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# I'm not just a statistic: A qualitative analysis of sexual assault survivors

Kelsey Lynn Ruane  
*James Madison University*

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I'm Not Just a Statistic  
A Qualitative Analysis of Sexual Assault Survivors

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A Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the Undergraduate  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
James Madison University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Kelsey Lynn Ruane

May 2014

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Sociology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts

FACULTY COMMITTEE

---

Faculty Project Advisor: Dr. Matthew Ezzell, Ph.D  
Assistant Professor, Sociology

---

Dr. Barry Falk, PhD  
Director, Honor's Program

---

Reader: Dr. Beth Eck, Ph.D  
Department Head, Sociology

---

Reader: Dr. Margaret Plass, Ph.D  
Professor of Justice Studies

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## **I'm Not Just a Statistic: A Qualitative Analysis of Survivors of Sexual Assault**

### **Abstract**

Empirical research shows that as many as 1 in 4 women in college will be raped or sexually assaulted. Despite the overwhelming prevalence of these crimes, survivors of sexual violence often feel uncertain, isolated, and fearful of judgment when coming forward to authorities. Even amidst improvements in sexual violence education and response, it appears there is still something missing in the way that sexual crimes are handled. This research, based on in-depth interviews with women who have been assaulted or raped, addresses the processes of meaning-making women use following an experience of sexual violence. Common themes include victim blaming, emotion work, shame of their sexuality, and a perceived indifference to the epidemic of sexual assault in this culture. The evidence explicitly shows a pattern of rape-prone ideologies in this culture, and how they groom women for silent victimhood from a young age.

## Introduction

Despite efforts in education and research to prevent sexual violence, instances of sexual assault and rape are still incredibly common. Sexual violence is defined as sexual activity as a result of force/coercion, against their will, or while incapacitated. Empirical evidence shows that as many as 1 in 4 college woman will be the victim of sexual assault or rape. Despite these alarming rates, women who are victimized feel isolated and alone in their experience. (Warsaw 1988). A culture of silence pervades men's violence against women, and survey data suggests that only 5% of women who have experiences that meet the legal definition of rape report it to the police (Warshaw 1988). This study seeks to answer the question: Why do so many women feel that they cannot report sexually violent crimes?

A common way to approach this issue is to question the victim herself, and ask why she as an individual did not feel she could report. However, in this paper, based on semi-structured interviews with self-identified survivors of men's violence, I argue that women are groomed to be silent victims from a very young age and point out the ways that cultural factors have a tremendous impact on whether or not a female victim of men's violence feels that she can report. Many male perpetrators groom their victims to be silent, yet in the current media-saturated and pornified social context (see Dines 2010; Paul 2005) the same grooming process can play out on a cultural level. Women living in a rape culture are raised to believe that their value is directly connected to their body and what they choose to do with it, and sexually objectified images of the female body saturate our cultural landscape (APA report 2010). As Dines (2010) argues, in the modern era we are "turning out a generation of girls who have been 'assaulted' by the very culture they live in...we can assume that an ever-increasing number of girls and women are going

to develop emotional, cognitive, and sexual problems as they are socialized into seeing themselves into sex objects and not much else” (118). This cultural context can shape the ways that girls and women view themselves, their bodies, and their sense of value (APA report), and, if girls and women are sexually violated by boys and men, it may well shape their responses to that violence.

I began this project wondering why many women do not label their experiences as “rape”, or report their experiences to law enforcement. I found that the answers come from the fact that we live in a rape culture – this means we “live in a culture in which rape is pervasive, prevalent and normalized through societal attitudes about gender, sexuality, and sex” (Ezell 2009). It is true that on an individual level, perpetrators may often groom and/or coerce their victims to stay silent. But living in a rape culture, much of this work is already done for them.

## Literature Review

Though this theory is primarily based in Warshaw's (1988) *I Never Called it Rape*, there are earlier theorists who highlight possible reasons for the tendency to approach victims of sexual violence with suspicion and shame. Melvin Lerner's (1980) "just world theory" provides some insight into the tendency for so many people to blame the victim. Victim blaming and stigma have been realities for sexual violence survivors for quite some time. Lerner insists on the existence of a "just world" where actions and conditions have predictable, appropriate consequences. Just world theory asserts that consequences are based only on how the individual has acted. In other words, when people who have bad things happen to them, they must have done something to deserve it. When applied to instances of sexual assault, this mindset often leads people to assume that a victim of sexual violence must have done something to provoke her attacker. This theory is often used to justify unfairness towards many groups of people and victims of sexual violence are no different. While Lerner does not speak specifically about victims of sexual assault, the tendency to question the victim's actions rather than the perpetrator's seem ever-present in the discussion of sexual violence, particularly on college campuses.

While rape itself has been studied for decades, the occurrences of types of sexual assault that deviate from the stereotypical "stranger rape" started to be seriously studied in the early 1980s. Early research highlighted the prevalence of acquaintance rape and the fact that it is often not taken seriously. These early studies established the problem, and chronicled incidents of sexual assault. Linda Williams (1984) found connections between the type of rape that took place and the likelihood that there would be a report to the police. The type of rape most likely to be

reported is referred to as “the Classic Rape”, which is a physically violent rape of a woman committed by a male stranger. Williams established patterns in who reported and who did not based on the amount of physical violence, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and the environment in which the assault took place. The further away an instance was from “the classic rape”, the less likely the woman was to report the crime.

The present study is anchored in Robin Warshaw’s (1988) landmark study, *I Never Called it Rape*. This book continues to be one of the most famous and cited studies done on acquaintance rape. It takes into account both the phenomenon of victim blaming and the continued belief in the “classic rape” as the only type of rape worth recognizing. The findings show that 1 in 4 women interviewed had experienced something that constitutes the legal definition of sexual assault or rape. However, very few of them (about 27%) named their experience as rape. For many of Warshaw’s respondents, the distance between their own experiences and the dominant stereotype of men’s violence represented by “the Classic Rape” limited the likelihood of their self-identification of their experience as rape. When dominant discourse constructs rape as primarily something perpetrated by strangers, many people have no idea what to do or think when the assault is carried out by someone the victim knows and possibly even trusts.

As this issue began to be studied more, many researchers started to focus their inquiries on the variety of myths surrounding rape. Rape myths are defined (Ryan 2011) as any type of idea that is false and serves to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women. Researchers such as Ryan (2011) and White and Humphrey (1991) have examined shaming tactics that come up when discussing sexual assault. These tactics are often reflected in

pervading rape myths. For example, commonly held rape myths include the belief that husbands cannot rape their wives, women ask to be raped, women enjoy rape, and women often lie about rape (Ryan 2011). One of the most common myths however, is that in order for an act to qualify as sexual assault, it has to involve documented physical injury. The majority of respondents in these studies report that rape is a heinous act of violence when asked directly, yet many fail to correctly identify situations *as rape* when they were asked to do so in a survey. Reflecting dominant rape myths, among college populations many respondents only identified situations as rape if it involved physical violence (Williams 1984). In addition to not identifying rape correctly, many students also took insignificant variables into account such as what the woman was wearing, if she had been drinking, and if the man had paid for dinner (White and Humphrey 1991).

Other researchers like Thomas and Overlein (2009) and Belknap (2011) called for an expansion on the way rape and trauma are conceptualized. One of the patterns highlighted in earlier research (Warsaw 1988) is that people often don't take acquaintance rape seriously because of the false belief that there is little to no variation in the way the rape is experienced. A broadened conversation about the aftermath is just as important, because labeling trauma as having a right or wrong way to be experienced makes the stress on the victim even worse. The aftermath of an instance of sexual assault is an aspect of the conversation that is still missing (Thoresen and Overlein 2009). Another challenge a survivor faces after the fact is the experience of going through the criminal justice system. Since the Violence Against Women Act, rape shield laws have been put in place. These laws prohibit lawyers from using the victim's past sexual behaviors against her in a criminal hearing. Though rape shield laws have been put in place in

attempt to make coming forward less painful, shaming, and personally difficult, research shows that these laws are often ignored, and the myth that women “cry rape” when they simply feel bad about a sexual encounter is still present among professionals in the criminal justice system (Belknap 2011).

As research on this subject becomes more prevalent, the focus shifts from how common the problem is to why these attitudes exist and what can be done about it. More recent literature (Ryan 2011) is aimed at what might be to blame for the widespread disregard of “non-violent” instances of sexual assault, and the prevailing belief in various rape myths even after increased funding for education on the subject. Importantly, men’s violence against women is neither natural nor inevitable, and different cultural contexts enable different patterns of violent and/or nonviolent interactions between males and females. On college campuses, many researchers have argued that Fraternity houses are some of the most dangerous places for women (Boswell et al, 1996). In addition to buying into myths such as women ask to be raped, men in fraternities showed a greater sense of entitlement than other men surveyed and interviewed. Connections were found between power imbalances on campuses, adherence to strict, traditional gender roles and the amount of sexual violence in a certain group (Sanday 2007). This inspired other research on the relationship between variables such as age, gender, sexual orientation and how likely one was to believe certain rape myths, highlighting significant associations between hostile sexism and adherence to rape myths (Davies et al 2012).

In attempt to empower survivors and secondary survivors to deal with sexual violence in the most constructive way, information is also targeted at the general public. Sarah E. Ullman (2010) reaches out to survivors and secondary survivors themselves on how to identify and deal

with sexual assault. Reactions to sexual violence are often influenced by greater cultural beliefs, and as a result, many survivors experience negative, victim blaming reactions from family or close friends. There is reason to believe that these negative reactions are partly to the blame for the fear that victims have in coming forward. The rape myths perpetuated by our culture directly impact the women who are trying to seek justice and the secondary survivors who often have good intentions.

## Methods

Starting in September 2013, after getting IRB approval, I sent out an email to every woman at the university I attend asking for volunteers to participate in an interview. In order to be eligible, these women must have had an experience involving sexual violence. The women came forward by their own will, based on their comfort in talking about their personal experiences. In order to gain insight, I asked personal questions about what happened, how they processed their experience, and how they moved forward. Once the woman agreed to an individual interview, I secured a private room and with their consent, recorded and transcribed the interview. Over the course of a semester, I interviewed 18 women who had been assaulted or raped by a male perpetrator.

The interviews were semi-structured and on average, they lasted 40 minutes. After transcribing and coding the interviews, I found patterns and reoccurring themes in the participant's experiences. The qualitative methods gave me the chance to gain insight into this very personal issue and increase my understanding of how these women process their experience on an individual level, and make the choice to not make a report to the law enforcement. Each woman has been given a pseudonym, and their actual identity will remain unknown.

This study is being approached from a feminist and symbolic interactionist approach. Symbolic interactionism maintains that humans are ultimately products of society that they live in, and every experience that people have is influenced by social structures and attitudes. (Mead 1943; Blumer 1969) Feminist theorists focus the inequality of women (Frye 1983) as well as the intersection between other social inequalities such as race, class, and sexuality. Keeping these

theories in mind, I am interested in the way that the process of coming forward is affected by external factors.

## **Findings**

This study is structured around the emerging themes that came out in the interviews. The individual stories of the women are so important, and each one is different. However, the reactions and processes of meaning making do not exist outside of our cultural landscape. The themes I found are interconnected, and they function as a way of keeping victims silent. The evidence from the interviews will show that victims can be groomed for silence by a perpetrator, but how our culture does much of the work for them. Much of the silence around this issue comes from the tendency to hold victims responsible, an incredibly flawed framework of understanding, and the overall inequality and lack of empathy for women in this society.

### **Rape as an Inevitability**

Emile Buchwald defines a rape culture as:

“a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm . . . In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable” (X1).

Elizabeth was the first woman I interviewed, and she immediately articulated a crucial aspect of what it means to live in a rape culture.

If I looked at myself as a victim for every time a guy touched me without me wanting it, it would crush me. I would be destroyed and I wouldn't be able to function

When sexual violence viewed as an inevitability, this can contribute to a cultural climate in which people feel indifferent. In the present study, seeing rape as an inevitable part of life was a thread woven through most of the reasons that women identified for not reporting their experiences to law enforcement. Many of the respondents not only internalized a sense of blame for a perceived failure to protect themselves, they also noted that the constant threat and reality of men's unwanted sexual attention and advances is simply too much for an individual to handle. Living in a rape culture, unwanted harassment and touching becomes an everyday reality for women.

A lot of the women talked about rape jokes, normalization in the media and everyday interactions, and rape as natural and/or inevitable. An example of the trivialization of consent and sexual assault is the Summer 2013 hit song *Blurred Lines* performed by Robin Thicke. The song was widely popular and widely criticized (in feminist communities) for lyrics such as "I hate those blurred lines/I know you want it". Jackie expresses her disgust for the song when she says, "That song makes me so angry...To me it sounds like he's at a party and he sees a girl who's really drunk and he's like 'oh she wants it, I don't have to ask her, I know she wants it.' It is like the definition of date rape." This thoughtful quote from Jackie shows how dangerous it is to make light of consent in sexual situations. While the lyrics are certainly problematic, this song is just an example of numerous songs that promote active and passive roles for men and women in sexual situations. The song glamorizes the chase between men and women that always features a dominant male who pursues a sexualized, passive female who exists solely for entertainment purposes. The song *Blurred Lines* implicitly suggests that there are blurred lines of consent, and

it makes it natural and even “sexy” for a man to tell a woman what she wants. The popularity of the song shows that our culture shows how deeply those attitudes are woven into our culture.

Seeing rape as inevitable contributes to the broader context of victim blaming — if men’s violence against women is just going to happen or if is seen as a natural, inevitable, and even glamorous aspect of the culture, it becomes women’s responsibility to prevent it. Additionally, many of the women in my study reported feeling like people don’t care about rape or their experience specifically, since rape in this culture is so normal that their own experiences seem unremarkable.

When men’s violence against women is constructed as inevitable and, by extension, unremarkable, victims may feel as though their experience is not worth reporting. As my respondents suggest, women living in a rape culture can come to expect inappropriate and aggressive behavior as a natural part of life for women.

Another component of rape culture that falls under this category is the issue of rape jokes, and the trivialization of rape in our general discourse. While “jokes” can suggest something trivial, they can work to normalize men’s violence against women and desensitize us to its realities and severity. In this context in which rape is both viewed as inevitable and trivial, the survivors I interviewed reporting not feeling justified in making a big deal out of their experiences. Before they even start the process of coming forward, they have the impression that they will be dismissed, or blamed:

Because we [as a culture] are so desensitized the word [rape], but hypersensitive to the meaning, and what the actual thing is, we’re really confused on how to react. We don’t know what’s normal, we don’t know how to deal with it. So if we don’t have an educated

way to respond, our way is to make a joke out of what it is and tell people that it didn't really happen.

The cultural construction of rape as both inevitable and a joke can leave survivors feeling confused, isolated, and alone.

### **Victim Blaming**

The public conversation surrounding sexual assault is one that puts the blame and responsibility on the victim. We tend to talk about the women who “get raped” instead of the men who rape them (Katz 2006). We give women tips on how to avoid getting raped instead of teaching men that they are responsible for getting consent in every encounter. It should be no surprise then, that every woman I interviewed felt as though she had some culpability in the crime that was committed against her. As an example, when I asked Elizabeth about how she had originally made sense of the assault perpetrated against her, she said, “I knew the guy, I thought he was cute, I had told him that I thought he was cute so I guess I kind of thought that I deserved it or I had it coming because I led him on.” This example highlights the ways that victim blaming – internalized by the victim or expressed by others – extends out of the belief that rape is inevitable.

Over time, Elizabeth realized that she was not to blame for what was done to her. But her reaction is incredibly common. She clearly had the idea that once she gave the impression that she might be interested, or “led him on”, she no longer had a say in what happened to her. Often in cases of sexual assault, the victim blames her or himself before even telling anyone what had happened. Elizabeth noted in hindsight that the attempt to name something that she did “wrong” was an attempt to take some power back and promote a sense of control – if she could name

something she did wrong, she could avoid making that “mistake” in the future and protect herself. While such a strategy of emotion work is understandable, it removes responsibility for men’s violence against women from men and promotes an ultimately false sense of security. Importantly, Elizabeth further reported that she did not even consider telling her friends about it because she did not feel justified in labeling the incident as rape – she had “led him on” – and she assumed that her friends would have similar feelings about the situation.

As another example, Susan very clearly stated that her experience of rape was not her fault, but in making sense of the situation she still internalized blame: “Obviously no ones gonna judge me...but there is the fact that I put myself in that situation...it was still a weak moment even though it wasn’t my fault.” This simultaneous internalization and dismissal of blame occurred frequently across my interviews. Often, the woman would accept blame for simply being out in public life. For example, the situation that Susan “put herself in” was being at a party and drinking with friends. Her quote highlights how deeply ingrained victim blaming is.

The respondents also reported experiencing victim-blaming when they disclosed the assault to friends. When Amelia reached out to her group of friends for support she was both blamed for what happened and disbelieved, “[One friend] called me a liar and that was really intense...when I had to sit down and explain it all to them because they weren’t going to believe me, they said ‘feel free to let us know if you were ever telling the truth’” Similarly, Alicia reflected on the larger context of her experiences talking about her assault on her majority-female college campus: “You would think at a more woman dominated school there would be a better culture around it. But it’s like..oh you’re just another biddy [bitch] who couldn’t control herself. I hate to say that, but that’s definitely what it feels like to a lot of people.” Most of my

respondents did not report such cruel and direct experiences of victim-blaming when they disclosed to friends. For many, the victim-blaming they encountered was more subtle and less judgmental. While this “kinder” form of victim-blaming may be easier to deal with for the individual survivor, all forms of victim-blaming reflect a broader unwillingness to deal with rape as a personal and societal problem, and a dispersal of responsibility away from male perpetrators and onto the victims they assault.

Not surprisingly, all of the women in the current study initially blamed themselves or experienced blame from someone else whether it was cruelly articulated or not. For a few, even after they were completely past thinking that it was their fault, they still had to contend with victim-blaming responses from others. This made it harder for them to maintain their sense of having been victimized. This suggests the need for a broader and more critically engaged cultural conversation about men’s violence against women.

### **Emotion Work**

In patriarchal cultures, women do a disproportionate share of emotion work for others (Hochschild 1979), often playing the role of “nurturer” and putting others’ feelings above their own. When it comes to their own problems, women may feel pressure to keep it to themselves and not cause trouble. This minimizing of women’s voices and experiences can leave women feeling isolated and alone in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. For example, Caroline reflected on her experiences of reaching out for help,

Once my counselor told [my parents] about it, they knew, and they didn’t doubt it anymore. I mean I had only mentioned it once and then dropped it so I wasn’t pestering

them about it...I had such low self esteem and I didn't think I was worth making other people get stressed out.

Although Caroline attributes her silence to low self-esteem, she was still looking out for her mother whom she described as incredibly emotional and unstable. She repeatedly said that she didn't want to "pester" anyone with her problems. This reflects larger patterns of patriarchal socialization and conditioning of women. Many of my respondents expressed a feeling of responsibility to hide their problems for the good of others, whether they knew them or not.

In the conversation surrounding sexual violence, victims and potential victims (i.e., women) are often made to feel like *they* are the problem. They are the ones who drink too much, lead men on, or dress too provocatively. This victim-blaming affects all women whether they are assaulted or not, but when coupled with the cultural expectations of women taking care of others to the detriment of their own experiences and needs it can contribute to the culture of silence surrounding men's violence against women. My respondents reported worrying that they would ruin their perpetrator(s)'s futures or make loved ones sad.

The pressure to remain silent and protect loved ones can be particularly intense when the perpetrator is a loved one or a member of the family. For Anne, who was assaulted by her step-father, this point was made explicit by her mother: "She was like, 'If you call and make a report then your sisters are going to be in foster care and they're going to starve. You're going to ruin the entire family.' So I was like, 'okay I won't do it.'" Anne's mother didn't deny that Anne's step-father sexually assaulted her. But she explicitly attempted to silence Anne by placing the potential "ruining" of the family on Anne's decision to report as opposed to her step-father

decision to assault her. The burden of keeping the family together, *even with her abuser in the house*, was completely on Anne.

In other situations, the women were not directly silenced by a loved one in their support network but they internalized a sense of responsibility for managing the emotions of loved ones all the same. Consider the comments of Michelle:

Like with my mom..I have two older sisters and they're both kind of wiggged out. Like one of them is on drugs and the other one is a stripper. So if I told my mom she would just be disappointed in me just like she is with them, because I was like her gem child. I was the only thing she did right. She tells me that all the time. I'm just afraid that if I told her what happened then she would be disappointed in a way.

Susan expressed a similar sentiment:

The way that I am in my family, I like to keep everything together as best I can...My family is not...not even in a negative way...They're just not very stable...It's just that it was a new and different thing for me to be the one who needed to be fixed.

In other contexts, the women in my study received these messages directly from their perpetrators. For example, Rachel was assaulted by a well-liked man in her community who worked at a funeral home. She noted that he told her: "If you tell what goes on in here, I'm gonna be in a lot of trouble, and my business will go under." She reflected on the pressure that this put on her to stay silent: "I figured I was dealing with his actual business, dealing with the families and the deaths of their loved ones so I was kind of just like, 'Okay, it happened.'"

Most of the women I interviewed had already internalized the idea that they were responsible for emotion work. Rachel's abuser actively used her role of nurturer against her in

this situation; however, that type of manipulation would not have been as effective without the cultural ideology backing it up. Rachel described herself as a “people pleaser” and could not bear to make her parents and other people in the town face the reality that this well-liked man was a serial abuser.

In different ways, many of the women expressed fear that they would be a burden on others, particularly family members. What all of this suggests is that not only is emotion work a burden for all women within our culture, but this hegemonic feminine ideal can contribute to the silencing of women who are the victims of men’s violence, in addition to internalization the idea that women are ultimately responsible for crimes committed against them. In addition to the fear of being blamed, and judged, and accused of lying, female victims also have feelings of guilt pushed upon them when it comes to the effect that their assault will have on the people they love. This not only leaves women isolated and alone, but it once again displaces responsibility from the perpetrators.

### **Failure to Label**

Given the lack of attention to the subject, the fear of being blamed, and the silencing of female victims, many respondents could not even label their experience at first. Amelia experienced a delayed reaction because she wasn’t even able to conceptualize what happened to her. The man who raped her was an acquaintance, and she could not even imagine that he was capable of such violence.

I didn’t have any concept of that. I just buried it. I was getting so depressed, but I wouldn’t understand why I was getting depressed. And as soon as I had talked about it for the first time..it was like I was reacting to it for the first time.

Another strategy for surviving in the context of a rape culture is to convince oneself that what happened wasn't really rape. Considering that victims already internalize blame because of cultural beliefs, not labeling can serve as a damaging, but nonetheless understandable strategy to deny the severity of one's own experience. Elizabeth demonstrates this concept in her own story when she says "I rationalized it completely, actually for a couple days after that, I just told my friends that we had sex...at that time I labeled it as a hookup to make it sound like I liked it, and I tried to convince myself that I like it." Since it is so easy to feel powerless given the widespread acceptance of rape-supportive ideology, this type of thought can be a way of holding on to power and control.

Perhaps it is to hold on to some sense of control, but many of these women either don't label the experience at all, or they think of ways to convince themselves that it was not a big deal. Shock and initial trauma could be part of it, but it leaves out a lot of the larger story. Current cultural attitudes that women grow up with and internalize don't even allow these victims to label their attack as rape or assault. Emily's quote is particularly telling because even the reaction has to be a certain way, or else women automatically lose confidence, even after the assault is completed: "Also, for me at least it took time to process what had happened. It was like what I knew and what I felt were different things. At that time I felt numb. I knew the details of what had happened, but I didn't have any emotions toward it....I guess I felt very weird and I felt like if I didn't go back in there and ball my eyes out then it wasn't true." In addition to not having a typical rape, victims also feel like if they don't react a certain way, then it wasn't real. Emily describes her reaction, and how nothing could have prepared her for being raped by a

classmate, but she never expected that she would be in such shock, and that if she didn't react in the right way, then she was not justified in calling it rape.

Survivors of sexual assault are met with a great deal of suspicion as it is. Another problem these women run into is not having the "right reaction" to whatever happened. A typical rape scenario is already laid out for them. It is normally a violent, stranger rape that happens to a woman who is walking down the street by herself. When rape happens by someone who the victim knows (which will most likely be the case), they don't know how to respond. Whether consciously or not, these women have learned that they are the ones who will be held responsible. In addition to that, neither the victim or the perpetrator has the proper framework to recognize instances of sexual assault.

A common reaction to a survivor's failure to label is that if they didn't label their attack immediately, then it couldn't have been that bad. A popular and particularly malicious myth about women is that they just go crying rape whenever they have a sexual experience that doesn't go their way, or if they regret having sex. That myth serves a couple of purposes: to minimize the problem and justify not believing the victims, to discount women's voices, and to further the assumption that women *should* be so ashamed of a "bad hookup" that they would take such drastic actions that deny that it happened.

### **Not the Typical Rapist**

In his book, *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How all Men Can Help*, anti-sexist advocate Jackson Katz identifies a serious problem in the way we think about people who are responsible for sexual crimes. Our current framework sees rapists as "handful of 'sick' or deviant individuals" Instead, they should be seen as "products of a culture that glorifies

male power and dominance, and at the same time glorifies female submission and submersion” (149). The spectrum of inappropriate behavior can include inappropriate comments, objectification, sexual harassment, and possibly escalate to assault and rape. The challenge is that once the spectrum of behavior framework is introduced, the normal, everyday males can be seen as potential perpetrators. The reality is there whether we as a culture choose to see it or not. The people who suffer most if we don’t face this reality of course, are the victims themselves who are completely ill-equipped to deal with the reality that they were horribly violated by an otherwise normal person.

Most rapes and sexual assaults are done by someone that the victim knows. Not labeling the experience immediately is often used as a reason to discredit the victim. People are quick to say that if they don’t know immediately what happened, then it couldn’t have been that bad. The reality of the situation is that because of the lack of education on the subject, and the responsibility that women feel, many women can’t bring themselves to think of their peers in such a way. Olivia’s story demonstrates the confusion that so many women feel when their rapists show human qualities despite their terrible actions.

He was very nice and comforting, and he let me cry which is something he never did before..but he was very comforting about it which made me kind of like brush it off...Even a year later after we broke up and I realized how abusive he was, I didn’t really label it as so wrong because I still thought he loved me

Another thing that really caught these women off guard is that in every single case, their attacker was an otherwise “normal” person. Due to our lack of information and unwillingness to face the problem anyway, any attacker who does not fit the “typical rapist” description is immediately

avored over the victim. Going back to the black/white framework we have now, part of the reason that it is so hard for the victims to label is the fact that they just can't imagine that someone who is an otherwise good person could be capable of causing so much damage to them. The realization that we all have the power to do real damage to someone is certainly unsettling. It is easier to for men, and their parents to think that in order to not be a rapist, they just have to refrain from violently attacking a random woman with a weapon and raping her in an alley. It's even easier for women to think that rapists just hide in alleys all day, because it doesn't seem to be as much as a threat. We don't have to worry about people we know, or people who seem like they're nice or normal. However, the evidence continues to show how important it is to face that discomfort. The fact that these men seemed normal would make other people question the victim, but it also just makes it that much harder for the victim to understand that being a nice person in everyday life doesn't excuse any behavior that is done when people aren't looking. Amelia was in a situation when her attacker was an otherwise "good" student and member of the community.

That's what kills me is he's a nice guy, he has a good family, he's strongly Christian, so nobody believes me. Because if you look at this guy, you're not going to see a rapist.

You're gonna see a really scrawny guy who plays in a band for his Christian church.

In order to teach people about the reality of acquaintance rape, we would have to acknowledge the fact that rapists are not isolated psychopaths, but they are products of our society. The women interviews were caught completely by surprise by the fact that their assailant was someone who they knew, and someone who seemed otherwise "normal".

Taylor, who was assaulted by her step-brother (whom she considers to be her real brother) even felt the need to protect him from the rest of her family. Consider this quote, where she makes excuses for him to make sense of the assault, but ultimately to protect him: “I don’t know if he remembers and for a long time I would tell myself that he didn’t know what happened and didn’t realized, but now I think about it I’m like ‘I don’t know’ but basically when he came in and he was being really nice to me I was like ‘oh I have my brother back.’” Similar to the situation with Ann, there was already a great deal of family turmoil, and Taylor feared for the safety of her brother. She was protecting her brother from retaliation, mainly from her father. This assault took place on the opposite end of the spectrum from the typical stranger rape. The fact that this person was her family adds even more pressures to protect this person, and it made her feel less justified in labeling this act as an assault.

### **Ownership of Body and Sexuality**

Even in this day and age, women are still not seen as independently sexual beings. Abstinence education and purity culture targets women almost exclusively for messages about how shameful it is to be a sexual person (Valenti 2009). At the same time, women’s sexuality is put on display for the purpose of men’s entertainment. Women are seen as sexual objects instead of sexual subjects. As a result of giving men sexual freedom and shaming women for their sexuality, women become merely objects for men to explore their own sexuality. As a result, men begin to feel entitled to women’s bodies, and women internalize the idea that their sexuality is shameful, and not their own. Consider Elizabeth’s experience with her first boyfriend:

I was like absolutely not...I'm not okay with this, and he ended up telling me that he was my boyfriend and he had the right. At this point I guess I didn't know enough. I wasn't ready and I hadn't paid attention to whether or not that is true

In a society where women are simultaneously displayed as sexual objects and shamed for their sexuality, feeling ownership of their body becomes pretty difficult. In addition to that, we often think of mens sexuality as uncontrollable in the context of victim blaming. For example, arguing that men can't help but react when seeing a woman wearing a revealing dress implies that their sexuality is uncontrollable, and thus, the antithesis of the widely suppressed female sexuality. In the context of sexual violence, it comes into play for many reasons: they don't feel like they have the right to refuse, they feel responsible for being too sexual, they've internalized the idea that men are entitled to what they want, or they don't feel the right to hold someone responsible. Elizabeth had never thought about about the idea that someone would feel that they had the right to do whatever they wanted with her after a certain point.

Women are taught from a very young age that their bodies exist largely for the purpose of pleasing and entertaining other people, mainly men. The internalization of this idea made many of the women I interviewed question whether or not what happened was rape, or whether they even had a right to resist or be angry.

Olivia for example, was in a year-long relationship with an abusive boyfriend. Part of the abuse stemmed from the fact that she did not want to have sex with him. Even Olivia's friends told her that after six months, it was "just time". Olivia was abused physically and sexually by her boyfriend for a year during high school. During our conversation, she consistently differentiated between the physical abuse, which she was more comfortable talking about, and

the sexual abuse, which she still had not completely processed. When she reported the crimes to her peers, or talked about it with a guidance counselor, she focused only on the physical abuse. To this day, while she has disclosed the physical abuse to most everyone, she has still kept the sexual abuse a secret. When I asked her why, she said that physical abuse was more concrete. Everyone agrees that you can't hit a girl. When it came to sexual abuse she felt much more shame, and felt that it was more of a gray area. She explained this to me when she said, "The sexual stuff..it's just so much more embarrassing to me, because I felt like I had sinned or something. Like I still kind of feel that way because I didn't want to and I told him I didn't want to but he made me do it anyways, but I kind of went along with it so it would be over. So I thought by doing that, I made it consensual even though I clearly said I don't want to do this." Again, we can see how physical abuse against women is seen as a concrete wrongdoing, where sexual abuse is still seen as understandable under certain conditions.

Olivia was not only embarrassed by her sexuality, but she felt that she was in the wrong for going along with it in order to end the situation. In addition to that, she was told by her friends that after six months, it was "just time". The sexual abuse that occurred was so overwhelming to Olivia, and to so many other women because in a society that teaches women that they don't own their bodies, many don't feel justified in labeling sexual abuse as what it is.

This is not to say that every woman I interviewed didn't feel ownership of her body. In her experience, Emily knew all along that she had the right to refuse unwanted contact until she was ready. The only problem is that she got no support from her peers. She describes a situation at her school's sporting event: "We get there, and he's there and then he starts touching me. He was sitting in the row behind me and I turn around and I yell at him 'can you just leave me

alone!’ and then everybody just looks at me. And I turn around and people keep going on their own way.” Emily knew that this man had no right to be touching her without her consent. She clearly asserted her right to be left alone. But even then, no one stuck up for her. Throughout the interview, Emily told me how her friends told her that she wasn’t mature enough to like it, or that she made things awkward by standing up for herself. For asserting ownership of her body, and her right to being treated with basic dignity, she was often dismissed as annoying and immature by her peers. Shortly after she told this man to stop touching her, she left the stadium, and he followed her out, and raped her. While this is of course no one’s fault but his, this situation also highlights the importance of empowered bystanders. What if people had told him to back off, and that it wasn’t okay what he was doing? Maybe the situation would have been the same, but either way, Emily had done the best she could to let this person know that she didn’t appreciate being touched without her permission.

Unfortunately, at this point, we rarely tell women to stand up for themselves in situations like this. Instead we’ll tell them the opposite: stay home, dress conservatively, don’t drink, don’t flirt, don’t have fun. The safety tips that we give women not only come from lack of information and complacency, but they also are just another way of rewarding women for their silence, instead of encouraging them to stick up for themselves. While I’m sure it’s not true in all situations, it seems likely that if victims had more people to stick up for them, then potential perpetrators would get the message that they have no right to touch people without their consent. Instead, we penalize women for demanding respect.

To add even more depth to the issue, women who are part of the LGBT community face even more conflict when trying to own their sexuality without shame. Elizabeth gives voice to specific difficulties that women who are not heterosexual face.

Guys will be so ‘oh you’re just doing it for attention’ and I’m like no, I really want a girl right now. They also say ‘oh it’s just because you’ve never been with a guy.’ I’ve actually had a guy put my hand on his penis and say you know you want it. I’ve had so many people say ‘you’re not actually bi. You just want attention.’”

This type of reaction happens only in societies where women’s sexuality exists only for men. While homosexual and bisexual men certainly receive a great deal of undeserved discrimination, it is hard to imagine someone saying that a gay man is doing something for attention from the women around him. Women in same-sex relationships face additional discrimination and disbelief that they could have a fulfilling sexual relationship in the absence of a man. Members of the LGBT community are invisible in current educational programs and women aren’t considered sexual beings as it is. In this scenario we can see not only the denial of female sexuality in absence of a man, but the aggrieved entitlement that some men feel.

### **Conclusion**

Sexual violence at its core is a crime that involves a lack of empathy. In order for a perpetrator to rape or assault someone, he must first suppress any empathy he has for his victim. In order for someone to blame the victim for an act committed against him or her, they must also forget about the victim’s basic humanity. The issue of having basic empathy for someone is present among all of these themes, but it also deserves special attention in a society that seems so void of empathy for women in particular. In our society, the perpetrator doesn’t have to do any

work to suppress empathy for women. The work is done on a cultural level. The failure to see the humanity of women is ever-present in this discussion, but another more specific issue is that of the statistical evidence of how often rape happens. Jessica reflected on the suppression of the human beings reflected in statistical representations of men's violence against women:

Working with C-A-R-S [a student-led crisis response service on campus] and going through my own issues, you discover a lot of times that survivors kind of have their stories pushed to the side, and people don't really think about it, they look at in terms of statistics. And a lot of times I think that if people took some time to think about some of these things and to hear some of the stories behind the statistics, they would learn a lot more.

From an incredibly general point of view, empathy for the victim is one of the most important issues there is. The rapists do what they do by suppressing empathy for the person that they are violating. The denial of women's basic humanity is one of the necessary components in the creation of a patriarchal culture (Johnson 2005; Schwalbe 2000), and this message comes early and often in primary patriarchal socialization. The suppression of empathy, in this respect, is an undercurrent across all of the themes that emerged in the women's stories in this project.

Consider Alicia's comment that she felt like others saw her as "just another biddie who couldn't control herself". When women are constantly objectified and dehumanized, it is no surprise that people fail to see their human qualities when something like this happens. Even knowing the statistical prevalence of men's violence against women, given the larger suppression of empathy for women in the culture many of the women felt reduced to a number. Without critical discourse, statistics only contribute to the feelings of helplessness. Susan, said, "I just told myself

that I was like 1 in 4 that that would happen to. So I boxed it up and didn't tell anyone." Emily reflected a similar sentiment: "I mean, I don't want to be a statistic. It's made me feel that I am in a sense." If the statistical evidence exists without critical conversation, then women will continue to have reactions similar to Susan's, and just accept that they are another casualty of this epidemic.

The incredible amount of empirical data on sexual assault, given the lack of a critical engagement in the issue and broader campaign of resistance, is in some ways a double-edged sword. It's vital that there is more information surrounding the prevalence of sexual assault so that we can take honest stock of the scope of the problem, but until we add a movement to resist the objectification and dehumanization of women to that knowledge it can leave many victims feeling invisible, reduced to a number, silenced, isolated, and, ironically, alone. Even when the women in this study did come forward, many of them experienced cold and unsympathetic reactions. They were interrogated about details instead of comforted, they were blamed, they were gossiped about. When women are reduced to objects, they cease being humans in need of support and care.

It is much easier for a society that is as complacent as ours to see rape as an inevitability. It makes it okay for us to just throw our hands up and say "be careful out there". It's easy to think that rapists are just evil people who we just need to avoid instead of seeing them as the "normal" people that are the product of what we have taught (or not) taught them. There is a tendency to see rapists as a small group of sick deviants who are the exception to the normal cultural environment. Thus, rapists are often people that no one would expect. They are "normal guys" who show no sign of violent tendencies. Because they are the normal guys, it seems more likely

that there is something going on in the cultural environment. In many cases, the abuser showed a clear escalation, based on what he thought he could get away with. A framework for understanding rape as a cultural problem would provide a much more accurate depiction of what happens when there is a sexual assault. If more people would think about rape in this way, then it wouldn't seem like such an inevitability.

Every woman I talked to said that we need an increase in education and resources. Certainly, education is desperately needed. Men's violence against women should be a central part of a larger, comprehensive, enthusiastic-consent-based sex and sexuality education program in schools, and we are in need of a broad-based campaign to instill skills in media literacy to counter the nearly ubiquitous objectification of women and girls across our cultural landscape.

All of that being said, rape-supportive ideology is woven into the fabric of American culture (Jensen 2002). The solution requires a radical approach beyond the scope of the singular question of whether a victim of men's violence reports the crime to law enforcement. It will require that we re-examine what we teach people about what it means to be a man or a woman in America. Patriarchal constructions about womanhood dictate that women should be passive and that their sexuality exists only for the benefit of a relationally defined predatory and dominant manhood. Until these ideological underpinnings of a rape culture are challenged and dismantled, rape will continue to be an all-too-normal, yet silenced, component of girls' and women's experiences of social life.

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