

Increased interest in researching violence against women, along with prevention initiatives and growing public awareness of the problem, is to be welcomed. But could such attention trigger a backlash? There has been a general reluctance to acknowledge the realities of sexual assault and to abandon long-held myths about rape. This may set the scene for a hostile response to feminist research – as experienced in America in the early 1990s.

Revisiting America's "date rape" controversy

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National attention is currently focused on relationship violence, and this interest is to be welcomed. Often, however, heightened awareness of violence against women has sparked a strong adverse reaction to feminist research that attempts to describe the reality of intimate partner violence, particularly sexual violence. It would thus be wise for researchers and policy makers to be able to identify in advance a form of criticism that can be called "backlash rhetoric".

There are a number of reasons to anticipate public debate about the nature and extent of sexual violence in relationships. Chief among these is the level of interest and funding commitment from the Australian Government, in particular, the campaign *Violence Against Women – Australia Says No*. There is also a broad policy trend towards primary prevention and early intervention, which is now beginning to be applied to the issue of violence in the community. And we can look to the media's recent interest in various sexual assault issues – in 2003 there was animated discussion of "drink spiking", and so far 2004 has seen intense media coverage of allegations of rape against football players.

In short, trends in both politics and the media indicate the potential for sexual assault to be high on the public agenda.

This article briefly outlines the Australian policy context that indicates the emergence of relationship violence as a topical issue, and the reasons why we might expect a hostile reaction whenever violence in relationships (particularly sexual violence) makes its way onto the public agenda. It then revisits America's "date rape" debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and critically evaluates the aggressive response that emerged in that country against research indicating higher rates of rape in dating relationships than the media and general public were willing or able to accept. In particular, a detailed critique is offered of the inaccuracies and flaws that suffuse the most famous book of the "date rape" backlash, Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*. Finally, a number of the trademark arguments of backlash rhetoric are described, to enable researchers and policy makers to identify and respond to such arguments.

Policy context

There is a growing interest in primary prevention and early intervention strategies targeting young people with the aim of preventing various social ills and promoting positive or adaptive behaviours. The areas in which such projects are emerging include alcohol and other drug problems (Drug Policy Expert Committee 2000), school retention (South Australian Government 2004), crime prevention (DCPC, 1999), homelessness (Chamberlain and Johnson, 2003) and domestic violence (Indermaur et al. 1998).

The ideas of prevention and early intervention emerged from a medical model, and are often thought to rely upon attributing definable causes to specific problems, so that such causes can be targeted for intervention. Applying these strategies to social phenomena is difficult because the concept of causality cannot simply be transferred from the natural sciences to the social sciences. Moreover, it has been argued that insufficient attention is paid to the economic and social power relations underlying judgements that particular causal factors produce social ills. This has led, in crime control literature for example, to a focus on particular populations (often society's most powerless and vulnerable) as the source of a narrowly defined "crime problem", while white collar or corporate crime is "subsumed under a welter of 'background' conditions" (Hil 2000: 32).

Much of the difficulty of applying primary prevention and early intervention strategies to the problem of violence against women is that gender inequality has produced a situation in which the “causes” of violence are likely to be located in aspects of *women’s* behaviour, while men’s responsibility for perpetrating violence is mitigated (Carmody and Carrington 2000). Despite these imitations, and the fact that primary prevention in relation to violence against women is relatively new on the policy agenda, there is growing interest in community education (particularly targeting young people) as a primary prevention strategy to combat violence against women (Mulrone 2003).

Raising awareness in the general community about the extent and nature of sexual assault is a valuable primary prevention strategy. Often this involves acknowledging that sexual assault is more widespread than is commonly known, and that the stereotype of “stranger rape” is in fact the least common form of sexual violence. It may also include education about the harmful consequences of sexual assault, to challenge long-term assumptions that sexual violence does not have long-term and serious impacts. Where community education is concerned with early intervention as well as primary prevention, there may be information on early warning signs about violence in the relationship, and advice on how to avoid or rectify the problem. Finally, increasing understanding of the need for *promotion* as a complement to prevention may mean promoting positive steps towards achieving healthy relationships (for example, emphasising “respect”, or practical communication, or conflict management techniques).

Australian Government initiatives

After the success of the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Initiatives, the Australian Government announced in the 2001-2002 budget the *National Initiative to Combat Sexual Assault* – a \$16.5 million commitment over four years, which aims to foster the development of an Australian culture that will not tolerate violence. The initial focus was to establish a sound evidence base to ensure that the most effective policy and service responses can be developed and implemented. The next phase of the Initiative focuses on prevention and community education.

The *National Relationship Violence and Sexual Assault Campaign*, the “Australia says No” campaign, released in June 2004, targets people aged 16 to 24, and adopts a prevention and early intervention framework to reduce the incidence of violence and sexual assault within relationships. The Campaign aims to increase young people’s knowledge and understanding of what constitutes violence and sexual assault in relationships; it warns of the risks and consequences of violence, and promotes non-violent relationships.

The target group of the campaign, its framework and its goals make particular statements reflecting what is known about sexual assault:

- By focusing on relationship violence, the campaign rejects the myth that strangers perpetrate most acts of sexual violence, and recognises that violence is most likely to occur within a relationship.
- By emphasising the need for a “cultural shift in attitudes and beliefs” (in order, we may assume, to prevent violent relationships and promote non-violent ones), the campaign recognises that sexual assault and violence in

relationships is not always aberrant, but often appears to young people as a normal aspect of heterosexual relationship dynamics.

It is precisely the normalcy and acceptability of sexual assault and relationship violence that must be challenged if violence is to be reduced.

For researchers and those working with women who have experienced violence, none of these points is new or radical – rather, they reflect the evidence base about sexual assault. To that extent, they are also indicative of a well designed, appropriately targeted and potentially efficacious intervention. Why, then, might one predict a backlash against such a campaign?

Why a possible backlash?

The question of why primary prevention campaigns on contentious social issues have the capacity to provoke backlashes, particularly in the media, is a complicated one, but at least part of the answer lies in the tendency of such campaigns to contest long-standing and emotionally charged norms. Tension is bound to result when an entrenched belief system (about sexual relationships or gender roles) is challenged by new ways of thinking about those issues. Particularly in the area of violence against women and sexual assault, many factors contribute to an unwillingness to acknowledge and address the realities of sexual assault.

Feminists would offer a *gendered analysis* of backlashes against increasing community awareness of, and knowledge about, sexual assault. They would argue that the continuing currency of rape myths and victim blaming stereotypes fuel resistance to realistic portrayals of sexual violence. Many feminist positions will also contain a *political analysis* – in other words, a concern to elucidate the power dynamics that suffuse social relations. From a political perspective, backlashes arise when certain entrenched social arrangements or institutions (the family or the economy, for example) are destabilised in some way. Backlashes protect and stabilise the status quo, and, by extension, benefit those individuals or groups with a vested interest in current social structures and/or economic arrangements. In the case of sexual assault and intimate partner violence, feminists might claim that men’s interests are bound up with the continuing viability of current gender norms.

However we understand its dynamics, if a strong adverse reaction does emerge as a result of increasing awareness of sexual violence in relationships, it is important to be able to recognise the kinds of claims that typify a backlash response, in order to counter them effectively. The remainder of this article discusses the “date rape” controversy in America to give examples of typical backlash rhetoric in relation to sexual assault and suggest how to promote a more progressive understanding of sexual violence issues.

The American “date rape” backlash

The term “date rape”, while not used frequently in Australia, became ubiquitous in America during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In October 1985, *Ms Magazine* published the results of the “Project on Campus Sexual Assault”, a national survey of college students’ experiences of sexual victimisation and aggression, conducted by Mary P. Koss, with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health.

The research indicated that 27.5 per cent of American college women had experienced rape or attempted rape since the age of 14 years, and that 84 per cent knew their attacker. After publication of the findings, a great deal of attention began to be directed toward the issue of “date rape”, particularly on American college campuses.

A broad-based prevention movement sprang up: women raised awareness by speaking publicly about their experiences of sexual violence; colleges responded to student activism by adopting official sexual assault policies; self-defence training and relationship education was broadly offered and taken up. By the early 1990s, however, a tremendous backlash erupted, both over whether “date rape” was as frequent as Koss’s research indicated, and whether it was “real rape” at all.

Koss’s study was a nationally representative survey of 6,159 women and men, at 32 institutions. It found that 27.5 per cent of the women reported experiencing an attack that met the legal definition of rape (15.4 per cent) or attempted rape (12.1 per cent) since the age of 14 years. In 84 per cent of cases, the victim knew the offender, and 57 per cent of the attacks were committed by a “date”. Almost 8 per cent of the men reported perpetrating an act that met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape. Koss (1987: 169) discussed the reasons for the discrepancy between women’s experiences of victimisation and men’s self-reported rates of perpetration and concluded that: “Some men [may] fail to perceive accurately the degree of force and coercion that was involved in a particular sexual encounter or to interpret correctly a women’s non-consent and resistance.” These findings, and Robin Warshaw’s *I Never Called It Rape* (which adds women’s stories of date rape to Koss’ statistical research) were the two main targets of the backlash.

It should be emphasised that the backlash was not mobilised in the social science community – as Koss and Cook (1993) pointed out, the study has remained unchallenged in the professional literature since its publication. Koss’s findings reflect those of almost every campus sexual assault study, including the 1992 federally funded survey by the National Victim’s Centre, which found 14 per cent reporting of completed rape, *excluding* cases where victims were incapacitated or otherwise unable to consent (this finding is comparable to Koss’s 15.8 per cent).

Similarly, the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann et al. 1994; Michael et al. 1994) found that, since puberty, 22 per cent of women were forced by a man to do something sexually. Again, the perpetrator was most likely to be someone the women knew well (22 per cent), was in love with (46 per cent), or married to (9 per cent). Only 4 per cent of the women surveyed were attacked by a stranger. In addition, studies have been conducted specifically to test the validity of Koss’s research in light of methodological issues raised during the backlash – for example, why women do not name as rape experiences that meet the legal definition of rape (Fisher et al. 2003).

While Koss’s research was published in a leading, peer reviewed psychology journal, the attacks on her appeared in the popular press, and thus were not subjected to scientific scrutiny, and left Koss with no right of reply to point out the numerous inaccuracies that compromised her

critics’ work. The backlash emerged from sources such as *Playboy*, a young English graduate with no social science training, and the men’s movement. Neil Gilbert, a Berkeley academic who had never published anything about rape in a scholarly or peer-reviewed journal, wrote commentaries for the right-wing press; his stated intention in articles for the *Wall Street Journal* (6/27/91 and 6/29/93) was to defeat the Violence Against Women Act.

Roiphe’s “The Morning After”

Although they created a stir, ultimately there was limited scope for anti-feminist men such as Warren Farrell (who described date rape as “buyers remorse”) and sources like *Playboy*, to successfully pedal a denial of date rape. However, when Katie Roiphe, a 24-year-old English literature graduate, positioned her attack in the heroic style of a young woman’s lament at feminism’s betrayal, she found an eager audience. Roiphe’s work was repeatedly featured in the *New York Times*, including the *Sunday Magazine* (Roiphe 1991, 1993b), and she was widely feted by the media.

Broadly, Roiphe’s book, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*, argues that feminist concerns with rape, sexual harassment and pornography are conservative, and ultimately infantilise women. Some of the issues she touches on are part of ongoing debates in feminism about the way women put their feminism into action – for example, the questionable alliance between radical feminists and the American Right in the anti-pornography movement.

However, Roiphe’s argument is ultimately unreflective of these questions; she uses debates within feminism to differentiate her polemic from those which are unashamedly hostile towards women. The real appeal of her book lay in its systematic expression of backlash rhetoric against feminist accounts of women’s oppression. Roiphe’s flamboyant style runs to arguments along the lines of: If a man walks up to you in a diner and grabs your breast, do something smart, sassy and sexy – like pour a glass of milk on his head; don’t bore us with talk of gender inequality and sexual harassment (paraphrased from Roiphe 1993a: 101).

Roiphe dwelt a great deal on the image of feminists as rabid ideologues, using the pervasive threat of rape to promote a radical agenda bent on infantilising women. To this end, she heaped ridicule upon Koss’s findings that rape is more frequent on college campuses than previously thought, and painted a stereotyped image of the women involved in the rape prevention movement (hysterical, hirsute).

The inaccuracies in Roiphe’s criticisms of Koss result from two significant problems. First, Roiphe appears to have limited understanding of statistics, and social science research more generally. The rhetorical force of her denial of date rape is successful only because it is underwritten by a misrepresentation of Koss’s findings. Second, as Robin Warshaw (1988) points out, Roiphe apparently didn’t read Koss’s work, instead basing all her criticisms on Neil Gilbert’s 1992 article “Realities and mythologies of rape”, and replicating the errors made in that publication. (Gilbert has written a number of articles attacking Koss, beginning with “The phantom epidemic of sexual assault”, published in *The Public Interest* in 1991.)

Statistical errors

Roiphe (1993a: 52) asks: "If I was really standing in the middle of an epidemic, a crisis, if 25 per cent of my female friends were really being raped, wouldn't I know it?" Her reference to her friends "being raped" reveals her confusion between *prevalence* (how many women in a population have experienced rape or attempted rape¹) and *incidence* (the number of episodes occurring in a specified population during a defined time period²). Of course, 27.5 per cent of Roiphe's friends are not "being raped", either at any given moment, or in the course of a year. Nor are Roiphe's friends a scientific and representative sample. Nor would they be likely to tell Roiphe about the experience, given that 42 per cent of the victims never disclosed to *anyone* (and, we may speculate, Roiphe's obvious scepticism towards date rape may be something of a barrier to disclosure).

The most telling example of Roiphe's distortion of statistical information (whether an intentional strategy or unwitting error) is when she claims Koss's research suggested that, "sex is, in one in four cases, against your will". Again, after inflating the statistic to one in two, she claims the "real crisis" to be that feminists and researchers like Koss have "college students really believing, as they walk around . . . that they have a 50 per cent chance of being raped" (1993: 58). To speak of women having a "50 per cent chance" of being raped "as they walk around" simply makes no sense, either empirically or statistically. Given Roiphe's gross mishandling of statistical information, it is ironic to see her describe Koss's painstaking, meticulous, and indeed *cautious* research as "the stuff of airy political visions" (1993: 57).

"Who said it was rape?"

Roiphe follows Gilbert (1991, 1993) by arguing: "73 per cent of the women categorised as rape victims did not define their experience as 'rape'; it was Mary Koss, the psychologist who conducted the study, who did" (Roiphe 1993a: 52). In this way, Roiphe misrepresents the survey's findings on how women define their experiences of sexual violence, to imply two things: first, that these women were not really raped at all; and second, that it was Koss who defined their experiences as rape, according to a broad definition that included verbal pressure and drunken consensual sex. Roiphe ends up asserting: "There is a grey area in which someone's rape may be another person's bad night. Definitions become entangled in passionate ideological battles" (1993a: 54). This claim is staggeringly misleading, for a number of reasons.

First, it is not Koss who defines the victims' experiences as rape, *the law does*. The survey's respondents answered questions about whether, since the age of 14, they had had experiences that *met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape*. They were also asked whether they had consented to sex following other forms of coercion (such as misuse of authority, or continual pressure and arguments) but these responses *were not included in the rape and attempted rape prevalence calculation*. In fact, only respondents' most serious experience was counted in the 27.5 per cent prevalence estimate, so if any victims of completed rape had also experienced a separate incident of attempted rape, that experience would not have been counted. Warshaw (1994: xxiii-xxiv) is emphatic that: "Both Koss and I have heard non-rape incidents called rape, especially by a few hyperbolic students. We have seen occasional materials that support applying a broader

definition to rape, but *the empirical data in the survey does not*. Nor do we. Post-coital regret is not rape. Neither are offensive behaviours that do not fit the legal definition of rape" (emphasis added).

Second, women who are raped by acquaintances, dates or intimate partners are consistently unwilling or unable to name their experiences *as rape* (Heenan 2004). Roiphe not only ignores or is ignorant of this fact, she also fails to point out that 90 per cent of the women identified as rape victims in the survey defined their experience in one of the following ways: it was rape; it was some kind of crime, but they didn't know if it qualified as rape; it was sexual assault, but they didn't know if it was a crime. She also ignores the women's responses to the assault: 83 per cent reported attempting to reason with their attacker, and 70 per cent physically struggled; 11 per cent screamed for help, and 11 per cent attempted to flee.

"But they had sex with him again!"

Again following Gilbert, Roiphe implies that since 42 per cent of the victims had sex with the offender subsequent to the rape, they "cannot" have been raped. This is a particularly complex and fraught issue, but a number of points should be made.

Whether a woman has consensual sex with a man who previously raped her, does not alter the experience of rape. However, the survey did not determine whether sex that happened subsequent to the reported rape was consensual or not. The women who were raped had a mean average of 2.02 episodes. Koss found that 55 per cent of the men who admitted to actions that met the legal definition of rape said they had sex again with their victims; men who committed rape said they had used the same behaviour against the same woman, a mean average of 2.29 times. It is possible then, that a proportion of the sex that Roiphe and Gilbert point to as disproving the existence of date rape, are in fact more sexual assaults.

This interpretation of Koss's research is essentially about the phenomenon of *re-victimisation*. It has been widely recognised that a prior history of victimisation is the best predictor of whether a woman will experience sexual assault. That our culture finds it so hard to comprehend (and, indeed, believe in) re-victimisation reflects our propensity for victim blaming when it comes to sexual assault. There is a strongly punitive sentiment in Roiphe's work that if it "really was" rape, then victims should have "learnt something" from the experience. From this position, to be re-victimised is, once again, to be to blame for sexual assault.

Accepting the realities of sexual violence

The Morning After is an encyclopaedic manual of backlash strategy and tactics, and is therefore instructive, particularly where feminist accounts of sexual violence are at stake. If the issue of sexual assault in relationships makes it onto the public agenda in Australia, we should prepare ourselves for difficulty, even unwillingness, to accept the realities of sexual violence.

By examining Roiphe's polemic against Koss, we can identify four potential indicators that the challenge of talking about sexual violence has descended into outright backlash against feminist research.

- One of the first signs is flamboyant, polemical, and often inaccurate, reference to published statistics to imply that research on violence *must* be inaccurate or distorted.
- Following this will usually be an appeal to “commonsense” or some form of intuitive knowledge that violence and rape simply *cannot* be as prevalent as research indicates.
- Appeals to experience or commonsense typically imply that “we all know” rape to be infrequent, violent, and perpetrated by pathological men, usually strangers to the victim.
- Finally backlash rhetoric will invoke a range of rape myths to explain why research into rape contradicts this commonsense knowledge, and thus produces inflated incidence figures, as well as a different picture of the typical characteristics of rape (minimal or no violence, known perpetrator).

Few people peddling backlash rhetoric will claim outright that the women surveyed in a particular research project simply lied about their experiences of sexual violence. However, complex narratives emerge to explain how research on sexual assault is ultimately an ideological fabrication, and therefore does not require us to re-evaluate our understanding of the frequency and characteristics of rape. For example, Gilbert (1991: 5) explains the “phantom epidemic” of sexual assault in the following way: “An unprecedented number of women have become heads of single-parent families and have begun to receive the minimal payment of entry-level workers. Not surprisingly, many feel socially and economically oppressed. Advocacy numbers on sexual assault may resonate with feelings of being, not literally raped, but figuratively ‘screwed over’ by men”.

While Gilbert has stopped short of claiming that individual women who were surveyed “lied about rape”, he does suggest that the feminist account of rape resonates with women who are hysterical, psychologically unstable, vengeful and incapable of differentiating between fantasy and reality. In particular, his image of such women appeals to prejudice against socially and economically marginalised women, with the subtext being that women “cry rape” for economic reasons, or as a result of their own distorted sexual relationships.

When considering the kinds of narratives used to discredit research on rape, it is important to emphasise that theoretical and methodological disputes are a vital aspect of social science research, and such critiques of studies into sexual violence should be welcomed³. However, work which disregards research findings because of an insinuation that “women often lie about rape”, reflects a backlash response, not a desire to produce better research. Finally, we should be alert to claims that certain research (particularly feminist research) is “ideologically driven” or has an “agenda” while other kinds of knowledge (especially that supporting the status quo) is value free and ideologically neutral.

Increased interest in researching violence against women is to be welcomed, along with growing public awareness and prevention initiatives. To ensure that these initiatives have as much impact as possible, researchers and policy makers should bear in mind the potential for backlash against sexual assault research, and be prepared to respond to such rhetoric.

Endnotes

- 1 In Koss’s study, prevalence was measured from the age of 14, thereby generally excluding childhood sexual abuse.
- 2 Koss’s incidence rates for a 12-month period were 353 rapes, involving 207 different women, in a population of 3,187 women, during a year. During this time, there were also 533 attempted rapes on 323 victims.
- 3 Roiphe and Gilbert came closest to a methodological critique in disputing Koss’ survey question on intoxication, an issue which is notoriously difficult to frame in sexual violence research. Again however, their aim was clearly to discredit feminist claims about sexual assault, not make a contribution to research methodology.

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