

Briefing paper Rape Perpetration: A Review

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Rape perpetration: A review¹

Introduction

Rape can have an enduring impact on the lives, and health of victims, their families and communities. Both men and women perpetrate sexual violence (Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2009), however the majority of sexual offences are committed by men (Steffensmeier and Zhong et al 2006). Research on what drives perpetration of rape and other forms of sexual violence is needed to inform prevention programmes – for this it is necessary to study men. This briefing paper summarises the key issues drawn from a larger review on rape perpetration² including research on risk factors for sexual violence perpetration, the methodologies used to identify these risk factors and discusses the implications of this research for rape prevention strategies. Most of the literature reviewed focused on perpetration of sexual violence by men against women and girls. For the purposes of this paper, risk factors are factors that increase the risk (likelihood) of a person perpetrating sexual violence.

Review methodology

The review provides an overview of current discussions in the research literature around the main factors associated with rape perpetration, it does not follow the approach of systematic review, although the author sought to identify all published papers on rape perpetration. In identifying this literature an internet search was conducted for published papers or reports with empirical research on rape perpetration from 1990 onwards. In so doing, 3,325 abstracts were identified; yielding 293 papers of interest for the study. The review includes qualitative and quantitative studies along with studies that discussed the origins, risk factors or frameworks for thinking about perpetration. Only English language databases were searched.

Key findings

For many years theoretical understandings of rape perpetration have largely been based on clinical observations, and research with North American college students and convicted rapists. Yet in the last decade there has emerged substantial research from Africa, including the first large longitudinal study, important systematic reviews of the field and research in biomedicine. On the one hand these constitute substantial advances, but overall empirically based understandings of rape perpetration are still at a fairly early stage.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the evidence base, developments over the last decade suggest that there is a need to move beyond some of the models that have dominated the field, including the four factor model of paedophilia of Finkelhor and Araji (1986) and the Confluence Model (Malamuth, Sockloskie et al. 1991; Malamuth, Linz et al. 1995; Malamuth 2003). Other theoretical perspectives need to be embraced including the contribution of genetics, gender theory and developmental psychopathology. This paper stops short of proposing an alternative model, out of a desire to emphasise the complexity and interrelatedness of risk factors for rape. However, we do conclude that in addition to genetic influences there is strong evidence that five groups of potentially amenable risk factors are important in rape perpetration: adverse childhood exposures; attachment and personality disorders; social learning and delinquency; gender inequitable masculinities; and substance abuse and firearms.

¹ This executive summary was written by Rachel Jewkes for the Sexual Violence Research Initiative, 2012.

² Jewkes R. (2012). Rape Perpetration: A Review. Pretoria, Sexual Violence Research Initiative.

There is considerable interconnectedness between these groups of factors and indeed between them and other factors where direct impact on rape perpetration has yet to be demonstrated. It is important to note that not all people exposed to these factors will engage in the act being studied, and not everyone doing the latter will have the risk factor. For example, not all sex offenders have been victimised in childhood, and the majority of those who have been victimised as a child do not go on to become offenders. The question about what makes a person who has a risk factor vulnerable to become sexually coercive is of great importance in understanding rape prevention.

Implications for rape prevention: comprehensive intervention strategies

Interventions to prevent rape perpetration are needed for different age groups. Given that some risk factors for raping start from birth, it is essential that programmes to prevent rape perpetration include interventions directed at the first five years of life. The goal of these interventions is to strengthen care giver child attachment, reduce use of physical punishment, and enhance parenting. Parenting interventions must address gender issues given the importance of witnessing intimate partner violence (IPV) and the social learning component of gender-based violence (GBV). Effective interventions need to be implemented with adaptation for new settings where appropriate.

Delinquency is also an important risk factor in settings where rape perpetration is common in dating relationships or against non-partners. In these circumstances many men who will ever rape do so for the first time as teenagers. Rape perpetration interventions are needed to target boys before they rape and so must span all of the teenage years and focus on high risk youth, as well as youth who are not part of gangs or identified as delinquent. There is an increasing move to include gender based violence prevention in school curriculum and this seems a very valuable way of reaching a wide range of young men and boys. In recognition of the importance of challenging the 'taken for grantedness' of gender inequitable masculinities by women, it is important that girls and young women are also included in these programmes.

The contribution of interventions to reduce alcohol consumption, drug use and small gun ownership to rape prevention is uncertain. For alcohol and drugs the chief activities of risk are binge drinking and social drug use, rather than addiction. It seems likely that interventions that are of value for rape perpetration prevention will address the use of alcohol and drugs in a gendered, frequently peer, context in which sexual coercion may be encouraged and supported. Gun ownership similarly does not cause rape, but reducing societal levels of small firearm ownership reduces the numbers available for use in any form of crime.

High quality services for victims of rape although not the focus of this review are very important in rape prevention because they send a message to society that rape is serious and will not be tolerated. Similarly, part of the environmental frame of rape perpetration at a societal level is a country's laws and policies. Strong legislation, with good definitions of crimes, is an essential part of prevention. Overall we must strengthen the legal framework of gender equity in all areas of social life, including transforming gender dynamics in daily interactions, for example, through implementing effective policies in workplaces and by transforming the many aspects of education to promote gender equity in schools and school curriculum. In many settings these require legislation backed by systems-wide interventions.

Conclusions and recommendations for future research

Rape perpetration is preventable. This review suggests that the predominant underlying factors for rape perpetration are environmental, and central among them are gender attitudes and childhood experiences of violence. Although there is a genetic contribution that cannot be changed, it is possible to change the environmental exposures that influence expression of the genes involved. All of the groups of risk factors identified as underlying rape perpetration are potentially preventable. It is essential that policies and interventions for rape prevention include both a thorough understanding

of risk factors for rape perpetration and a theoretical grounding for interventions and strategies. Understanding masculinities is of vital importance for rape prevention as rape is predominantly a practice of men. The implications of this review are that complex interventions are needed that work at multiple levels, particularly addressing environmental and structural factors as well as those working on individual level factors, such as gender attitudes. As a critically important structural factor, gender issues need to be addressed in a cross-cutting manner through rape prevention interventions.

To further strengthen the field of rape prevention, the follow key areas for research are proposed:

- **Broadening the geographical base of knowledge:** There is a great need for research on rape perpetration from a much wider range of countries and particularly low and middle income countries.
- **Deepening understanding of risk factors for perpetration of different types of rape:** There is a need for research from a range of settings that is able to compare risk factors for intimate partner rape, non-partner rape, gang rape and child rape and sexual abuse.
- **Stronger research designs:** There is a need for research to have stronger designs so that there is sufficient power to distinguish rape and other sexually coercive practices, comparison groups who have never been sexually violent (or never raped), valid measures of sexual violence, a comprehensive assessment of risk factors and confounders and more longitudinal research.
- **Multi-disciplinary research:** New generations of research are needed that combine perspectives from multiple disciplines, including developmental psychopathology, psychology, criminology, epidemiology, gender studies, genetics and neuroimaging.
- **Intervention research:** Mixed methods intervention research is needed both to develop interventions that are effective in reducing sexual violence perpetration. They can also deepen our understanding of sexual violence perpetration through examining which men change, what are the processes of change, and are barriers to change in the face of different types of intervention.
- **Understanding patterns of susceptibility:** Research is needed to understand why some men who have particular risk factors become perpetrators and others do not.

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