comes to your mind (thoughts/images) when you hear the word "perpetrator of sexual assault"?
 - Do you think there is anything inherently different about perpetrators from the rest of the population?
- What first comes to your mind (thoughts/images) when you hear the word "sexual assault victim"?
 - Do you think there is such a thing as a typical sexual assault victim?
- What first comes to your mind (thoughts/images) when you hear "sexual assault scenario" (as in, situation where sexual assault occurs)

B. Popular ideas about sexual assault

- In your experience, how do the media (e.g. news, movies...etc) tend to portray sexual assault?
 - Do you feel it mirrors reality? Why or why not?
 - What about the internet (e.g. social media, websites, forums...etc)
- Here is a list of various attitudes and perspectives on sexual assault (see appendix 1).
 - Have you heard of any of them? From where?
- How did you think you came to these understandings of sexual assault? (e.g. family upbringing, cultural upbringing, media...etc?)
 - Do you think your cultural upbringing had any influence on your views of sexual assault?

C. Implications of the ideas in real life

- Do you feel your understandings of sexual assault have any implications in your everyday life? (I.e. Doing or not doing certain things, seeing things a certain way...etc)
 - For safety strategies (if mentioned)
 - Does it make you feel safer?
 - Do you think you would still do these things if you were a guy?
 - If no, why not?
- What do you think society can/should do to prevent sexual assault?

D. Closing Questions

- Do you think there is something relevant to the topic we should have discussed but we didn't in this interview?

Thank you very much for your time on this! It has been a very interesting discussion for me, and I hope you feel the same way!

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this interview or the research in general, please do not hesitate to contact me or the SFU Research Ethics Board. All of our contact information can be found on the consent form that you have.

Appendix D.

List of Rape Myths Used In Interviews

Attitudes and Perspectives on Sexual Assault

- The woman is at least partly to blame if she wears revealing clothing at the time of the attack
- The most common kind of sexual assault is stranger-rape
- The woman is at least partly responsible if she is drunk at the time of the assault
- Sexual assault is basically unwanted sex
- Sexual assault most often occur outside and at night
- Men cannot be sexually assaulted against their will
- Sexual assault is usually impulsive and spontaneous because once a man is sexually aroused, he cannot control his actions.
- The woman is at least partly to blame if she is out alone at night at the time of the assault
- Young, attractive women are more likely to get sexually assaulted
- Perpetrators are usually insane, abnormally perverted, or mentally ill.
- It is impossible for a woman to sexually assault another woman
- Sexual assault often happens when men misread cues from women and think that they are interested in them
- Sexual assault always involves vaginal penetration
- Sexual assault is often violent, leaving physical marks and injuries on the victim
- Perpetrators tend to be from the working class or lower class (e.g. homeless, unemployed)
- Sexual assault is more traumatic for women who are virgins than women who have had sex with a lot of people

Appendix E.

Contact Information for Supportive Organizations

Vancouver Rape Relief & Women's Shelter

Website: <http://www.rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/>

Phone number: (604) 872-8212

Women Against Violence Against Women Rape Crisis Centre

Website: <http://www.wavaw.ca/>

Phone number: (604) 255-6228

Toll-Free 24-hour Crisis Line: (1-877) 392-7583

SFU Women's Centre

Website: <http://www.sfuwomenctr.ca>

Phone number: (778) 782-3670

Rape Victims Support Network

Website: <http://www.assaultcare.ca/>

Phone number: (778) 886-7001

VictimLink

Website: <http://www.victimlinkbc.ca/>

Phone number: (1-800) 563-0808