

Perpetuating rape-supportive culture

Talking about rape



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*examine social
reasoning about rape
and some of its
negative
consequences for the
victims.*

SOCIAL reasoning embodies explanations for why events happen — where issues such as what happened, who is responsible and who is innocent or guilty are debated. A common cultural reaction to incidents of sexual violence is, as the extract on the right illustrates, that negative and derogatory judgements are often directed at the victim in addition to, or even instead of, the perpetrator of the incident.

Angus Diggle, a lawyer, had been found guilty of attempted rape of a colleague. In journalist Anne Robinson's explanation for the incident, it is the perpetrator who is defined as the innocent victim of a feckless 'sexually provocative' woman. It is the perpetrator's behaviour which is normalised, exonerating him from responsibility for the act, and the victim who is positioned as deviant and blameworthy.

Secondary victimisation

Blaming a victim for being raped¹ is a form of 'secondary victimisation', where victims can be made to feel guilt or shame because they are further victimised by negative feedback about their conduct. Secondary victimisation can have a number of profound consequences.

Davis and Breslau (1994) argue that victim blaming is related to the onset of prolonged negative psychological effects. For example, 57 to 80 per cent of self-defined victims of rape have been shown to meet the criteria for lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder, experiencing symptoms such as depression and persistent re-visualisation of the crime.

Secondary victimisation has also been linked to the under-reporting of rape to the police, close friends and relatives (Renner *et al.*, 1988; Koss & Harvey, 1991) and may seriously limit the perceived accessibility of institutional support for rape survivors. For example, Lees (1993, 1997) discusses how rape trials are tantamount to 'judicial rape' — 'a spectacle of degradation visited upon the victim rather than the offender' (1997, p.73).

'Mr Diggle, given the circumstances, behaved as you would imagine any half-drunk, virile man would. If any damage has been done to the reputation of the legal profession, it is by the stupid, unnamed woman who apparently continues to earn her living as a lawyer yet clearly possesses not an ounce of common sense.'

Anne Robinson, Daily Mirror, 15 February 1995

Rape myths

Feminist standpoint research has been crucial to the development of the literature on rape, and has attracted substantial attention from the discipline of psychology (Ward, 1995). Feminist scholars have argued that the tendency to attribute responsibility to the victims and exonerate the perpetrators of rape is underpinned by a number of myths about rape, namely 'prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists' (Burt, 1980, p.217).

There are a number of rape myths which operate within a range of professional and everyday contexts. We list five of the most common here:

1. Women precipitate rape by their behaviour or appearance.
2. Rape is not damaging because, after all, it is only sex.
3. Real rape victims have signs of injury to prove it because you can't be raped against your will.
4. Women often lie about rape because they are malicious and deceitful.
5. Real rapists are psychopathic individuals.

Rape myths are embedded within and reinforce culturally dominant, stereotypical assumptions about femininity, masculinity and the nature of normative heterosexuality (Brownmiller, 1975; Nicolson, 1994; Ussher, 1997). Russell (1982) has argued that these myths are widely and uncritically accepted, creating a 'rape-supportive' culture which is hostile to women in general and to rape survivors in particular.

Many rape myths suggest that women should take responsibility for the control of male sexual behaviour. They

also trivialise the severity of a rape experience through construing it as a potentially pleasurable *sexual* act rather than as an act of *violence* and oppression.

For many people, rape myths provide a 'commonsense' resource for making sense of rape incidents. However, there now exists a volume of research which suggests that these beliefs are essentially mythical. For example, Bonney (1985) indicates that 44 per cent of rape victims present no signs of physical injury whatsoever, because in many cases sexual coercion is achieved through verbal or psychological means.

There is also little evidence to support the view that women commonly lie about rape. Studies have estimated that false reports of rape account for between only 1 and 4 per cent of alleged rapes — not significantly different from other violent crimes against the person such as robbery (Ward, 1995).

Contrary to the view that rapists are necessarily psychopathic strangers, there is some evidence to suggest that rapists are likely to be 'regular men'. For example, the majority of victims are at least acquainted with the offender and some will know him very well (Parrott, 1985; London Rape Crisis Centre, 1982). Also, Tieger (1981) found that 36 per cent of male undergraduates agreed that they would rape a woman if they 'could be certain they would not be caught'.

Social definition

Although rape in theory is generally regarded as a legally and morally unjustifiable act, from the moment that a rape survivor makes a public declaration that she was raped, her claim will be scrutinised and debated.

The social environments in which rape victims are the focus of attention are characterised by a competition for the appropriate meaning of the encounter and disputes about the legitimacy of the claim to rape victimhood. A claim of rape may be challenged by arguing that the event should be understood as consensual sex rather than rape or, if it is accepted that forced intercourse did occur, through suggesting that the victim is still responsible because she acted stupidly or recklessly (Burt & Estep, 1981).

To illustrate, Caroline Carey claimed to be the survivor of a brutal rape in which her assailant, a former friend, 'raped me, beat me and then threatened to kill me' (*The Times*, 13 April 1997). Dublin's Central Criminal Court supported her definition of the event as rape and her assailant, Liam Sheehy, was convicted and is now serving a seven-year sentence. However, members of their local community continued to defend Sheehy by arguing that the event should be understood as consensual sex. Villagers speculated that she probably consented to (or even initiated) sex, but

'got more than she bargained for' when things 'got a bit rough'. By offering this version of events, Carey is positioned as blameworthy, and the legitimacy of her victimhood is undermined.

As we have argued, such examples of secondary victimisation can have enormously damaging consequences. It is therefore imperative that psychologists contribute to the minimisation of post-rape trauma by understanding the social processes which perpetuate our rape-supportive culture.

Social psychology investigates

There are now two extensive literatures within social psychology which focus on reasoning about rape, both of which can be located squarely within the perceptual-cognitive paradigm.

Firstly, rape perception research attempts to understand the process of rape victim blaming within an attribution theory framework, by examining individual interpretations of the causes of rape incidents (Pollard, 1992; Krahe, 1991). Secondly, research grounded in attitude theory tries to describe and measure attitudes towards rape and rape victims, often in relation to a variety of demographic or psychological variables (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Although positivist research within this tradition has been successful in adding rhetorical weight to the concept of 'rape-supportive culture' (Ward, 1995), we would like to argue that it cannot provide an understanding of the complex social processes which perpetuate rape-supportive culture in everyday talk. Social cognition research is limited in this respect because it offers an ecologically invalid, oversimplistic view of the way that blame and accountability are managed in conversation (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Beattie & Doherty, 1995; Anderson & Doherty, 1997).

This oversimplification arises firstly because such research conceptualises explanation as individual and private, ignoring joint sense-making practices in public conversations (Antaki, 1994). Secondly, the methodologies used serve to separate explanation from its usual venue of spontaneous argument and conversation. For example, the non-negotiable, straightforward attitude statements on questionnaires requiring a measurable, constrained response (e.g. level of agreement) bear little resemblance to the flexible, active and subtle way in which evaluative claims are made in the dynamics of ordinary discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1988, 1992).

Discursive approach

We would like to argue that a discursive psychological approach (DP) (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996) to the analysis of talk may provide a fruitful alternative framework. Within this perspective, analysis is guided by theoretical concerns which emphasise the constructive and active nature of talk. For example, one of the most important characteristics of any stretch of talk is its 'could have been otherwise' quality (Edwards, 1997).

Descriptions of events have considerable actual and potential variability. So claims about 'what happened' contain a silent endorsement of particular concepts at the expense of alternatives (Billig, 1987). In this sense, talk does not simply reflect the world, it constitutes it.

DP argues that this flexibility of description should be crucially understood as meshed with, and oriented to, the accomplishment of social activities such as evaluation, explanation and persuasion.² As the Caroline Carey example illustrates, competing versions of reality make possible a range of inferences about the legitimacy of victimhood.

Furthermore, DP draws our attention to the subtle way in which issues of blame and accountability are managed in conversation. Edwards and Potter (1992) argue that potentially contentious blamings are produced indirectly, in a way that effectively denies any undesirable motivation on the speaker's part. This is done by presenting versions that are apparently neutral and factual — merely 'commonsense' descriptions of the world 'as it is'.

In the following analysis of fragments from three conversations concerning a hypothetical rape incident, we hope to illustrate the way in which rape myths that distribute blame towards the victim are embedded implicitly in a joint version of the rape event. These conversations were generated by giving men and women, in pairs, a rape description that we view as a provisional version of reality which the participants argue with.

Although there is an acceptance in these discussions that the victim was raped, we hope to go some way towards unpacking the way in which blame is still allocated to the victim in a manner that seems 'reasonable' and convincing. In this way, we hope to gain an insight into the subtle ways in which rape-supportive culture is perpetuated in talk.

Conversations

Conversation 1 (C1)

Vernon(1): *well yeah so here we're saying that she should have probably been aware of this and not [been so foolish] as to take a short cut but even so*

Sally(2): *maybe ... she ... yeah it does seem that way doesn't it, they should be able to I think*

Vernon(3): *yeah but even so ... people should be able to walk about in freedom but*

Sally(4): *but the trouble is you can't nowadays can you ... I mean it's too dangerous*

Vernon(5): *well...*

Sally(6): *I mean people are forever telling you on television you know whatever you don't*

Vernon(7): *yeah I think people are becoming more and more aware of it*

Conversation 2 (C2)

John(1): *you would have thought she would have been aware of the danger wouldn't you*

Debbie(2): *yeah it does seem like ... you know it was a silly thing to do really*

John(3): *yeah it does seem a bit strange I mean ... I agree with you ... I mean but yeah like I said*

Debbie(4): *but you can't can you that's the trouble ... people should be able to walk about without being attacked but given that it's a violent ... it's a violent society that we live in ... er ... people have to be aware of the dangers I mean it's no good just walking about with her head in the clouds is it*

Conversation 3 (C3)

Alison(1): *yeah but I dunno it reflects that women always have to be careful I mean I know blokes get beaten up and stuff but you know you can still walk home and stuff like that*

Frank(2): *oh well yeah I know it's not fair but it's life innit*

Alison(3): *hmmm ... I mean so that implies that this poor woman has to spend her whole life looking over her shoulder and [inaudible]*

Frank(4): *[no not at all] but if you walk back take the lit way where it's like well lit up instead of taking this huge short cut across the badly lit field or whatever*

Discourse analysed

What follows is by no means a complete analysis of the texts presented. Nevertheless, we hope to provide a flavour of the way in which victim blaming is indirectly accomplished and to highlight some of the features which make it seem reasonable and difficult to undermine.

We are not suggesting that rape-supportive culture is perpetuated by a

few 'bad' or prejudiced individuals. Our focus is on the effects and consequences of discursive resources and practices which are culturally available and institutionally sanctioned.

In each of the conversations, the speakers jointly develop a version of the circumstances of the rape based on a construction of what the world is like 'nowadays' (C1(4)). The definition which is offered characterises society as a 'dangerous' and 'violent' place where people run the risk of being 'attacked' (C1(4); C2(4)). It is also suggested that this characterisation is increasingly taking hold (C1(7)) through continual reinforcement by 'people ... on television' (C1(6)).

Feminist scholars have argued, however, that the specific nature and consequences of perceived threats in the public sphere are different for men and women. Griffin (1971) suggests that the 'unnamed fear' which relentlessly figures as a 'daily part of every woman's consciousness' (p.27) is specifically the fear of sexual violence. The fear of rape exerts a powerful means of social control over all women, often leading to the adoption of behaviours such as not going out alone (Riger & Gordon, 1979).

The participants in conversation 3 allude to this explicitly. They acknowledge that although 'blokes get beaten up and stuff' this is not the constant concern that rape is for women, who 'always have to be careful'. The risk of violence does not necessarily restrict men's behaviour in a general way; 'you can still walk home and stuff...' (C3(1)).

The dangers to women are located by speakers to be in predictable places such as clearly demarcated, dark, unpopulated 'short cuts' (C1(1); C3(4)). The image of the 'classic stranger rape' is reproduced in C3(4). Here the source of fear — the rapist — lies in wait in the shadows waiting to pounce on potential victims, presumably in this case from behind a large tree or hedge in 'the field'. The function of this is to suggest that 'safe' routes do exist and that they are easily identifiable. This implication is supported through the construction of an unproblematic 'lit way where it's ... well lit up' in extreme contrast to the construal of the short cut as 'huge ... across the badly lit field'.

In these texts, we therefore see the implicit reproduction of two common rape myths. Firstly, that women are most at risk from rape perpetrated by psychopathic rapists who lurk in dark, unpopulated public places. Secondly, that rape is easily avoidable — women will be safe if only they avoid 'dangerous' places.

It is against this backdrop of a particular construction of the circumstances of the rape that the victim's identity and character are established. The victim is variably categorised as 'foolish' (C1(1)), 'silly' (C2(2)) and naive, through the

suggestion that she walks about 'with her head in the clouds' (C2(4)).

An important insight here is that we select categories in talk to accomplish social actions (Wowk, 1984; Edwards, 1991). Here, the selection of categories works to allocate blame towards the victim and away from the perpetrator.

The key point is that these derogatory categorisations of the victim only appear sensible and convincing because of the implication that she consciously selected an 'obviously dangerous' route home when 'safer' alternatives were easily available. It is important to note once again that the victim could have been categorised in an infinite number of different ways (e.g. perhaps as 'rational' for taking the short cut because it's quicker — a common feature in our conversational data on male rape, not reported here). This would make very different implications available regarding her blameworthiness.

Overall, we see that in offering a version of accountability for the rape, the participants focus on the behaviour and personal characteristics of the victim and not the perpetrator. The status of the rape survivor as a legitimate victim is undermined by the implication that she precipitated her attack through her own stupidity and recklessness. It is implied that the victim only has herself to blame because she placed herself in the path of a rapist and, by her mere presence, incited his 'uncontrollable' sexual urges.

There are several other features of the content and organisation of the talk which make the implicit attribution of responsibility towards the victim seem convincing. We focus on just one here.

In each of the conversations a particular kind of content, 'pragmatic realism' (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, 1992), is reproduced (e.g. C1(4); C2(4)). This emphasises the constraints which exist in practice. It functions to position speakers as sensible because they are 'realistic' enough to recognise the constraints 'out there' beyond the control of ordinary folk which 'inevitably' inhibit our freedom. Also, by expressing regret about these constraints, speakers appear reasonable — e.g. 'I know it's not fair but it's life innit' (C3(2)). This is a particularly robust piece of rhetoric, as it operates as a closed argument against the possibility of social change.

Analysis can lead to change

We have argued that it is necessary to understand the social processes that lead to the secondary victimisation of rape survivors. This is imperative not only because of the negative interpersonal and institutional effects discussed above, but also because of the material consequences that flow from an emphasis on

the victim's character and behaviour in explanations for rape.

If victims are the focus of explanation, then they also become the targets for intervention. This then results in a preoccupation with regulating the behaviour of 'foolish' or 'wayward' women according to the dictates of femininity (e.g. stay at home, be passive, be modest), while the seriousness of rape as a violent and oppressive crime is undermined, and rapists continue to go unpunished. In 1985, 24.4 per cent of the recorded rapes in the UK resulted in a conviction. By 1994, the conviction rate had fallen to just 8.4 per cent and many of these convictions were overturned on appeal (Lees, 1996).

We argue that, to gain an insight into the social mechanisms involved in the perpetuation of rape-supportive culture, it is necessary first to appreciate that the negotiation of blame and responsibility for rape incidents in open-ended discourse is accomplished indirectly. We feel that an ecologically valid approach to research in this area must therefore engage in a detailed exploration of the way in which explanations for rape are constructed and made to seem reasonable.

We hope to have provided a flavour of the type of analysis that such an enterprise might produce. We believe that this work is an important step toward transforming and undermining the damaging discursive practices that shape the experience of many women in the aftermath of rape.

'What becomes clear is the importance of other people's reactions towards women who have been raped — how much difference a clear, supportive, positive response could make to a woman's self-image and the way she views her experience.' (Lees, 1993, p.25.)

Notes

¹ In this article, we discuss female rape only. See Anderson and Doherty (1996a, b) for a discussion of social reasoning about male rape.

² It might seem that our use of statistics and other rhetorical devices in this article is inconsistent with an otherwise postmodern, relativist epistemology. However, we do so self-consciously to make our argument convincing, and such reflexive practice is consistent with a DF framework.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the members of the Loughborough Discourse & Rhetoric Group, who provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this analysis.

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