

The Feminist Framework Plus: Knitting Feminist Theories of Sexual Assault into a Comprehensive Model

Beverly McPhail, LMSW, PhD

University of Houston

Graduate College of Social Work

bmcphail@uh.edu

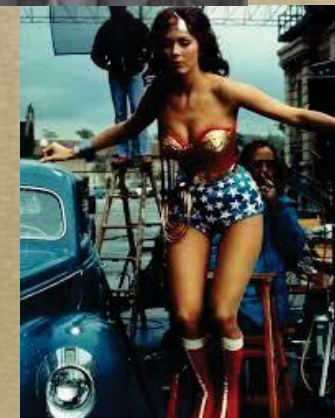
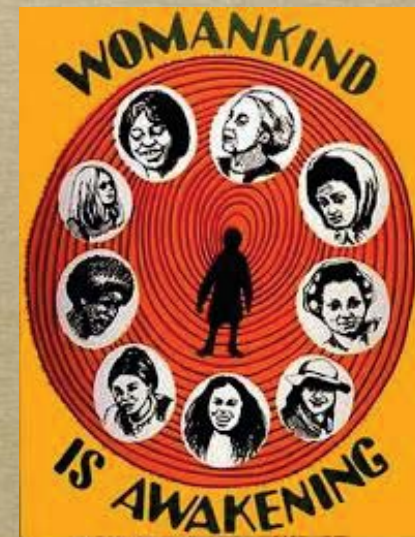


Reason for Presentation & Model



- Aging baby boomers - handing off to next generation
- Feminists are sexual assault experts, yet are we?
- Presenter's internal conflict when working with college-age men
- Need to better link theory, research and practice
- Current model stuck in the 1970s

A Look at the 1970s



History of Sexual Assault Theory



- Women as male property - rape is a property/economic loss to man
- Medicalization of sexual assault - man as mentally ill and uncontrolled desire
- Freudian view - victim precipitation or wish fulfillment
- 1970s radical feminist consciousness raising groups developed the radical/liberal perspective

How Did We Get Here?



Radical Liberal Feminist Perspective

- Rape is not about sex, but violence.
- Rape is motivated by power and control of men as a group over women as a group.
- Most famous quote: Brownmiller (1975): “Man’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe that rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”

Strengths of Radical Liberal Feminist View

- Shifts blame from victim/survivor to perpetrator
- Moves from individual blame/cause to societal factors
- Emphasized harm to victim/survivor
- Led to new solutions/interventions

Empirical Support for Radical Liberal Perspective

- Gender-based realities supported by statistics, 94% of completed rape victims are female
- Burt (1980) found cultural supports for beliefs in rape myths
- Meta-analysis of 39 studies found relationship between hostile masculinity and patriarchal ideology and sexual assault (Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002)
- Sanday(1981) found difference between rape-free and rape-prone societies with the latter characterized by rape as ceremonial act or an act by which men punish or threaten women

Weaknesses of Radical Liberal Feminist Perspective

- Acts like a level one comprehensive theory, but is a single-factor theory
- Belief that all men have power over all women is an oversimplification
- Belief that patriarchy privileges all men does not acknowledge diversity between men
- Focus on broad cultural causes does not provide solutions at individual levels
- Can such a complex act have just a single cause? Meston & Buss (2007) found that people have consensual sex for 237 distinct reasons.

Additional Weaknesses



- If not sexual, but rather violent in nature, is being punched in the face the same as being raped?
- Brownmiller said: “I never said rape was not about sex, just that it was not *sexy*.”
- If it is about violence not sex, what happens when rape is not substantially violent? Many people then think that is not, therefore, rape.
- Limits our interpretation of events when there is only a single motive for range of acts
- If rape is not about sex why is women’s sexuality affected afterwards and why do they feel shame?

Additional Problems



It is not always clear in debates if whether sex, power, or violence are being invoked as **motivations**, **means**, or in some cases **effects** (Garvey, 2005).

Kimmel (1990) says: “The feminist definition of masculinity as the drive for power is theorized from a women’s point of view. It is how women experience masculinity. But it assumes a symmetry between the public and private that does not conform to men’s experiences. Feminists observe that women, as a group, do not hold power in our society. They also observe that individually, they, as women, do not feel powerful. They feel afraid, vulnerable. Their observations of the social reality and their individual experiences are therefore symmetrical. Feminism also observes that men, as a group, are in power. Thus, with the same symmetry, feminism has tended to assume that individually men feel powerful.”

Solution: Theory Knitting

- In the theory-knitting approach to theory development: there is integration of the strongest features of the alternative theories
- Theory-knitting, combines various threads to create whole feminist cloth
- Theories do not have to be competitive or segregated, pitted against each other, which is a male model of theory development
- Identifies and effectively uses the common dimensions that underlie the theories to be knitted
- Provides conceptual integration








Solution: Add More Feminist Theories for Better Explanatory Power

Fortunately, additional feminist theories are readily available:

1. **Radical** 🖱️ **Liberal** - *Patriarchal Power/Control*
2. **Radical²** - *Normative Heterosexuality*
3. **Women of Color/Intersectionality** - *At the Intersections*
4. **Social Construction** - *Doing Masculinity, Doing Rape*
5. **Postmodern/Queer/French** - *Embodied Sexual Practice*

Feminist Framework Plus

Table 1. Feminist Framework Plus: Theory-Knitting a Model of Sexual Assault Dynamics (McPhail, 2014)

Title	Patriarchal Power and Control	Normative heterosexuality	At the Intersections	Doing Masculinity, Doing Rape	Embodied Sexual Practice
Feminist Perspective	Radical → Liberal	Radical ²	Women of Color/ Intersectional	Social Construction	Postmodern/Queer/ French
Primary Theorist(s)	New York Radical Feminists, Susan Griffin, & Susan Brownmiller	Catherine Mackinnon	Angela Davis & Kimberlé Crenshaw	Diana Scully & Anne Cossins	Ann Cahill
Theory Premise	Rape is a political act due to motives of power/control in order to preserve male domination and female subordination.	Rape is a continuation of normative heterosexuality where violence is eroticized and female subjugation is ensured.	Rape occurs at the interactional nexus of race, class, gender, and other identities with unique consequences for women of color and others at the intersections	Rape is related to culturally dominant scripts and is a way for men to achieve masculinity; thus, motives are multiple in achieving those aims.	Rape is a sexually specific act upon the body/self; bodies are different, so rape is specific - age, sexual orientation, race disability and relationship to the offender all matter
Symbol					
Common Denominators	Power Dynamics * Cultural Forces * Gender Dynamics * Feminist Perspective				
Prime Action Level	Cultural	Cultural	Historical/Individual	Interactional	Individual
PLUS	Empirically derived individual risk factors for sexual assault (compiled from bibliographic sources)				
<i>Psychological</i>	Attachment disorders, low self-esteem, low-empathy, subclinical psychopathic traits, deviant sexual arousal, poor mental health, deviant fantasy				
<i>Environmental</i>	Childhood abuse (sexual & physical), parental intimate partner violence				
<i>Developmental</i>	Attachment disorders, early sexual initiation, peer pressure, subcultures,				
<i>Situational</i>	Alcohol & drug use/misuse, firearms, gang membership, juvenile delinquency, multiple sexual partners				
<i>Biological</i>	Genetic factors, gene x environmental factors, androgens, neurological deficits				
<i>Gender</i>	Sexual entitlement, hostility toward women, belief in rape myths and traditional gender roles, emphasized heterosexuality, existence of patriarchy and gender inequality				

Normative Heterosexuality



Chief Theorists - Catherine MacKinnon & Andrea Dworkin

Feminist Perspective - Radical Feminism²

Primary Concept - Rape is on a continuum of normative heterosexuality where violence is eroticized and female subjugation is ensured. Rape is about sex and violence, which are fused under a system of gender inequality.

Empirical Support - Self-reported rape proclivity of men (Malamuth) and unacknowledged rape victims (Koss)

At the Intersections

Chief Theorists - Angela Davis and Kimberlé Crenshaw

Feminist Perspective - Womanism, Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Legal Studies

Primary Concept - Rape occurs at intersectional nexus of race, class, gender and other identities with unique implications for those standing in the intersections

Empirical support - Women of color experience different rates of sexual assault and sexual assault reporting, media coverage, believability as victims, and social support

Doing Masculinity, Doing Rape



Chief Theorists - Diana Scully and Anne Crossins

Feminist Perspective - Social Construction

Primary Concept - Gender is a verb, created through interactions. Rape is a way for men to achieve masculinity through dominant cultural scripts, and thus the motives are multiple, including feeling powerless rather than powerful, to achieve sexual gratification, prove their manhood

Empirical Support - Scully's (1985, 1990) work with convicted rapists found multiple motivations including: revenge, punishment, bonus in commission of another crime, sexual access to unavailable or unwilling women, sexual conquest, desire to have impersonal sex, fulfill a rape fantasy, adventure, recreation, pursue a challenge, power, control, dominance, to feel good, show camaraderie with other men, to prove masculinity

Embodied Sexual Practice (Trigger Warning)

Chief Theorist - Ann Cahill

Feminist Perspective - Postmodern/Queer/French Feminism/Feminist Philosophy

Primary Concept - Rape is a sexually specific act that destroys (if only temporarily) the intersubjectivity, embodied agency, and personhood of the woman. Since women's bodies are different, rape is specific, due to women's age, sexual orientation, race, disAbility, material means, relationship to the offender, etc.

Empirical Support - Research reveals sexual acts in the commission of sexual assaults including kissing, masturbation, licking, forced to dance nude, etc (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1980). One study (McCabe & Wauchope, 2005) recorded comments made by rapists including, "I won't hurt you; I just want sex;" "I want you to enjoy this," and "I can give you the wildest sex of your life." A study of over 10,000 men and six countries found the primary reason given by men for rape was *sexual entitlement* (Jewkes, et al., 2013).

The “Plus”




- Feminist theories focus primarily on cultural factors and ignore other dimensions
- There is a wealth of research by clinicians who work with sexual offenders that feminists typically ignore
- There are many factors at the individual level that include psychological, environmental, developmental, situational, and biological as well as gender dynamics

Practice Implications



- Increasing the expertise of frontline workers
- Increasing the explanatory power of feminist(s) conceptualizations of rape
- Expanded educational efforts

Increasing the Expertise of Frontline Workers




- Increase status by reflecting current knowledge
- Maintain status as sexual assaults experts
- Evidence-based practice, knowing latest research
- Better able to work across disciplines

Increasing the Explanatory Power of Feminist(s) Conceptualizations of Rape

- Current single factor radical feminist model does not explain all sexual assault (same-sex male rape, gang rape, doesn't distinguish between perpetrators, that is acquaintance and stranger, why victims may experience sexual difficulties later, the assault's unique sexual nature)
- FFP broadens understanding by including specific focus on bodies, intersectional lens (more focus on race, class, disAbility, etc.), sexual nature,

Expanded Educational Efforts



- Broaden educational efforts; can talk about safer sex, consensual sex, and pleasurable sex in same breath
- Focus off men as potential perpetrators and talking instead about sexual choices
- Expand our prevention educational efforts to include better parenting: improved attachment and preventing sexual and physical abuse of boys as well as girls
- Keep abreast of literature on sexual offenders outside of feminism(s)
- Gain credibility with audiences when we don't have to disabuse them of what they know about sexual nature of sexual assault