

Can Radical Feminism Coexist with the Public Health Paradigm?

...or more precisely, *“Is it possible to define sexual violence as a logical consequence of a rape culture while utilizing a public health approach to develop intervention and prevention strategies?”*

By Lydia Guy

One of the most “radical” concepts in the feminist analysis of rape is the idea of a rape culture. The concept of rape culture is fundamental in understanding the sociopolitical framework adopted by the first rape crisis centers. This thread continues to be embodied in much of the work of the anti-rape movement today. Juxtapose this concept with the concept of the social ecological model as defined by public health theorists. The public health model is primarily focused on using a four step approach to: 1) Define the problem, 2) Identify risk & protective factors, 3) Developing strategies and/or interventions and 4) Promote widespread adoption. Public health professionals utilize a variety of frameworks, including the social ecological model to accomplish these tasks. This model has been applied successfully to myriad of public health concerns. Its fundamental tenant is that risk and protective factors do not occur in isolation but exist at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels.

Rape culture is a term used to denote a culture in which rape and other sexual violence is common and in which prevalent attitudes, norms, practices, and media condone, normalize, excuse, or encourage rape or other violence against women. Within such paradigms, it is a well-established assertion of feminist social critics that such a thing as “trivial” or “harmless” sexism does not exist; for instance, telling a sexist joke is interpreted as fostering a misogynistic disrespect for women and an accompanying disregard for their well-being, which can ultimately make rape seem acceptable. The term is widely used within women’s studies and feminism (particularly radical feminism). In a 1992 paper in the Journal of Social Issues entitled “A Feminist Redefinition of Rape and Sexual Assault: Historical Foundations and Change,” Patricia Donat and John D’Emilio suggested that the term originated as “rape-supportive culture” in Susan Brownmiller’s 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*.¹

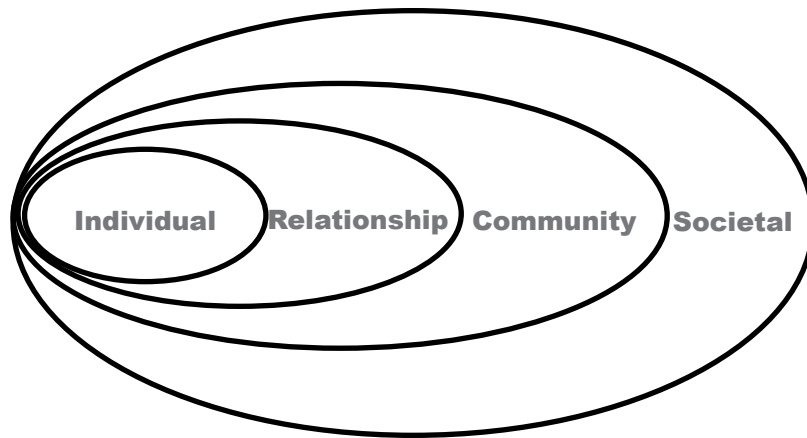


Rape is no excess, no aberration, no accident, no mistake—it embodies sexuality as the culture defines it. As long as these definitions remain intact—that is, as long as men are defined as sexual aggressors and women are defined as passive receptors lacking integrity—men who are exemplars of the norm will rape women

Andrea Dworkin (b. 1946), U.S. feminist, critic. Speech, March 1, 1975, at State University of New York, Stony Brook. “The Rape, Atrocity and the Boy Next Door,” ch. 4, *Our Blood* (1976)

The Social Ecological Model

as presented in Sexual violence prevention: beginning the dialogue. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2004.



Individual-level influences are biological and include personal history factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or perpetrator of violence. For example, factors such as alcohol and/or drug use; attitudes and beliefs that support sexual violence; impulsive and other antisocial tendencies; preference for impersonal sex; hostility towards women; and childhood history of sexual abuse or witnessing family violence may influence an individual's behavior choices that lead to perpetration of sexual violence (Dahlberg and Krug 2002). Interventions for individual-level influences are often designed to target social and cognitive skills and behavior and include approaches such as counseling, therapy, and educational training sessions (Powell et al.1999).

Interpersonal relationship-level influences are factors that increase risk as a result of relationships with peers, intimate partners, and family members. A person's closest social circle peers, partners, and family members—can shape the individual's behavior and range of experience (Dahlberg and Krug 2002). Interventions for interpersonal relationship-level influences could include family therapy, bystander intervention skill development, and parenting training (Powell et al. 1999).

Community-level influences are factors that increase risk based on community and social environments and include an individual's experiences and relationships with schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. For example, lack of sexual harassment policies in the workplace can send a message that sexual harassment is tolerated, and that there may be few or no consequences for those who harass others. Interventions for community-level influences are typically designed to impact the climate, systems, and policies in a given setting.

Societal-level influences are larger, macro-level factors that influence sexual violence such as gender inequality, religious or cultural belief systems, societal norms, and economic or social policies that create or sustain gaps and tensions between groups of people. For example, rape is more common in cultures that promote male sexual entitlement and support an ideology of male superiority (Dahlberg and Krug 2002). Interventions for societal-level influences typically involve collaborations by multiple partners to change laws and policies related to sexual violence or gender inequality. Another intervention would be to determine societal norms that accept violence and to identify strategies for changing those norms (Powell et al. 1999).²

The social ecological model as defined by public health theorist and applied to interpersonal violence is a framework which depicts violence as occurring across several inter-related spheres: individual, relationship, community and societal. In order to effectively prevent violence it is necessary to develop strategies which include components addressing each of the four areas.

So back to the question, “Is it possible to define sexual violence as a logical consequence of a rape culture while utilizing a public health approach to develop intervention and prevention strategies?” The short answer is “Yes”... at least in my opinion.

I came to this work and the anti-rape movement in 1992 as an advocate at Seattle Relief. At the time, Seattle Rape Relief was one of the oldest rape crisis centers in the country, founded in 1972. Our fundamental belief defined sexual violence as a direct result of a rape culture. Also incorporated was the principle that our culture was not only sexually violating, but sexist, racist, homophobic, classist, anti-Semitic and discriminatory toward people with disabilities. The resulting conclusion was that in order to eliminate rape we needed to be a social change organization. Our mission encompassed looking at social norms, deconstructing them, determining which systems, individuals and beliefs reinforce the rape culture and developing strategies to dismantle them. We were strident, vocal, and in many cases relentless in our rhetoric. In many ways we embodied the term, *radical feminist*.

In the fourteen years since then, my analysis has become more nuanced but the fundamental concept of sexual violence as a result of micro, mezzo and macro factors remains consistent. A comprehensive strategy to end rape requires interventions with individuals, families, communities and systems. Since 1997 my work within the movement has focused on sexual violence prevention, particularly community mobilization strategies. Much of my prevention work was developed utilizing the public health framework. Understanding sexual violence using the framework has been extremely useful at times and ineffective at others. However, the one component or model that has always been a good fit is the social ecological model.

The social ecological model validates what my direct experience and intuition tells me, “In order to prevent sexual violence, we must change the world.” Changing the world requires us to change not only the behavior of individuals but also their surrounding families, communities and society. In less radical terminology, one might say, “A successful sexual violence prevention strategy will include components which address contributing macro level factors, such as social norms, gender inequality and public policy in addition to individual interventions.” No matter which way I phrase it the underlying sentiment is the same. Sexual violence is a social and political issue. Ending it will require us to create solutions which effect change on a societal level. Or to say it more radically, ending sexual violence will require a revolution.

So... I guess the long answer is also, “Yes”... at least in my opinion.

revolution
n 1: a drastic and
far-reaching change in ways of thinking and
behaving

