Rape Culture.docx

Lynell Hodge
Lynell Hodge

Title: Passive Participants: Women Who Perpetuate Rape Culture

Abstract

Rape culture is a highly contested topic often framed by sexual assault as a central focus. As result, when feminists and social justice activists attempt to have a more expansive conversation to include coercive relationships or street harassment it isn’t always received well. In some cases the conversation is labeled as divisive. Having a rape culture discussion can be already contentious, there is also a subgroup of women who lean anti-rape culture rhetoric. Rape culture requires an understanding of the normalization of violence due to the pervasiveness of sexism. As a result, exploring why women deny rape culture’s social impact is crucial to dismantling patriarchal structures that encourage and maintain matrices of oppression.

Keywords: rape culture, sexism, benevolent sexism, horizontal hostility, victim blaming, respectability politics

Introduction

Rape culture is often framed as a woman’s issue. A power difference, where men are the aggressor and women are the victims. Deconstructing rape culture in a palpable manner means that one must understand the very complex and nuanced concept i.e. what it is and what it is not. In addition to understanding the multifaceted nature of rape culture it would be remiss to avoid the damaging discursive nature it holds in a patriarchal society. At is very core, rape culture is cultivated because it provides a space for dominance and oppression. Then, it is no peculiar to hear women defend and/or support rape culture narratives. Throughout this essay examples of how women (gender identified) perpetuate rape culture through horizontal hostility, victim blaming, and respectability politics because some level of benevolent sexism.

Context of Rape Culture
What is rape culture? This question is imperative to answer before understanding how and who plays a role in maintaining it in society. Rape culture is a sociological term that appeared in *The First Sourcebook for Women* which provided language to understand the pervasive nature of sexual violence. Rape culture doesn’t only mean sexual assault (rape), but rather includes the constant experience of intimidation and threats of sexual violence coupled with actual sexual violence. These experiences create an environment that is inherently a threat to safety to women and girls because in many ways rape culture is normalized. Rape culture is normalized in four ways social behaviors and practices, thought processes about rape, the way in which rape is discussed, and finally how sex and assault are represented culturally (Cole, 2018).

It’s important to understand these distinctions because rape culture also includes street harassment, defining masculinity in aggressive behaviors, condoning explicit jokes, invalidating rape accusations, victim blaming, and/or trivializing assault (Launius & Hassel, 2015). In this manner, both men and women prescribe to the belief then physical and emotional terrorism against women as norm (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005).

Rape culture doesn’t just begin. There’s a slow churning that starts with the prioritization of male sexual dominance. This dominance is maintained and valued in statements such as “boys will be boys”. Where does the prioritization begin for male dominance? The socialization process is a great starting point. Socialization is the process of learning how we behave. Our first teachers in the socialization process is our family. Bobby Harro provides a visual representation of the cycle of socialization.

Harro theorized each person is born into identity groups that have relationships to oppression. Some identities have more or less relationships to oppression due to inequitable social systems (Harro, 2000). The first circle the *first socialization* occurs when we are born, we
are nurtured by the people we love and trust. These norms establish expectations of how we ought to see the world. In this circle children begin to see their first glimpses of gender ranking through gender roles and/or norms. The next circle institutional/cultural socialization individuals are now exposed to rules, roles, and expectations beyond family. Expectations such as dress codes subtly communicate that girls must maintain a certain level of modesty to avoid distracting boys. The third circle enforcement girls are punished when they do not confirm to the rules set in place. The middle circle or the core is rooted in fear, which in this case would be representation of how rape culture is maintained. If rape culture is not confronted or addressed, girls and women will continue to live in fear and their lives will be threatened. In the cycle of socialization there is a framework to identify where the “learned behavior” of violence or dominance towards girls and women is taught and reinforced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Socialization</th>
<th>Institutions/Culture</th>
<th>Enforcement</th>
<th>Core</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beginning</strong></td>
<td>Churches--Practices</td>
<td>Sanctioned</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schools--Song lyrics</td>
<td>Stigmatized</td>
<td>Ignorance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Television--Language</td>
<td>Rewards and</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legal system--Media</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental health--Patterns of</td>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thought</td>
<td>Persecution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conscious or Unconscious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 adapted from Bobbie Harro Cycle of socialization

As an aforementioned example, school dress codes inherently penalize girls more so than they do boys. In a 2015 TIMES expose *How School Dress Codes Shame Girls and Perpetuate Rape Culture* highlights how schools (institutions) teach girls their bodies are dangerous and must maintain a sanctioned level of appropriateness. The dress codes is instituted to set and enforce the school’s expectations of appropriateness level. Dress codes are reinforced by stigmatizing
and punishing certain attire. The article suggests the dress codes are less about protecting
students, but rather social norms and patriarchy (Bates, 2015). This ideal must be shared
collectively to be communicated and sustained systemically in a culture.

_Misogyny vs Sexism_

_“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”_ Audre Lorde

It’s important to acknowledge that culturally making broad strokes about dominance can
be dangerous. And having a nuanced conversation about rape culture can be difficult,
understanding that the power dynamics can be fluid. Not all cases of dominance are men, women
can be in a place of dominance. Additionally, it’s important to note, that rape culture not only
impacts women and girls, but impacts nonbinary, queer, and the trans community. The available
research is still emerging for these communities, however, for the purpose of this essay, the focus
will primarily be centered on women and girls. Nonetheless, the intention is to understand that
rape culture is pervasive and it comes at the risk of girls, women, non-binary, queer, and
transwomen.

Why would women actively support rape culture? Catherine Kitchens makes the
following case:

_“Tolerance for rape? Rape is a horrific crime, and rapists are despised. We have strict
laws that Americans want to see enforced. Though rape is certainly a serious problem,
there’s no evidence that it’s considered a cultural norm. Twenty-first century America
does not have a rape culture; what we have is an out-of-control lobby leading the public
and our educational and political leaders down the wrong path. Rape-culture theory is
doing little to help victims, but its power to poison the minds of young women and lead
to hostile environments for innocent males is immense._

In Kitchens’ statement there is an acknowledgement rape occurs; however, how the environment
is created and maintained seems to be disconnected. Additionally, the argument centers the
innocence of men, rather than the reprehensible harm the act does to the victim. Which leads to
posit the question again why? Why would women actively support a cause that works against their own interest. To answer this question it was necessary to explore misogyny and sexism further.

Misogyny has Greek roots misein (to hate) and gynē (woman); there is a disregard for women or that women are less than men (Collins Dictionary, 2012). While sexism the term coined by Pauline Leet in the 60’s refers to discrimination based on sex. The two terms are not synonymous, misogyny is overt, while sexism is more elusive. Consequently, it’s important to understand the role of misogyny it requires men (if not all, most men) to be dominant over women. This dominance requires women to conform to a normative vision that is actively compliant to a patriarchal system that can be hostile and functions coercively. (Richardson, 2018). While misogyny is covert, it is not needed to maintain the patriarchal structure. Sexism on the other hand for some can feel natural and enforces norms, assumptions, and beliefs. Therein lies the difference, sexism is not coercive, it feels natural and often times can be represented in the broader culture by both men and women at a low risk (Manne, 2016).

Understanding the pervasiveness of rape culture rhetoric becomes more plausible. In order to avoid conflating the two sexism and misogyny-- misogynists are always sexist, but sexists are not always misogynists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misogyny Ideology</th>
<th>Sexism Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Men are superior to women</td>
<td>1. Seems natural and rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Imposes sex differences</td>
<td>2. Supports broader cultural norms and stereotypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Characterized by hostility and coercion</td>
<td>3. Does not rely on coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Concerned with compliance</td>
<td>4. Shapes beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ex: Rape culture doesn’t exist and men and the criminal system protects women who report sexual assault.</td>
<td>5. Ex: Rape culture doesn’t exist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2 Logic of Misogyny (Manne, 2016)*
If the key to understanding and dismantling rape culture is acknowledging its pervasiveness, then deconstructing sexism is paramount. In particular, women who hold ideals that are sexist, it may be advantageous to explore benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism suggests an evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive, but maintains ideologies that are damaging or stereotypes the non-dominant gender, for instance women should be caring and nurturing (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Benevolent sexism in some ways as mentioned previously seems natural. In a conversation, what is the harm in asserting women are caring and nurturing? The statement is not problematic, but when overlaid on other concerns of women’s choice, agency, safety, or threat of violence the ideology becomes problematic. In order for these norms to be maintained, women need to actively and passively participate and agree with the ideology because it disarms and reduces women's resistance to patriarchal systems (Manne, 2016). Women are divided into “acceptable” and “unacceptable” types; women who are considered acceptable fulfill conventional gender roles are elevated in society and rewarded, whereas women who reject conventional gender roles are scrutinized and penalized (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Gender roles then perhaps become a part a woman’s identity for instance women should be modest and/or cater to the male ego. Thus, normalizing and confirming to these conventional gender ideals is necessary to maintain patriarchal norms (Chemaly, 2018). Denial of rape culture to maintain sexism may seem like a reach; although, if you believe in gendered roles for women, maybe not so much there could be implicit bias. Chemaly (2018), describes this focus on individual attributes of womanhood versus the collective judgement of what it means to be women in the greater society as a type of identity protective cognition. This position relies on women avoiding social judgements, aligning with stereotypical information to render decision
about their gendered identity (Calogero & Jost, 2011). The justification to align with cultural norms even at the risk of one’s own interest also relies the system will protect you in other circumstances. Consensus seeking, conservatism, higher tolerance for ambiguity and nonconformity is consistent with preserving the status quo (Calogero & Jost, 2011). Benevolent sexism, much like identity protective cognition is devoid of responsibility and allows for victim blaming, horizontal hostility, and respectability politics in rape culture conversations.

Women who are willing participants in conserving patriarchy muchless sexism is difficult, nonetheless speaks the pervasiveness of rape culture. It’s important to continue to have nuanced conversations and challenge systems, but also provide context within the framework. Consequently, in this manner, this section will be used to explore how rape culture is supported by women is three specific ways- horizontal hostility, victim blaming, and respectability politics. These three concepts are ways women passively leverage benevolent sexism therein by extension deny the discursive effects of rape culture.

*Horizontal Hostility*

Horizontal hostility is a form of internal oppression and can be defined as members of a marginalized group policing each other’s behavior because it identifies with values of the dominant group a term coined by feminist Florynce Kennedy (Kennedy, 1970). Horizontal hostility can also be described as simply as group in fighting because there is a practice of rejection from some members within the group (White & Langer, 1999). The action is based on status, reinforcing social norms, and rooted in maintaining patriarchy’s status quo (Launius & Hassel, 2015, pg. 87). Horizontal hostility is a powerful norms to assert women's behavior by manifesting itself not only in hostility, but also in the cover to effectively preserving social inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Gender systems are created to surveil behavior; for instance,
women would comment and/or judge the sexual conduct of other women while justifying their own (Launius & Hassel, 2015).

Horizontal hostility can involve bullying into submission as a result of holding someone responsible for one's own oppression. The act of horizontal hostility involve attempts to silence criticism or even outright denial (Chemaly, 2018). Kennedy saw horizontal hostility as a form of ‘power-over’ enacted by women against women, and that it by virtue serves the interests of the oppressor (1970). An example of horizontal hostility is name calling. Women are bombarded with various names ‘bitch’, ‘thot’, ‘slut’, ‘ho’, ‘whore’ and the list goes on. These names can be weaponized to diminish woman’s character and certainly assert power. When women lob these names at each other is a form psychological predicates which is the act to use language with the purpose to incite a reaction (Penelope, 1992). In conversations about rape culture using this strategy is effective not only to assert dominance, but to also disarm another woman by focusing on her behavior. This scenario systemically pit women against each other rather than focuses on how the system in place inherently disenfranchises women collectively. When women participate in horizontal hostility they reinforce sexism.

Aziz Ansari was embroiled in a scandal earlier this year, when an anonymous young woman published her experience after a date. The young woman described her experience as “aggressive advances” (Framke, 2018). Grace (her anonymous name) said she felt pressured to go along with Ansari’s request to perform oral sex for her own safety. After the news of her experience was public Ansari didn’t respond right away. He didn’t have to because several women chimed in for him. CNN anchor Ashleigh Banfield was one woman who responded on air. Banfield shared her opinion “this was a bad date” and “this was not rape” (CNN, 2018). This example provides a specific example where Banfield used her position of power to tell another
women who had an experience what she experienced the her feelings were in essence wrong. Banfield suggested that the woman should not muddy the waters of the #MeToo movement with baseless accusations because “real accusations” needed the attention. Banfield received some pushback, but she also had support from other women who agreed with her assessment. What Banfield (and others) missed in this exchange was that coercive dating dynamics and the need for women to make decisions for safety purposes is very much a conversation women should have nationally. The Ansari story was and is a prime example of sexism, benevolent sexism, and horizontal hostility occurring simultaneously. Men didn’t need to participate in this conversation because women did the heavy lifting and women again are at risk. Rape culture continues to be normalized.

*Victim Blaming*

Victim blaming is a function of the model of blame or path model of blame. Moral psychologists deduce, the model of blame explains judgements both cognitively and socially (Glick & Fiske, 2001). There are three types of moral judgements: (1) setting affirming norms, (2) evaluating behaviors, and (3) evaluating responsibility of blame (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). When victim blaming occurs the observer assigns some responsibility to the victim in part (Niemi & Young, 2014). This occurrence is done by the observers subjective judgement of evaluating the victim’s behavior and assessing her responsibility. Moral judgement is another form of regulation, thus observers are expecting victims to act in accordance with the prevailing social norms (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). Narratives such as women are obligated to keep themselves pure and to prevent themselves from being sexual assault victims provides the support in the model of blame (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Therefore, victim blaming is defined as the victim of a crime or any wrongful act being held entirely or partially at fault for
the harm they experienced (Niemi & Young, 2014). Victim blaming requires assessing the victim for the perpetrator’s action.

Bill Cosby, famous comedian who reportedly for decades drugged and assaulted dozens of women. Cosby in a deposition, admitted to using sedatives or quaaludes before assaulting his victims. Women who came forward to testify in the 2018 retrial were very much on trial as Cosby. Cosby’s lawyer Kathleen Bliss attempted to discredit victims by characterizing one as promiscuous. Bliss was quoted as saying “she slept with almost every single man on the planet” when cross examining Janice Dickinson (North, 2018). This strategy follows the model of blame theory by casting moral judgement by the observer to create doubt or to devalue the victim’s experience. The technique is more effective and should be more compelling when it comes from a woman directed to another woman. Bliss tried to discredit a rape victim’s account of what happened by using her sexual history. Not only does this strategy conflate issues, it assumes the victim is partially responsible for the traumatic event, it also shifts responsibility away from the perpetrator. In Bliss’s analysis, Ms. Dickinson violated the gendered expectation women should not have several partners and if she did/does, the likelihood of an assault increases should also her fault. Bliss never says Ms. Dickinson wasn’t assaulted but focused on her sexual history as a counter argument to her client’s behavior. To what end? Her client admitted to drugging his victims; therefore, an any attempt to discredit a victim had to rely on a juror supporting Bliss’s moral judgement and victim blaming tactic.

In the end, the evidence and testimony from the victims resulted in a guilty verdict. Cosby was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but he still still garnered support from the Black community. Phylicia Rashad, Cosby’s on screen wife in an abc interview was quoted saying “What you’re seeing is the destruction of a legacy. And I think it’s orchestrated. I don’t know
why or who’s doing it, but it’s the legacy. And it’s a legacy that is so important to the culture.” (abcNews, 2015). Again, this opinion supports victim blaming by centering the consequences of perpetrator’s behavior on the victims. In the interview, Rashad said she’s a woman, so she understands that it can happen. However, it was not the Bill Cosby she knew. Abusers can be kind and still be abusers. Rape culture is normalized even with evidence.

*Respectability Politics*

The last concept to cement the discussion on why women may participate in maintaining rape culture is the concept of respectability politics. Similar to horizontal hostility, respectability politics is the sentiment that marginalized groups must demonstrate they adhere to normative values before they are granted rights or access to resources by the dominant group(s) (Strolovitch & Crowder, 2018). Respectability politics purpose is representation while simultaneously disproving dominant stereotypes about the group by regulating behavior with socially acceptable norms (Gould, 2009). Activists warn the dangers of respectability politics because the power it can yield when negotiating the basic humanity of group’s worth and acceptance (Strolovitch & Crowder, 2018). Respectability politics allows for space to treat groups as second class citizens if they do not conform (Strolovitch & Crowder, 2018). For girls and women what is communicated in respectability politics is how you should behave, present yourself, and represent your subgroup.

Ariana Grande fell victim to respectability politics during her performance at Aretha Franklin’s funeral. Grande was invited to perform to commemorate an icon’s legacy; however, her performance was overshadowed by what she wore. PEOPLE (Merret, 2018) magazine screened grabbed tweets many from women commenting on the ‘appropriateness’ of her dress. Below are just a few of the tweets:
・ “I need to know who told Ariana Grande should could wear a shirt-length dress to church for anything, let alone of all things Aretha's funeral?”
・ “There’s no way Ariana Grande would have made it to the stage of my childhood church with a dress that short."
・ “Detroit. Ariana Grande. Has. On. A. Black. Mini. Dress. Lord Have Mercy! At the funeral singing Aretha’s Natural Woman. Evidently, she has never been in an African American Church in Detroit or elsewhere.”
・ “Jennifer Hudson in funeral chic. Take note Ariana Grande. This is how you dress for a Black funeral, not like you going to da club.”

These tweets are example there is a time and place to present yourself in a certain manner.

Grande’s dress violated funeral protocol and was met with criticism as seen as above. These messages were reinforced by other women that Grande should be covered when paying respect. In not doing so, Grande was disrespecting the space and not representing women well. It’s important to point out during this performance, Grande was groped by a bishop at this church. Modesty in the respectability politics framework does not protect girls and women’s bodies from being violated. Therefore, women need to be keenly aware participating in this type of regulation is not helpful to women rather allegiance to temperance (Collins, 2005) and more often sexist values. Then rape culture can not be confronted.

**Implications**

How can we have better conversations about rape culture? How is this information all related? How can we minimize the contention to understanding socially why it happens? Contextually rape culture is such a broad concept to understand and it’s necessary to break down the concept into segments for nuanced and productive conversations.

**Implication #1 Matrix of Oppression**

Throughout this essay the goal was to provide a framework of why women would participate in denying rape culture exists or its harmful effect. Kitchens’ statement was an
example to set the stage of the complex nature of the how difficult it can be to discuss this topic.

Rape culture impacts women beyond sexual assault so it was necessary to explore the root cause of patriarchal structures. The matrix of oppression functions within patriarchy because it is hegemonic domain (Collins, 2005). Consequently, oppression can and will be replicated in different forms because power begets power. Rape culture cannot be addressed without exploring the oppression of women, but further analysis must be conducted of how women are also replicating oppression due to their own privileges. Horizontal hostility, victim blaming, and respectability politics are three examples where women emulate oppression through self regulation and confirming to values that work against their on interests. In some ways when women support these narratives could it be their own internalized oppression.

**Implication #2 Mystification of Normalized Threat to Safety**

Working within the matrix of oppression the literature suggests that there are a myriad of sociological terms to explain the threat to safety women. For instance, in the Ansari case Bansfield’s unwillingness to be open to include Grace’s account in a conversation about men’s abuse of power. Coercive dynamics in a relationships have become normalized that a respected journalist could feel comfortable to say on air “this was a bad date”. Banfield did not consider the decision making process to acquiesce in order to minimize any further harm. To center the conversation on harming Ansari’s career or the victim could have left at anytime is a false equivalency. The victim didn’t see leaving as an option and she shared her story as shed led that the abuse of power comes in different forms.

**Recommendations**

How do we reconcile when there are so many factors to maintain rape culture, including the support of women? It requires a level of awareness and support from men and women to
continuously address rape culture on an individual, social, and structural level. Below are several recommendations to consider when addressing rape culture:

- Update language to ensure you are not victim blaming;
- Confront behavior and/or language that disenfranchises women and girls, non-binary, and transgender individuals;
- Expand understanding rape culture is beyond assault and is rather a threat to safety;
- Work to understand and dismantle social relations to matrix of domination;
- Resist participating in and address situations when horizontal hostility and respectability politics occur;
- Identify areas of benevolent sexism personally and socially; and finally
- Listen and believe women as they tell their stories;

**Conclusion**

*When we drop fear, we can draw nearer to people, we can draw nearer to the earth, we can draw nearer to all the heavenly creatures that surround us.* bell hooks

In conclusion, rape culture to its core, is a normalization of emotional terrorism lobbied primarily against girls and women. The environment needed for rape culture to be maintained is where violence and the normalization of threats to safety are questioned. Women’s stories of assault are questioned for a number of reasons because of choices they made or past sexual behaviors, rather than the behavior of the perpetrator’s actions. While accounts of coercion is minimized. Or, women attire if not deemed appropriate her safety can be questioned. As if her attire brought her safety into question. These examples are just a few examples of the underbelly of why rape culture is pervasive.

To complicate matters even more, having to contend with women also piling on to discount accounts of rape culture. Naturally, the thought would be all women would be aligned with rape culture is bad for all women. However, someone who ascribes to respectability politics
or horizontal hostility safeguard social norms through benevolent sexism. The need for regulation in order to confirm to mainstream norms still places women at a disadvantage.

Lastly, the purpose of this essay was to analyze why women would side against their own interests. And to be perfectly honest, it’s complicated. The literature suggests that rape culture is so entrenched in the culture it is almost hard to pinpoint. Women who participate in anti-rape culture rhetoric may not always understand how their perspective intersects with sexism and even oppression. Therefore, continued analysis is necessary to understand why it occurs to further discern how to enhance conversations.
References


