A Feminist Perspective on Sexual Assault

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The word *feminism* is derived from the French term *féminisme* and is defined by Merriam-Webster (2018), who chose it as their 2017 Word of the Year, as "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes." There are many different types of feminism that have developed throughout history and from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Within this chapter, we find feminist activist bell hooks' conceptualization of feminism most useful when discussing sexual assault. She describes feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Hooks, 2000, p. 1). We choose this framing of feminism because it demands action in its use of the phrase "to end," the ultimate goal of feminist work regarding sexual assault. Also, we choose it because with this definition, hooks asserts sexual assault is predicated on the concept of sexism, not simply a struggle between men (perpetrators) and women (victims). She goes on further to say that "…sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult" (Hooks, 2000, p. 1).

The terms *sexual assault*, *sexual violence*, and *rape* all overlap with and diverge from each other in important ways. Definitions of each of these terms have changed over time, and currently, definitions may differ within and between researchers, activist, journalists, and the community at large (Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1996). Beyond definitional incongruences, use of the terminology is further complicated because we may choose to use certain terms over others due to varying connotations and linguistic powers associated with each term. For example, due to its more intense emotional connotation presently, it is not uncommon for individuals to avoid using the term *rape* and, instead, substitute it for the less jarring term *sexual assault*. Due to the array of definitions and uses of these terms, when reviewing previous work in this chapter, we will retain the original wording used by the original speakers as to not distort their voice.

Nevertheless, when we use these terms ourselves, we describe *sexual violence* as the broadest of the terms and *rape* as the most specific of the terms. That is, sexual violence encompasses both behaviors that involve attempted or completed bodily contact (e.g., sexual assault) and behaviors that may not include bodily contact (e.g., sexual harassment). Sexual assault only includes attempted or completed bodily contact, yet this contact can be either penetrative (rape) or nonpenetrative (e.g., grabbing genitals). Rape only describes attempted or completed bodily contact that is penetrative. Therefore, all rape is sexual violence, but not all sexual violence is

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rape. The core commonality of all these terms is that they involve sexual or sexualized behaviors that occur without at least one involved person's consent.

Western Historical Ideas of Sexual Assault Pre-1960s

During the Colonial Era and into parts of the nineteenth century, rape was treated like property crime wherein women were the property of their fathers until they became the property of their husbands (Burgess-Jackson, 1999). If an unmarried, virgin woman was raped, the crime committed was considered a crime against her father to whom the woman may now remain an economic liability if she could not marry (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Similarly, if someone raped a married woman, the rape was considered a property crime against her husband. Remnants of this view of rape existed within US law as late as 1993 when marital rape became a crime in all 50 states (Bennice & Resick, 2003). Prior to this time, husbands could rape their wives without committing the crime of rape because, as women had previously been the property of their husbands, the husband could not commit a property crime against himself.

Donat and D'Emilio (1992) discuss in their review of the historical foundations of sexual assault that, during this time, women were viewed as naturally sexually "pure" while men were assumed to have an innate sexual lust. It was women's responsibility to use their purity to manage men's lust. If a woman was sexually attacked she "needed to comply with male standards of her behavior by proving her nonconsent through physical and verbal resistance, and through immediate disclosure of the attack..." (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992, p. 10). However, any woman who defied these ideas of purity, either via consensual sex or rape, was considered to be corrupted (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992).

In the early twentieth century, perhaps coinciding with the increasing popularity of the field of psychology, perpetrators were increasingly viewed as mentally unwell, "sick," or having a diagnosable character disorder (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). At this time, these views served to reduce the perceived control a perpetrator had over his actions, and therefore reduce his responsibility of those actions. For example, Donat and D'Emilio (1992) review historical "sexual psychopath laws" that allowed for men, particularly white men, to be sent to state hospitals instead of receiving jail sentences. This created public discourse which focuses conversations of sexual violence around the perpetrator's experiences, not the victim's experiences—"her victimization was simply a by-product of his pathology" (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992, p. 12). Again, when victims—who were exclusively considered women during this period—were brought into the conversation it was to either to note their now "fallen" or flawed status or to assert how their behavior contributed to their victimization (Rennison, 2014).

Prior to the 1960s, theoretical explanations of sexual assault and, more often, rape, specifically, centered around the Androcentric Theoretical Tradition. This model often described sexual assault in a biologically imperative manner (Marcus, 1992). Rennison (2014) notes that

> …when these traditional perspectives discussed "gender difference," it was done in a way to highlight differences and to deny the presences of gender inequality. For instance, disparities in strength and in aggression (in general) between males and females and the greater innate nurturing and care giving behaviors (in general) found among females compared to males were seen as reflecting the natural order of things… (p. 1619)

Because of this, few people advocated for social change as a means to curb sexual assault.

Western Historical Ideas of Sexual Assault During and Post 1960s: Introduction of the Feminist Movement

It was not until feminist discourse began to enter the mainstream conversation about sexual assault in the 1960s that social change was demanded in order to address the issue (Donat & D'Emilio,

1992; Rennison, 2014). The feminist movement greatly concerned itself with addressing sexual assault (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992), and therefore, had a profound impact on the issue's framing (McPhail, 2016). For example, in the first steps of the movement, feminists advocated that gender socialization, not merely biological sex, needed to be considered within criminological behavior research (Marcus, 1992; Rennison, 2014). In other words, feminists claimed that criminal behavior was affected by learned gender assumptions like the endorsement of adversarial sexual scripts—where sex is viewed as a conquest by men whose job it is to "get" sex from women—instead of being affected by an inherent, unchangeable biological trait of men or women. Feminists also focused conversations toward the actual experiences of the women who were assaulted (Marcus, 1992; Whisnant, 2017) when the conversations had previously centered around either the perpetrator's experiences or the women's father's/husband's experience (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992).

Leading up to and during the 1960s, rape was primarily thought of as an act of sex rather than an act of violence (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Because rape was sexually motivated, the victim's sexual history was deemed relevant and could be included in legal procedures (Hegeman & Meikle, 1980). As female desire for sexuality began to be legitimated during the Sexual Revolution, this could serve to further blame her for her own sexual assault or rape—she must have "asked for it" (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Because of this, some scholars argued that rape was sometimes viewed as a punishment for deviance from the traditional feminine gender norms of purity (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992; Marcus, 1992). Feminists worked to reform policies that institutionalized the discussion of disproportionate gender violence suffered by women in order to better serve these women (e.g., Violence Against Women Act of 1994; Burt, Newmark, Norris, Dyer, & Harrell, 1996). These changes included Rape Shield Laws, which excluded some victim characteristics—like the victim's sexual history—from court proceedings (Burt et al., 1996).

Additionally, as perpetrators were more often conceptualized as mentally "sick," two distinct approaches to dealing with perpetrators arose: extreme penal sentences and rehabilitation through mental health systems (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992; Freedman, 1987). Neither approach provided practical justice or resolution to the affected women because, with both approaches, perpetrators were less likely to be convicted for their crimes (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Feminists lobbied to include laws with several levels of sexual assault types that carried a wider range of penalties—some with mild penalties and others with more serious penalties. This was necessary because few perpetrators were ever convicted with the harsh "all or nothing" penalties in state statutes at this time; knowing that a perpetrator would be sentenced to life in prison, juries would be less likely to convict unless the rape was particularly violent or heinous (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Simultaneously, feminists worked to dispel previous beliefs that perpetrators were helplessly controlled by their overwhelming sexual impulses and therefore were less accountable for their actions (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992).

Through these efforts, rape began to be recognized as an act of violence, not sex (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Perhaps most famously, Brownmiller (1975) shaped the conversation with her work *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, which suggested, among many things, that rape was about power and a form of male domination over women. Her work and others broadened the view of sexual assault from a micro lens at the interpersonal level to a macro lens that discussed how sexual assault is situated within the broader patriarchal culture and is cultivated and substantiated by systems within that culture (e.g., Sanday, 1981). Feminist researchers have commented on this by saying, "in a feminist analysis, sexual assault is understood to be intrinsic to a system of male supremacy" (Herman, 1990, p. 177) and "rape was no longer viewed as an outcome of an individual deviant, but a product of a larger rape culture that condoned and excused male violence" (McPhail, 2016, p. 2).

These ideas helped to launch the sexual assault conversation into the political realm.

The authors of the *New York Radical Feminists Manifesto of Shared Rape* (1971) were credited with declaring that "when more than two people have suffered the same oppression the problem is no longer personal but political—and rape is a political matter" (Manhart & Rush, 1971, p. 1). Many scholars and activists describe that this "same oppression" not only includes acts of rape but also a ubiquitous fear of rape among women. Marcus (1992) reviews and critiques some of these ideas that women are "always either already raped or already rapable" (p. 386) and never not rapable. Because this fear of rape is so common for women, the constant threat limits their ability to be active participants in the public arena, including in politics (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). In fact, Brownmiller (1975) specifically discusses rape as a political function that preserves a system of male dominance, which benefits all men regardless of if they have ever committed rape.

Types of Feminist Theory

Over the years, the broad spectrum of feminist ideologies have been conceptualized as historic waves (Genz & Brabon, 2009), as a spectrum (Whisnant, 2017), and as varied by discipline and purpose (Kelly et al., 1996). Some disciplines (e.g., law and criminology) have been particularly impacted by feminism, especially around views of sexual assault. For example, in trying to define feminist theories for a criminological lens of sexual violence, Rennison (2014) says:

> As such, the phrase "feminist theories" refers to a decentered and diverse collection of perspectives and methodologies based on various ideas about the basic assumptions regarding inequality, the role of gender and gender relations, the issues and problems requiring attention, and the methods needed to address these issues and problems (p. 1618).

Below, we briefly examine a few different paradigms of feminist theory, conceptualizations of feminist identities, and an overall feminist perspective of sexual assault. Due to the ebb and flow of feminist thought and leadership, the following feminist theory paradigms are listed loosely in chronological order of their broad influential debut.

Liberal Feminist Theory

Liberal Feminist Theory is often concerned with policy and legal changes that foster equal economic and social opportunities for women. Through structurally equal treatment of the law, symptoms of women's oppression, which can include sexual assault, will be resolved. Rennison (2014) argues that although this theory is not directly related to sexual violence (because it addresses legal/economic issues broadly), it laid a foundation for the emergence of contemporary feminist theories that do. However, some feminists criticize Liberal Feminist Theory for "playing by the rules" of a governing system that is inherently unequal because it was built on patriarchal values. For example, liberal feminist efforts to put forth new legislation and judicial policies that were still decided on by a heavily male-dominated legislative and judicial branch in the US; therefore, largely men still got to decide what opportunities and protections were permissible for women.

Additionally, some modern feminists have moved beyond the liberal feminist's push for equality in law and policy. Today, many feminists advocate moving toward equitability rather than equality because "a focus on equal treatment uses males as the yardstick by which females are treated," which does not fix the underlying issues of women's oppression in a patriarchy as it still holds a male standard (Rennison, 2014, p. 1620). For example, within prosecution of sexual assault, it is common to provide evidence that the victim "fought back" against her perpetrator in order to be certain that it was not a consensual experience (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Although some women do fight against their perpetrators, many women are not socialized to resort to physical violence in order to resolve conflict. Holding women to this "equal standard" of physically

violent resistance may hinder women's likelihood of receiving justice in the judicial process.

Radical Feminist Theory

Radical Feminist Theory finds that patriarchy is the key cause of gender inequality and sexual violence (Whisnant, 2017). Broadly defined, patriarchy is a social system that values traditional masculine social norms (e.g., strong, powerful, stoic, sexually aggressive, protective) and where men disproportionately occupy positions of power. The radical feminist perspective frames sexual violence as not merely random acts of aggression but a means of social domination over women (Rennison, 2014). This social domination occurs because the continual threat of sexual violence perpetuates continual fear in women (Rennison, 2014). This theory helped to expand conceptualizations of sexual violence beyond stranger rape to include other types of rape (e.g., acquaintance rape) given that "…every man is a potential rapist and all women are potential victims" (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992, p. 17). Radical Feminist Theory has perhaps had the largest influence in framing sexual assault as an act of violence instead of an act of sex (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975).

Radical feminists and women of color feminists criticized the liberal feminist sexual violence agenda both for not addressing racism, classism, poverty, etc. (McPhail, 2016) and also for reinforcing the patriarchy by working within the preexisting patriarchal confines. Marcus (1992) argues this by stating.

> Attempts to stop rape through legal deterrence fundamentally choose to *persuade men* not to rape… they do not envision strategies which will enable women to sabotage men's power to rape, which will empower women to take the ability to rape completely out of men's hands. (p. 388)

Nevertheless, criticisms of Radical Feminist Theory also exist. Some, particularly intersectional and transnational feminists, find the idea of a universal patriarchy and timelessness of sexual victimization narrow in scope because patriarchy and sexual victimization exist in varying degrees across culture and time (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Others criticize Radical Feminist Theory because they credit it with focusing the women's movement solely around negative issues, like rape (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992).

Marxist Feminist Theory

Marxist Feminist Theory finds that the primary basis of sexual violence is class inequality; gender is a secondary concern (Rennison, 2014). In traditional marriage where husbands are lone income earners and wives perform unpaid domestic work, class forms the base for female disadvantage because of an economic master–slave relationship between husbands and wives (Rennison, 2014). Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1983) state that "inequality bred by a capitalist society enhances the conditions for female subordination and sexual violence…. In noncapitalist societies, rape is rare, and egalitarianism between males and females is high" (Rennison, 2014, p. 1621). Although this lens brings in important issues of the relatedness of gender and poverty, it stops short of examining the intersections of gender and poverty with race, citizenship, sexual orientation, and other important social strata.

Intersectional Feminist Theory

Intersectionality focuses on the idea that people occupy multiple social identities simultaneously, and each of these identities intersect with one another to form a person's unique experience of the world, particularly as it relates to their experiences of oppression. For example, a person can have the identities: indigenous, Mexican, immigrant, transwoman of low socioeconomic status. Each one of these identities has social implications alone and creates a distinct identity when layered together—the whole (person) is more than the sum of their parts (identities). Intersectional Feminist Theory notes the shortcomings of other theories focused on one identity, which can distort and misrepresent people's

holistic experiences (Bright, Malinsky, & Thompson, 2016). By grouping all women together, singular identity theories assume that, for example, a woman who is trans, indigenous, Mexican, teenager, and low socioeconomic status has a similar experience of sexual assault compared to a woman who holds other identities (e.g., cisgender, of American citizenship, White, middle-aged, and high socioeconomic status).

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), coined the term "intersectionality" first within discussions of employment discrimination and quickly applied Intersectionality to violence literature (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) discusses how both race and gender identities simultaneously and uniquely affect women of color's experiences of violence. For example, Black women are more likely to experience sexual assault compared to both White women or Black men (Black et al., 2011). The layering of both racial and gender oppression creates higher risk for victimization for these women. If sexual assault is situated on ideas of power and control, Mustaine and Tewksbury (2002) argue that this increased victimization makes sense because White men "may especially need to control minority women whose increasing status is particularly threatening" (p. 96).

Intersectional considerations also exist for perpetrators. Donat and D'Emilio (1992) discuss the racial myth of the "animalistic," sexually uncontrollable Black man as it relates to sexual assault perpetration. This myth, born out of slave imagery, was used as a threat to all White women while simultaneously used as an excuse for White men's violence toward Black men via lynching. Angela Davis (1981) uses Intersectional Feminist Theory to add classism to the discussion by addressing these intersections within the historical context of slavery—a form of both economic and racial domination. Further theorists have also addressed how these identities intersect with ableism, heterosexism, colonialism, as well as other identities.

Emerging as a blend between Intersectional Feminist Theory and Decolonial Theory—a theory based on the concept of deconstructing the ways colonization has negatively impacted indigenous societies (Salem, 2014)—Transnational Feminism focuses on women's issues on a global perspective where feminism is not solely defined by Western standards, particularly White Western women's standards. Transnational Feminism seeks to address global women's issues that affect different cultures, nationalities, and races in varying degrees without trying to westernize women across the globe. Transnational Feminism also critiques the idea of patriarchy as it often contains problems of unidimensionality and universality while also failing to address cross-border gender relations and identities (Patil, 2013).

"Doing" Gender Theory: Masculinities

Some gender theorists conceptualize gender as a performance, rather than an innate quality that a person holds. Similar to an actor performing on a stage, people perform their gender on the stage of life. Judith Butler (1988) explains that "gender is an act that has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized" (p. 526). People learn how to perform these actions (gender expression) through learned gender scripts. That is, how to perform masculinity and femininity is both actively learned (e.g., a father explicitly telling his son "a real man takes what he wants") and/or passively learned (e.g., watching media that rewards male violence with "getting the girl") within a culture. Feminist theory of masculinities finds that some cultures or subcultures may endorse and, subsequently, teach men to perform different types of masculinity or perform traditional masculinity to varying degrees.

Messerschmidt (1993) argues that, because masculinity is not an inherent or fixed characteristic, it must be continually accomplished by men. Because dominance and aggression are characteristics associated with traditional masculinity, sexual violence against women is one way to accomplish this type of masculinity (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2002; Rennison, 2014). This can especially be seen in revenge rape cases where, in an effort to restore threatened masculinity, some

men engage in sexual violence against romantic partners that have been unfaithful or have attempted to end the relationship (Rennison, 2014; Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait, & Alvi, 2001). Godenzi, Schwartz, and Dekeseredy (2001) assert that performing masculinity is why men who are associated with hypermasculine peer groups (e.g., college athletic teams) are more likely to commit sexual violence against women.

Performing masculinity combines with Marxist Feminist Theory to create the Left Realist Gendered Subcultural Theory. This related theory addresses the Marxist shortcomings of deemphasizing gender. Left Realist Gendered Subcultural Theory discusses how destructive economic policies (e.g., weak labor laws, deregulation of predatory money lending practices) make men's attempts to accomplish masculinity more difficult, at least masculinity that values financial success as a means to attain power and control (Rennison, 2014). When it is difficult to accomplish masculinity through these means, men can turn to rape as a way of accomplishing masculinity because rape can afford them a different type of power and control (Rennison, 2014). Additionally, Schwartz et al. (2001) describe that men rape women especially when they have other men's complacency, or even encouragement, for doing so.

Feminist Framework Plus

A newer feminist theory that aims to understand sexual assault via "knitting" together several pre-existing theories is Beverly McPhail's (2016) Feminist Framework Plus. Each theory partially explains motivations for sexual assault, but no one theory fully explains it alone. She argues the need for a more comprehensive theory because the idea that sexual assault is motivated by power and control, not sex, "while very important and groundbreaking in its time, does not wholly account for the etiology of sexual assault" (p. 1). To look at sexual assault through a broader lens, she brings together five core ideas while noting the strengths and weaknesses of each.

The first, Patriarchal Power and Control, describes the key theme born of Radical Feminist Theory; sexual assault is about power and control. Sexual assault is a result of a male supremacy and patriarchy, and, therefore, is political. Although McPhail critiques that this idea cannot fully explain sexual assault, she finds that it is one piece of the overall phenomenon. The second idea, Normative Heterosexuality Perspective, is similar to the first but acknowledges that sexual violence is both sex and violence at the same time. It frames rape as an inherent part of normative heterosexuality due to rape's frequency of occurrence and the sexual pleasure those with more power (men) sometimes report receiving from aggressing against those with less power (women).

The third core idea of the Feminist Framework Plus holds that Intersectional Feminist Theory also possesses important explanatory power for understanding sexual assault. She explicitly notes that the intersection of oppressed identities "results in less credibility for women of color survivors as well as longer prison terms for rapists of color" (McPhail, 2016, p. 6). The fourth core idea reflects the concepts of "doing" gender and masculinity where rape, rather than being a deviant sexual practice, is related to normative masculine practices (e.g., Malamuth, 1981). The fifth and final idea knitted into the theory is the Embodied Sexual Practice Perspective. This perspective brings discussions of rape inward focusing on how it is experienced by the victim in order to, in part, acknowledge that rape does not carry the same experience for all women. It also finds that "rape is a sexually specific act with sexual consequences for the victim…" (McPhail, 2016, p. 7).

Overall, these five core ideas blend together to assert five key concepts. One, rape is a sexual act that can create sexual consequences for the survivor. Two, there are multiple motives for rape, not only power and control. Three, it is imperative to understand rape at both a political level while also addressing that it occurs at the individual bodily level. Four, there should always be an emphasis on the intersectional experience of rape which highlights oppressed identities. Five, rape

can do great harm to a survivor. Lastly, the "Plus" part of this theory aims to add developmental, biological, environmental, situational, and psychological causal explanations for rape, which McPhail (2016) argues are often left out of many feminist theories.

Even with bringing together these varied feminist explanations of sexual assault and rape to create a broader model with more explanatory power, the Feminist Framework Plus still has limitations. McPhail (2016) notes that it does not provide a theoretical explanation for female sexual offenders, an area of research that, though historically neglected, is included in more contemporary sexual violence research. For example, in a recent national sample of lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women, 9% of women who experienced sexual assault indicated that their perpetrators were other women (Canan, 2017), giving evidence to an undertheorized topic in previous feminist perspectives of sexual assault: women as perpetrators.

Feminist Identities Related to Sexual Assault

While people use different theories and paradigms to *understand* sexual assault, feminists have also applied these theories to the modes in which they *interact* with sexual assault. Kelly et al. (1996) describe various "feminist identities" or different modes of feminism as distinctions to make sense of feminist activity, particularly in western countries. These authors describe four distinct feminist identities that, despite being conceptualized over 20 years ago, are still culturally relevant to the ways many feminists interact with sexual assault today. These are: academic feminist, activist feminists, commercialized feminists, and "power" and "victimhood" feminists.

Academic feminists aim to create knowledge about sexual assault from the perspective of women. However, theory has become increasingly disconnected from action to create change around the issue or, at least, to create change outside of the institutions in which these academics work (Kelly et al., 1996). On the contrary, activist feminists predominantly aim to challenge the current social order through grassroots organizing of media awareness campaigns, policy creation, lobbying, etc. Activist feminists are often doing the community work "on the ground." Many feminists, activist feminists in particular, criticize academic feminists and the knowledge they create because much of the information is inaccessible to the community at large.

Commercialized feminists are concerned with making feminism marketable and profitable. This occurs in both media and therapeutic services (e.g., films marketing as feminist blockbusters and feminist self-help books; Kelly et al., 1996). Kelly et al. (1996) credit this type of feminism with creating the concept of "survival" after experiencing sexual assault. The shift in terminology was developed within the self-help movements to move away from the stigma associated with the word "victim." They also note that the increased divergence between academic feminist and activist feminist helps to create commercialized feminists. More specifically, they state that "it is the lack of connection between the first two which, in our view, adds power to the latter" (Kelly et al., 1996, p 96).

"Power" and "Victimhood" feminists conceptualize a dichotomy that Kelly et al. (1996) heavily criticize as unhelpful to the overall cause. In this dichotomy, "power" feminists advocate to move away from victimhood framings of sexual assault as they find them to be disempowering to women. "Victimhood" feminists frame sexual assault within experiences of victimization in order to politicize the issue, and they, conversely, criticize the self-help movement's depoliticization of the issue. Both "power" and "victimhood" feminists overlap in that they both emphasize the importance of telling women's stories in order to make private pain into public discourse. Kelly et al. (1996) describe how both power and victimization exist for people who have endured sexual assault in that

> all sexual violence involves an experience of victimization, and if individuals do not die as a consequence they have physically survived… being victimized is what was done—a statement of

> historical fact; survival is what individuals who are victimized achieve in relation to, and often in spite of, that historical reality (Kelly et al., 1996, p. 91–92).

A Feminist Perspective of Sexual Assault

The plethora of feminist theories, some of which are identified above, allows for much philosophical and theoretical debate on what feminism entails. We have identified theoretical paradigms identifying the gendered experience on personal and systemic levels, in political and economic spheres, and from generalized, specific, and intersectional identities. With McPhail's knitting together of several feminist theories regarding rape and sexual assault, we get closer to an understanding of the complexities of sexual assault as an individual and personal act that carries implications both for that person and for society more broadly. Even McPhail, however, identifies that the expertly knitted theories still have some shortcomings—namely, not having a frame for understanding female perpetration of rape and sexual assault. Therefore, although the above theories offer bits and pieces of rhetoric to understand the phenomenon of rape and sexual assault, we must expand our scope to gain an overall feminist perspective of rape and sexual assault.

An Intersectional Imperative

Although women of color feminists have been doing intersectional feminism for decades, due to racial biases inherent within White western feminism, Intersectional Feminist Theory has only recently begun to gain mainstream traction in sexual assault discussions. Its increasing acceptance is exemplified in McPhail's inclusion of intersectionality in the Feminist Framework Plus. However, we argue a need to make Intersectional Feminist Theory *the central* component to an overall feminist perspective of sexual assault. When feminist theory lacks an intersectional grounding to reality, theories become increasingly disconnected from the lived experience of individuals. When lacking an anchor to intersectional experiences, concepts of gender, economics, power, and socialization—though exhaustively discoursed upon—offer little in the way of how sexual assault exists in our world and how we must address these issues. In other words, all other theoretical framings or feminist identities related to sexual assault lack holistic efficacy without Intersectional Feminist Theory.

With the joining of the various modes of feminism discussed above, we see where academic feminism leaves gaps and activist feminism offers insight. This is exemplified in Friedman and Valenti's (2008) book *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power & a World Without Rape*—a book with an activist-focus on positively affecting rape culture and female sexual pleasure. The editors and contributors compile a view of female sexuality, pleasure, and sexual violence from a variety of lived experiences focusing on the nuances of identity in the sexual experience. They move toward a more intersectional understanding of female sexuality by starting with the lived experience and supplying a space to articulate differences, difficulties, and disparities with the intent to affect rape culture. They discuss body size, immigration, citizenship, race, pregnancy, and sex work among other identity factors. These examinations make clear the need for an intersectional feminist perspective by highlighting the possible oversight of various types of oppression by a single-dimension feminist analysis.

In a more contextual example, the way Black women are subject to a sexual racism identifies how a simple gendered examination is not enough. Collins (1990) famously breaks down the racialization of female sexuality and White and Black womanhood. She says,

> In this context of a gender-specific, White, heterosexual normality, the jezebel or hoochie becomes a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality. Normal female heterosexuality is expressed via the cult of true White womanhood, whereas deviant female heterosexuality is typified by the "hot mommas" of Black womanhood (p. 83)

Collins identifies how female sexuality and womanhood is seen differently based on race. This examination stemming from the experience of Black, female sexuality—the source for discussing intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) subsequent interrogation of the theory, embedding it further into the dialogue of sexuality—is another example of how this discussion benefits from more than just a monolithic gendered critique.

With the dawn of intersectional and transnational feminism, we have a broader scope through which to view sexual assault. We see that feminism offers an examination of gender, sex, age, power, economic situation, political context, etc. As such, a feminist perspective of sexual assault is critical of the many dynamics that exist within the experience of sexual assault—both as it occurs on an individual basis and as society interacts with the concept and consequences on a macro level. Here, we briefly examine how four major components influence sexual assault through a more intersectional lens.

Gender/Sex

As an activist and author, bell hooks (1984) first identified feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression in the mid-1980s. Several years later, hooks expounded on the idea, offering insight into the complexities of how feminism can move the discussion on sexual assault forward. For hooks, feminism is much more than the social schema that pitted women against men. When considering sexual assault in a patriarchal system, many of the theorists above made gendered assumptions—that victims are always women and perpetrators are always men. While some authors identified this assumption, they did little to address the complexities of how sexual assault is portrayed beyond a unidirectional, binary gendered experience. More recently, hooks elaborated:

> When I boldly affirmed that I advocate feminist politics, folks wanted to know just what I meant by that. Their questions, their interrogations gave me the opportunity to challenge notions of feminism as being about women against men. It gave me the opportunity to share the definition of feminism that was for me clear and simple: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." Feminist politics aims to challenge and change patriarchy. (Hooks, 2015, para. 6)

As McPhail (2016) mentioned, the previous gendered scope has been insufficiently useful in addressing female perpetrators. When men are raped by women, oppression may exist in the patriarchal system preventing men from seeking emotional or legal support. When the gender identity of a sexual assault survivor—transgender or gender nonconforming, for example—may be dangerous to discuss, report, or identify in a narrative, what is needed to offer consolation and justice when their gendered experience is contributing to the stigma of sexual assault? Activist campaigns such as the 1 in 6 drive (1in6, 2018), or studies on male survivors of sexual assault exemplify the usefulness of identifying oppression in ways that have brought about awareness moving toward social change. In the edited book *Queering Sexual Violence*, genderqueer author River Willow Fagan notes "people of all genders experience sexual violence and have valid needs for support and access to healing spaces" (Fagan, 2016, p. 18). An intersectional feminist perspective of sexual assault includes the reality that sexual assault happens across all genders and is equally as intersectional in its support of these individuals.

Race

The race of sexual assailants and sexual assault survivors cannot be overlooked in a feminist perspective that aims to end oppression. Sexual assaults do not exist outside of a racial context. When race is ignored, implicit bias and racist thoughts influence how we discuss and address individuals involved in sexual assaults. An intersectional feminist perspective identifies how race plays a role in a given assault and the ways in which racial oppression may contribute to perceived harm to individuals or groups. Collins (1990) discusses in *Black Feminist Thought* the

complexities of addressing rape within racial boundaries:

> …to talk of White racist constructions of Black women's sexuality is acceptable. But developing analyses of sexuality that implicate Black men is not —it violates norms of racial solidarity that counsel Black women always to put our own needs second. Even within these racial boundaries, some topics are more acceptable than others—White men's rape of Black women during slavery can be discussed whereas Black men's rape of Black women today cannot (p. 124)

Collins gives voice to the nature of how discourse on sexual assault can be influenced by race—in this excerpt, by identifying what is acceptable or unacceptable. She identities the difficulty in discussing race and sexual assault by illustrating how the current gendered/racial dynamics affect what is more or less acceptable to discuss in a given social context at a given time. The historic oppression of the sexualities of people of color—from the rape of slaves discussed by Collins to forced sterilization noted by Angela Davis (1982)—has influenced how we discuss the existence of sexual assault in our world. A feminist perspective of sexual assault recognizes racial dynamics as inseparable from conversation of how oppression relates to sexual assault.

Class/Economics

When sexual assault occurs in a heteropatriarchy, there is much to say about who had the economic power that gave them access to commit sexual assault or the economic power to avoid consequences for sexual assault. For example, cases like Harvey Weinstein, Bill O'Reilly, and many other wealthy men in film and television have recently been exposed for sexually harassing and assaulting women in the industry for decades. Of the individuals who came forward against these men, several cited that Weinstein, O'Reilly, and others held key positions of power in the industry which kept the assaulted individuals from reporting their experiences lest they forfeit their own careers. These men held positions of economic power over their victims that both helped foster the sexual assaults as well as allowed these men to postpone or entirely avoid negative fallout of their actions. Therefore, there are economic circumstances for perpetrators, victims, and victims relative to their perpetrators that intersect with further identities (e.g., gender) to shape the context of sexual assault.

Sexual assault in the context of sex work is another intersectional economic consideration. The radical feminist view of sex work often equates all sex work or prostitution to sexual assault (e.g., Jeffreys, 1997). Intersectional, transnational, and global feminist authors advocate for examining sex work as beyond the view that all sex work is sexual slavery or violence against women (Jeffreys, 1997). Kamala Kempadoo (2001) notes that when sex work is reduced to "a violence inflicted upon women due to notions of a universality of patriarchy and masculinist ideologies and structures…[it] dismisses the great variety of historical and socio-economic conditions, as well as cultural histories, that produce sexual relations and desire" (p. 38). Neglecting to identify the economic impact of sex work undermines the reality that it can be a form of income and survival for some individuals. When sexual assault occurs in the context of sex work, there may be laws preventing sex workers from reporting rape (New York Consolidated Laws, n.d.; Anderson, 2002); also some police themselves perpetuate sexual assault on sex workers (Deering et al., 2014). These realities contribute to the oppression and stigmatization experienced by sex workers.

Political

In Friedman and Valenti's (2008) book, Miriam Zoila Pérez (2008) writes a chapter about immigrant women and their experience of sexual violence. She discusses the way that sexual violence assumes an added layer of intersectional complexity when considering structures of citizenship, poverty, and racism. More specifically, immigration laws and policies can create and sustain opportunities for perpetrators to sexually assault others, especially noncitizens, who hold less political power. When rape or sexual assault

occurs in the context of immigration, a simple awareness of gender and patriarchy offers an incomplete rhetoric to how we can move toward the end of this kind of oppression.

We must be clear in identifying the oppression in political power that impacts survivors and influences perpetrators' decisions to move toward sexual violation. An intersectional approach to sexual assault understands that political climate will shape a survivor's experience of sexual assault (e.g., political decisions to insufficiently fund rape crisis centers, victim blaming comments made by political officials). Furthermore, additional political intersections exist when it comes to police abuse of sexual power or the military's use of sexual assault as weapon. While McPhail stated the importance of recognizing the many motives of individual perpetrators of sexual assault, we must also identify the political motivations as part of a system, not simply an individual's relation to power, sexual pleasure, or socialization.

Recommendations

We offer two key recommendations to address the problem of sexual assault. These recommendations are broad as to include things that everyone can do, not just people of one particular gender, one particular race, one particular class, etc. For example, although their help is essential to solving this issue, we cannot only recommend men to act. Men exist in all forms in the sexual assault process—as perpetrators, as victims, as bystanders, as advocates, and as the uninformed public that upholds rape culture. Therefore, in keeping with the need for an intersectional approach to this problem we offer general recommendations which, we hope, can be adapted in culturally appropriate ways to fit calls to action for a variety of groups.

Our first and foremost recommendation is that it is imperative to see sexual assault as intersectional. These above feminist theories imply that we need a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon in order to most effectively address sexual assault in our world. Perpetuating a belief about where or how sexual assaults happen while overlooking evidence contrary to this belief, holding a single group of people responsible for perpetration while ignoring other types of perpetrators, or believing that sex and power are the only dynamics that exist in a sexual assault are all examples of nonintersectional ways of working around sexual assault. We must first break free of the narratives ruling the sexual assault discourse that prevent us from seeing oppression in all forms caused by sexual assault—oppression of all genders, racial oppression, economic disparities, oppression of victims through legal channels, overlooking perpetrators, false accusations, or allowing sexual assault to be tolerated in society. We start by seeking an education about sexual assault that is trauma-informed and aware of the many facets present in sexual assault.

Our second recommendation is that it is important to understand the role we play as individuals in perpetuating an atmosphere that upholds sexual assault as permissible or, at the very least, inconsequential. In what ways do we partake in a society that allows a nonchalance about sexual assault, often called rape culture? These theories above carry the implications that we must identify our own biases and learned beliefs that prevent us from speaking out about injustices that happen around sexual assault. The simplest form of not perpetuating this atmosphere is to avoid sexually assaulting people. This is, however, an incredibly low bar as a moral imperative for what these theories advocate. We must also analyze how we speak about sexual assault, to what extent we employ rape myths in our speech and beliefs, how our lived experience makes us responsible bystanders, or why we do or do not disclose our own sexually coercive experiences. We need to seek out how we can best work against the oppression of sexual assault in our life—talk to friends about it, ask teachers, counselors, or trained professionals about how we as individuals can work against these injustices.

Conclusion

With a seemingly endless matrix of intersectional identities, a feminist perspective of sexual assault encompasses more than the individual identities of a person. It includes an understanding of feminism that offers insight about sexual assault that brings about freedom from oppression in a multidimensional way. When we understand sexual assault to be a form of oppression, we might start from the lived experience and extrapolate the oppressive components.

Because individuals all have identities that may experience oppression in some way, we must consider the effects of sexual assault in the context of each of those identities. Though perhaps incredibly obvious, these components are not mutually exclusive. The four components above are also not the only components to consider—the list of identities is practically endless.

Whether a survivor is oppressed in a single-dimensional way or has a multifaceted oppressive experience, a feminist perspective of sexual assault—rooted in the experience of the patriarchy as an oppressive system in a symbiotic relationship with other systems—identifies the oppression that uniquely exists as a result of sexual assault. Because sexual assault happens to people of all kinds, a feminist response is equally varied and complex. A feminist perspective of sexual assault is intersectional. It is intersectional not only in its consideration of identity components and oppressive factors therein but also in its ontological, teleological, and epistemological approaches.

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