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## **Making Sense of Male Rape: Constructions Of Gender, Sexuality and the Experience of Rape Victims**

### **Abstract**

This study reports a preliminary investigation into accounting practices for male rape in conversation. Two main issues are raised for discussion in response to a male rape incident: the experience of the rape act and societal responses to male victims. A 'hierarchy of suffering' is established where rape is judged to be worse for 'heterosexual' men than it is for 'women' or 'gay' men. Hegemonic, phallogocentric representations of heterosexuality are mobilized to argue that acts of rape and consensual intercourse are the same for 'gay' men and 'women' and therefore less traumatic than for 'heterosexual' men. This obscures the violence of rape for gay men and women and exonerates perpetrators by minimizing injury sustained. Participants also argue that heterosexual victims are likely to experience ridicule for having departed from hegemonic masculinity. Arguments are constructed to avoid charges of being dismissive towards women and gay men and of victim blaming in relation to heterosexual men.

**Key words: male rape; conversation; accounts; discourse analysis; gender; hegemonic masculinity; phallogocentric heterosexuality.**

## Introduction

In 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act redefined rape within English Law to take account of male as well as female victims. Crime statistics show that in the United Kingdom in 1995, 150 such offences against men were recorded, rising to 231 in 1996<sup>1</sup> (Adler, 2000). It is widely recognised, however, that official statistics on male rape greatly underestimate the number of actual incidences of non-consensual sex between adult men<sup>2</sup>. The first major UK epidemiological study reported an incidence figure for male rape of 3% in the general population (Coxell et al, 1999) and there is evidence to suggest that this figure may be much higher when sampled in gay communities (Coxell et al, 1999; Hickson et al, 1994) or in college populations (Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, 1994).

Male rape survivors describe their experience of rape as life threatening, de-humanising and humiliating (e.g. Groth and Burgess, 1980; Kaufman et al, 1980; Goyer and Eddleman, 1984; Myers, 1989; Garnets et al 1990). The clinical literature indicates that survivors can experience long-lasting and severe physical and psychological reactions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (Isely and Gehrenbeck-Shim, 1997; Rogers, 1997; Turner, 2000) and disruption in their social and sexual identity and relationships. Yet, the majority of male rapes are never reported to the authorities or to friends and family members (Coxell et al, 1999; Hillman et al; King and Woollett, 1997).

The American Medical Association characterizes male rape as a 'silent-violent epidemic' (1995) and Lees argues that male rape is, "one of the most underreported serious crimes in Britain." (Lees, 1997: 89). There is a consensus in the UK and US male rape literature that the sexual victimisation of men is a serious, yet largely 'invisible' problem in society (Isely, 1998). Overwhelmingly, male rape survivors remain silent, hidden and

isolated (Donaldson, 1990; McMullen, 1990; Rochman, 1991; Scarce, 1997; Davies, 2000) often without counseling or medical support (Hillman et al, 1990).

According to the literature, there are several powerful 'report defense elements' (McMullen, 1990) that prohibit the reporting of a male rape experience, most of which have to do with actual or perceived societal responses. Survivor's accounts indicate that normative expectations about masculinity discourage men from reporting sexual victimization for fear of being ridiculed as weak or inadequate. Some survivors remain silent rather than risk being labeled as a 'closet homosexual', bi-sexual, or as promiscuous and thus somehow 'deserving' of rape (Scarce, 1997; Ussher, 1997; West, 2000). Social stigmatization of victims in the aftermath of rape has been identified as a form of 'secondary victimisation' (Williams, 1984) and has been directly linked to the under-reporting of rape and post-rape trauma. As such, closer investigation of societal responses to male rape is a pressing concern.

In the main, psychologists have approached this task from within the social cognition paradigm. A small number of experimental studies on rape perception, examining interpretations of the causes of male rape or describing and measuring attitudes towards male rape, have now entered the literature. In a typical causal attribution study, male and female participants are required to read one of several hypothetical rape descriptions in which variables thought to influence attribution judgments (e.g. gender of victim, 'respectability', familiarity with assailant) are manipulated. Participants are then asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a range of statements to measure issues such as the apportionment of blame, fault or responsibility, attributions of causality, judgments about what 'type of person' the victim is and the victim's likely response to the rape experience (e.g. the amount of pleasure or trauma the victim experienced).

The findings from this type of study indicate that, as in female rape (Pollard, 1992), participants tend to assign fairly modest levels of responsibility to victims. Nevertheless, despite the relatively low overall mean scores this research has highlighted a number of fairly consistent findings indicating a pattern in attribution judgements according to the gender of observers and characteristics and behaviour of the depicted victim. For example, in terms of observer gender, most studies show that men tend to attribute more blame to male rape victims than women do (McCaul et al, 1990; Whatley and Riggio, 1993; Mitchell et al, 1999) and McCaul et al's research showed that male observers are more likely than female observers to judge that any rape victim (male or female) derives sexual pleasure from a rape attack (McCaul et al, 1990).

In terms of the characteristics and behaviour of victims, male victims tend to be blamed relatively less than female victims. This may be because men are not expected to foresee rape as a potential occurrence as readily as female victims are (McCaul et al; Schneider et al, 1994; Perrott and Webber, 1996; Anderson, 1999). On the other hand, it is a commonplace assumption that women should restrict their behaviour according to societal expectations of 'respectable femininity' (dress modestly, don't go out unaccompanied at night etc.) to regulate male desire and 'prevent' rape (Griffin, 1971; Riger and Gordon, 1979). Perrott and Webber (1996) found that male victims (more than female victims) are held responsible for rape on account of their behaviour during an attack (e.g. observers think that men should be able to fight off attackers or escape from the scene) whereas female victims are attributed more blame on account of their internal characteristics<sup>3</sup>(e.g. observers think that women are more likely to put themselves into jeopardy than are men).

There is also a small literature on attitudes towards male rape where, most notably, the

level of support in different populations or occupational groups for a limited range of explicitly stated, researcher-defined 'myths' about male rape<sup>3</sup> (e.g. "Adult males only get raped in prison"; "Most men who are raped are homosexuals" or "men are too strong to be overpowered") is measured. Burt defined rape myths in relation to female rape as, "prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists" (Burt, 1980, p.217). Rape myths are considered to contribute to the cultural acceptance of sexual violence (and the maintenance of patriarchy) by framing rape as a sexual rather than violent act and by providing a repertoire of justification and exoneration for acts of rape (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Russell, 1982; Scully, 1990; Ussher, 1997; Doherty and Anderson, 1998).

The results from these studies tend to indicate fairly low levels of agreement with the rape myths as presented but show that there are significant differences in level of agreement with the different rape myth statements and between different categories of respondents. For example Tewksbury and Adkins (1992) found that, amongst emergency room personnel, parents more strongly reject myths that imply a degree of victim blame than do non-parents. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1992) report significant differences in degree of rape myth acceptance according to the gender of observers and the sex of the perpetrator depicted in the rape myth statements. Female respondents were more extreme in their disagreement with the male rape myth statements than were the male respondents but all participants responded less sympathetically when the perpetrator was depicted as a woman. Smith et al (1988) also showed that men tend to be rated as less deserving of sympathy when raped by a female as opposed to a male stranger.

It is indisputable that rape perception studies are useful in providing a systematic examination of the factors that effect the perception of rape events and in allowing a

comparison of the views held about rape according to demographic location or professional status. However, these quantitative ‘paper and pencil’ studies are also undoubtedly limited in their ability to offer insight into dynamic accounting practices for male rape in social interaction. This is because the participants in attribution experiments and attitude surveys are not permitted to dispute or discuss, as is the case in everyday life, the elements of a rape scenario, to set the agenda for discussion, support or refute a tentative explanation or to express hedged or even contradictory responses to attitude statements (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Antaki, 1994). Nor is it possible to capture the sense in which, in social interaction, attitudes beliefs and explanations are skilfully constructed and defended as part of broader activity sequences such as evaluating the experience of the actors in an event or subtly exonerating the actions of an alleged perpetrator. For example, in relation to female rape, it has been noted that rape claims can be ‘explained away’ by reframing what happened as normative ‘sex’ (Burt and Estep 1981; Donnelly and Kenyon, 1996; Ussher, 1997). Similarly, the actions of an accused rapist could, in theory, be indirectly justified by claiming that the alleged victim did not suffer greatly, or was responsible for what happened and is therefore not particularly deserving of sympathy (Burt and Estep, 1981; Semin and Manstead, 1983).

In this study, the analysis is based on unconstrained discussion on the topic of male rape and we treat the accounts offered as constructive and action-oriented. Our central concern is the way in which mundane accounting practices produce or resist a ‘rape supportive’ social order in relation to the sexual victimisation of men. This study is explicitly grounded in the ongoing political struggle for improved treatment and services for rape victims and our hope is that this analysis may go some way towards informing that struggle

(Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995). Our focus on talk allows us to uncover, “the practical reasoning through which the taken-for-granted world is accomplished (and resisted) and the resources members have for sustaining a social world” (Kitzinger, 2000: 173). We aim to trace the relationship of accounting practices for male rape to power relations and the fabric of everyday life.

### **Data Collection**

Women and men walking together<sup>4</sup> on the street outside the Psychology Departments at Sheffield and Birmingham Universities, United Kingdom, were asked to participate in research concerning opinions on rape. A total of thirty male-female dyads were recruited. Approximately 70 per cent of the participants were students and their ages ranged between 18-45 (the mean age was 21.5 years).

Participants were shown to a comfortable room with a tape recorder set up and ready for use. Full anonymity was guaranteed and the participants were informed that they were free to leave at their discretion. They were asked to read a male rape vignette (reproduced below), then to discuss it and reach a conclusion if possible. The advantage of using a vignette to elicit conversation as opposed to an interviewer is that it allows participants to discuss issues pertinent to male rape (along with the meaning or significance of the task and any information included in the vignette) and to interact with each other spontaneously within the research setting.

The circumstances of the assault described in the vignette were derived from an incident of male rape that was widely reported in the local media three years ago. The vignette was presented in the form of a newspaper article. The key features of the incident



(e.g. the victim taking a short cut, the victim being suddenly accosted and dragged away from the main path) were preserved in the vignette.

“A 22 year old single man testified in court that he was raped in the campus of a middle-sized university where he was attending as a full-time student. On the evening of the attack, the man had taken a short-cut home through the campus after attending an exercise class. The alleged rape took place at 9.30 p.m., when the man was attacked and dragged away from the main path and sexually assaulted. The man told the court that he was aware of a man walking behind him but this had not aroused any suspicion. The man’s shouts from the attack were heard by a passer-by who chased the attacker away. This passer-by subsequently identified the accused in the police line up. The man had been raped once before about one year prior to this attack. It was known that five other men had been sexually assaulted on the campus in the past 6 months before this alleged attack took place”<sup>5</sup>.

The literature indicates that there is considerable variation in the circumstances of male rape and in the characteristics of victims and perpetrators. This vignette is not therefore intended to represent a ‘typical’ male rape; it is one possible version of male rape, which provides a starting point for discussion. The particular details provided will however, inevitably impact on both the scope of the conversations and the explanations offered (Antaki, 1994) – precisely how becomes a topic for analysis itself.

The conversations lasted on average for fifteen minutes and were conducted without the researcher being present. The tapes were transcribed verbatim for content, overlapping speech, un-timed pauses (distinctions were made between long and short pauses), interruptions and ‘back channels’.

## **Analysis**

The aim of this analysis is to explore the ‘socially approved vocabularies’ (Antaki, 1994) or culturally shared ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Edley, 2000) utilized in the construction and evaluation of male rape. Particular attention is paid to the speakers' manipulation of membership category labels and descriptions of membership features (Wowk, 1984; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). The analysis explores how the participants display and ascribe category memberships to themselves and the actors in the vignette. We consider how the deployment of identity categories is connected to the accomplishment of interactional business, such as the management of motives and reasons for saying things and doing things (Edwards, 1998). Throughout, analytic attention is paid to the social and rhetorical organisation of the unfolding accounts (Antaki, 1994; Wetherell, 1998; Kitzinger, 2000)

### ***Extract 1***

1. Fay: Have you seen *Pulp Fiction*?
2. Sam: Yeah
3. Fay: It reminds me of that where that man gets raped
4. Sam: Oh yeah, I know what you mean
5. Fay: That's disgusting, it's really horrible
6. Sam: Do you think it's worse a man getting raped than a women getting raped?
7. Fay: No, no because I can't imagine a man getting raped but I can think of a women getting raped. Well I can't but it means more to me thinking of a women getting raped and it probably means more to you thinking of a man getting raped
8. Sam: Yeah, I don't know
9. Fay: What about you?

10. Sam: It's just really pretty horrible anyway isn't it (Fay: oh yeah) you can't really put a measure on it cos like, I mean I suppose it's not as bad as being murdered in a way because you have a life afterwards
11. Fay: But it's not really a life is it
12. Sam: Well it is, I mean I think you can live through that sort of thing. I mean I know a girl that got raped (Fay: oh my God) and she's fine really you know, she's fine really she's just a normal person
13. Fay: Oh that's really good
14. Sam: And I think most people are but it's just a really traumatic incident when it actually happens
15. Fay: Yeah yeah, it's got to leave bad memories but I mean it could almost be worse for a man because it must be so hard to talk about it for a man
16. Sam: Well yes I suppose it's the fact that if you're heterosexual man being raped then that would seem to be worse. It's weird, it's hard to say quite why
17. Fay: You couldn't
18. Sam: I mean partially there's the social thing of you'd be less likely to get support from people. I mean I don't know if you really would or not but you get the feeling perhaps that because of all the macho image and all that stuff and like people might take it more as, you know a joke or something even though it's not at all
19. Fay: And it's just not publicised that kind of thing is it, a man getting raped.
20. Sam: I don't know
21. Fay: Well, people are much more aware of women being raped and can probably talk about it
22. Sam: Well many more women do get raped I think
23. Fay: Yeah. I've not got. I mean you know what you said before about, it's easier, I mean harder for a heterosexual man to talk about it. You know, if it's happened to him. I've not really got anything against homosexual men
24. Sam: Well no
25. Fay: That's all. Just get that bit straight
26. Sam: Yeah, no I don't have a problem with it but erm, the point I was making more was that, I mean not even necessarily just a heterosexual man but someone who is to some degree homophobic or something, it would be more traumatic than, although I don't know if it really would because it's still someone forcing sex on you you know, which would be nightmarish
27. Fay: I can see your point though, because they're not going to experience that sort of thing before, it's going to be one heck of a shock

At the start of this extract Fay and Sam discover a shared point of reference for their discussion of male rape. They establish that they have both seen the film *Pulp Fiction* in which an incident of male rape is depicted. Fay evaluates the rape in *Pulp Fiction* as “disgusting” and “really horrible” (turn 5). This comment prompts Sam to ask Fay whether she thinks a man getting raped is “worse” than a “woman getting raped” (turn 6). Fay does not offer a direct answer to Sam’s question. She instead claims that she “can’t imagine a man getting raped”. She argues that, as a woman, she is not in a position to make a judgment about the experience of rape for men. Sam agrees that male rape “means more to him” (turn 7), but hedges that agreement with the addition of “I don’t know”. This weak agreement with Fay’s assertion (that, as a man, male rape surely means more to Sam) functions to keep the discussion of the relative severity of male and female rape ‘live’. In the next turn it prompts Fay to invite Sam to express his views on the matter. She does this by reflecting Sam's original question (posed in turn 6) back to him, “What about you?” (turn 9).

At this point, the floor is wide open for Sam to offer his view on whether the experience of rape is worse for men or for women. However, he declines the opportunity to make this evaluation and instead offers the view that all rape is, “pretty horrible anyway” (turn 10). He resists the notion that it is possible to quantify and rank the severity of any particular rape experience in comparison to others by arguing that, “you can’t really put a measure on it” (turn 10). Thus, having initially raised for discussion the issue of whether rape is “worse” for men or women (in turn 6), Sam now puts forward a possible counter-argument, that all rape experiences must be treated as equally bad. This argument is developed and sustained by grouping rape experiences together for comparison to other forms of assault, such as murder. In this case, rape is evaluated as “not as bad” as murder because “you have a life afterwards”.

The articulation of this argument, that all rapes should be treated as equally "traumatic", plays an important role in the construction of speaker identity in this part of the conversation. Sam displays himself as the kind of person who appreciates the grave nature of rape, as the kind of person who is, in principle, equally sympathetic to all categories of rape victim. Having established credentials as a basically 'sympathetic' person, the way is paved for the re-introduction of Sam's still hanging question from turn 6: whether it is worse a man getting raped than a woman getting raped. Sam and Fay can now embark on a discussion of the reasons why rape "could almost be worse" for men, without appearing unduly unsympathetic towards any other category of victim.

In the first half of the extract, the participants discuss rape in relation to the generic categories of 'men' and 'women'. Turn 16, however, marks a crucial point in the discussion. Sam introduces the idea that the *sexuality* of a male rape victim may be a significant factor when making judgments about the severity of a rape experience. The proposition that rape may be "worse" for a man is thus refined by Sam to suggest that rape for *heterosexual* men is worse than for women and, by implication, homosexual men<sup>6</sup>. In the rest of the extract, arguments are presented firstly that heterosexual male rape victims will suffer more ridicule at the hands of society and secondly that the rape act itself will be more traumatic for heterosexual men than it is for other categories of victims. We will deal with the construction and consequences of these two arguments in turn.

Fay suggests in turn 15 that rape may "almost be worse for a man because it must be so hard to talk about it for a man". In turn 18 Sam develops this line of argument by suggesting that heterosexual men are less likely to get "support from people" because of "all the macho image and all that stuff... people might take it more as a joke or something..." Sam

thus suggests that, in becoming a victim of rape, heterosexual men are likely to be perceived as 'less than men'. This is because they are likely to be judged as having departed from hegemonic (Connell, 1995) forms of masculinity. Cultural expectations dictate that "macho" men exhibit strength, autonomy and sexual aggression. By definition then, "macho" men cannot also be victims. Sam builds an image of 'society' where, in this context, "people" are likely to ridicule heterosexual male rape victims for failing in their duties to be 'real men'. Sam, however, carefully distances himself from this view. He locates the tendency to ridicule heterosexual male rape victims as something endemic to a general category of "people" 'out there' rather than as something about himself. He also explicitly states that male rape isn't a joke. In this way he is able to distance himself from charges of being part of the 'unsympathetic majority' that hold stereotypical views of acceptable male conduct. Sam's credentials as a basically sympathetic and enlightened speaker are thus maintained.

Over the course of turns 15 - 22, Sam and Fay develop an argument that rape is "worse" for heterosexual men than for women or gay men because heterosexual men are less likely to receive support from society. In turn 23 Fay explicitly orients to the possibility that this argument may make her appear unduly unsympathetic to gay male rape victims. She emphatically states "I've not really got anything against homosexual men...that's all ... Just get that bit straight". Sam enthusiastically agrees (turns 24 - 26) that he also "does not have a problem with it" (i.e. homosexual men and homosexuality). Sam and Fay thus anticipate, and deny, any possible charges that their particular concern for *heterosexual* men is motivated by homophobia.

In turn 26 the topic switches from the issue of the likely public response to male rape victims to the experience of the rape act itself. Sam suggests that for a "heterosexual"

victim or for a victim “who is to some degree homophobic or something”, the rape act would be “more traumatic”. Immediately following this utterance, Sam also articulates the contrary view, that forced sex, under any circumstances, is “nightmarish”. This offers Fay the opportunity of agreeing with either of these points of view, which are presented as provisional, and the opportunity for Sam of retracting either of them. In turn 27 she explicitly reflects back *her* understanding of Sam’s developing central argument. She announces that she can see his point i.e. that heterosexual men suffer more than other categories of rape victim because, “they’re not going to have experienced that sort of thing before” and thus, it will be, “one heck of a shock”. The formulation “that sort of thing” is vague. However, it seems likely that Fay is referring to what is assumed to be the normative *sexual* practice of ‘straight’ and ‘gay’ men. The rape experience is judged to be “worse” for heterosexual men because the physical act of rape is assumed to deviate from the normative sexual practice of ‘straight’ men. Conversely, it is assumed to replicate (or resemble) the normative sexual practice of ‘gay’ men.

In the next extract, the main topics for discussion are, once again, the experience of the rape act itself and society's response to male rape victims in the aftermath of rape.

### ***Extract 2***

1. Gary: I mean it's like a thing where I reckon, I suppose it gets to a heterosexual man that, I mean for a woman to be raped by a man, it's, it's a heterosexual act, whereas for a man to be raped by another man it's a homosexual act and I don't know, it it, not only, it destroys yourself and, sexuality as well really, erm, I don't

2. Sarah: Puts your own sexuality in your own mind perhaps

3. Gary: Yeah, yeah, also mean in the rape of women I think that when a woman has been raped you can say all right, she's been raped by a man, sort of in most cases a man is bigger, stronger.

4. Sarah: Yeah, it's coming down to the ableness, the issue that men are stronger than women generally, and so it's, if you're raped by another man

5.Gary: Yeah, and so if you're raped by another man then you'd think, people would say, 'you're a bloke why couldn't you fight them off, why couldn't you stop him from doing that'. It's words that normally you'd say, I mean oh well, you know

As in extract one, victim gender and sexuality are raised by the participants as relevant factors when evaluating the impact of rape for different categories of victims. In turn 1, Gary suggests that rape "gets to" a heterosexual man. In sketching out the reasons why, he compares the case of a woman raped by a man with the case of a man raped by a man. Gary constructs the former as "a heterosexual act" and the latter as a "homosexual act". He thus argues that male on male rape necessarily entails the experience of a "homosexual act" and that this experience is particularly 'destructive' for heterosexual men, posing a threat to "yourself and sexuality as well really".

As in extract one, the participants are making sense of male rape within a phallogentric version of gender, sexuality and sexual practice, based in a model of reproductive biology (Weeks, 1986; Jackson, 1987; Nicolson, 1994). Within this framework, the idealised heterosexual male is constructed as potent and non-permeable and 'normal' sexual activity is strictly defined as penetration of the female body by the phallus (Ussher, 1997; Wood, 2000). A clear distinction is made between 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' as discrete categories of sexual identity, which in turn are considered to confer distinct forms of sexual practice e.g. anal penetration is an activity that conventionally goes with the category 'homosexual'. It is important however, to underline the socially constructed status of the phallogentric representation of normative sex and associated sexual identity categories that inform the accounts presented here. The act of anal penetration, for example, carries a range of different



cultural meanings from 'sexual/desirable' to 'undesirable/perverse'. However, it is far too simplistic to straightforwardly ascribe these meanings to gay men and heterosexual men/women respectively (Lees, 1997; Wood, 2000). Wood (2000) presents a range of evidence that suggest that anal sex is unappealing for some men who identify as gay whereas some men and women identifying as heterosexual engage in activities which bring them anal pleasure.

The experience of rape is thus judged by the participants to be worse for heterosexual men than it is for women and gay men because the rape act is assumed to deviate from socially constructed norms of sexual expression for heterosexual men, whereas it is assumed to replicate 'normal sex' for women and gay men. 'Heterosexual' male victims are identified as particularly deserving of sympathy on these grounds. However, this argument also has the effect of diminishing the importance of rape and of trivialising its devastating effects for women and men positioned as 'gay' (Anderson and Doherty, 1996; Ussher, 1997; Scarce, 1997). To argue that acts of rape replicate normative sexual acts is to minimize and deny the status of rape as an act of *violence*, a humiliating expression of power (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt and Estep, 1981). In his discussion of male rape, Scarce notes that the effect of this move is to, "reduce the tragedy of the rape of a gay man ... the person has already experienced the physical act so it's no big deal" (Scarce, 1997: 64). However, as Ussher argues,

"Sexual violence is 'sexual' in that the hatred is directed at the sexual body ... or because the enactment of such violence often parodies that of a non-abusive sexual encounter. In every other way these are acts of violence, degradation and defilement – as far from a consensual sexual experience as most [victims] could ever possibly contemplate (Ussher, 1997: 420)

In turns 3-5 Gary and Sarah switch to a discussion of the way in which societal attitudes may also differently affect female and male victims of rape. Gary and Sarah agree that there is a plausible explanation for the victimisation of women by men in acts of rape: “you can say, all right, she’s been raped by a man... “ who “...in most cases...” is “bigger, stronger”. Here, socially approved vocabularies of gender and sexuality are readily utilized to construct an account for the rape of women. This repertoire constructs men as “stronger than women generally...” (turn 4) and positions women as the ‘natural’ (“you can say alright...”) victims of more “able” (turn 4) men.

Working with this understanding of gender relations, Gary then considers the possible response to male victims of rape. His opinion is prefaced by “you’d think” which is then immediately repaired to “people would say” (turn 5). This self-repair occurs at a crucial point in the conversation – it prefaces the expression of an opinion that could be interpreted as an overly harsh piece of victim blaming, that a “bloke” (archetypal ‘real man’) should be able to defend himself from a rapist. Male victims of rape, by implication, are positioned here as not “blokes”, as men who have, by definition, failed as men: “you’d think, people would say, ‘you’re a bloke why couldn’t you fight them off, why couldn’t you stop him from doing that’” (turn 5). The repair displays an orientation on the part of the speaker to be identified as neutral (if not sympathetic) towards male rape victims, which helps to maintain the rhetorical weight of the argument expressed (Potter, 1996). Gary accomplishes this by distancing himself from the more personal “you’d think” and instead constructs the negative evaluation of male rape victims which follows as located in others, “people would say”.

As in extract one then, rape is evaluated as worse for heterosexual men because firstly, the rape act is assumed to deviate from the normative sexual practice of heterosexual men and

secondly because 'society' is portrayed as unsympathetic towards men who violate the norms of masculinity. In the final extract presented, Chris also raises these two issues as relevant in response to Stella's question about whether male and female victims of rape are likely to be, "...treated differently..." (turn 1).

### ***Extract 3***

1. Stella: I wonder if you get treated differently if you're a man whose been raped rather than a women cause...?
2. Chris: I suppose because if you were a heterosexual male um, being raped by another male, although they'd be equally as traumatic and I'm not trying to differentiate between the two, um (Stella: There's an extra thing as well) the fact that you're being raped also by someone who's not of your sexual group I suppose, yeah for men because (a) in a way I suppose it's far more, this sounds a bit prejudiced but I would imagine that it's socially more accepted for a female to be a victim than for a man to be a victim (Stella: That's true) and therefore, with that in the back of his mind you've almost been emasculated (a) sexually and (b) sort of, I mean it smacks of machismo, but if you've been raped it's, for a man anyway, whether right or wrong you're going to feel really, I don't know, emasculated I think is the best way of saying it.
3. Stella: Yes, I know, you should have been able to stick up for yourself or something. Yes, it's true.

As in extracts 1 and 2, at the start of this conversation Chris similarly argues that the sexuality of male rape victims is a relevant factor when making a comparison between the treatment of male and female rape victims. Once again, it is argued that heterosexual men suffer more and are likely to be treated more harshly than other categories of rape victim. This potentially contentious view is produced *indirectly* using a 'two-sided' style of expression, where the speaker also disclaims the contentious statement. In turn 2 Chris denies that the rape of heterosexual men and women is different: "...they'd be equally as traumatic and I'm not

trying to differentiate between the two” directly before sketching the reasons why the experience of male and female rape victims could be evaluated as different. Contentious views are frequently delivered in this way (e.g. see van Dijk, 1987; Griffin, 1987; Billig et al, 1988; Edwards and Potter, 1992). The disclaiming utterance allows the speaker to avoid censure and here, to establish credentials as the kind of person who appreciates the “traumatic” nature of rape in general. Stella gives Chris a conversational ‘green light’ to go ahead and “differentiate” (turn 3) the rape experiences of heterosexual men and women with her overlapping turn: “There’s an extra thing as well”.

His first point is that, for “a heterosexual male”, the perpetrator is someone, “...who is not of your sexual group” (turn 2). It is therefore assumed that male rape offenders are necessarily ‘homosexual’, whereas female rape (by implication) is constructed as consistent with socially constructed norms of heterosexuality. Interestingly, statistics show that perpetrators of male rape are more commonly heterosexual. Male rape nevertheless tends to be constructed and explained as a ‘homosexual problem’, and as a sexually motivated crime, rather than as an expression of power and aggression (McMullen, 1990).

Chris prefaces the next portion of his argument - it is more socially accepted for women than men to be victims - with a form of ‘stake confession’ (Potter, 1996): “This sounds a bit prejudiced but, ...”. This operates as an acknowledgment that the opinion he is about to voice could be treated as somewhat biased, here against female victims of sexual violence. As discussed below, it could easily be heard as normalizing or even trivializing the victimization of women. The stake confession displays the speaker as honest and objective, as someone who is *already aware* of the potentially contentious nature of the view that is about to be, nevertheless, put forward. As Potter argues, this is rhetorically powerful because it is

disarming; "... it puts objectors in the position of making a point that has already been conceded..." (Potter, 1996: 130).

Chris and Stella agree that men and women are going to be treated differently in the aftermath of rape because it is not as socially accepted for men to be victims. They argue that a male rape victim is, "going to feel really, I don't know, emasculated I think is the best way of saying it" (turn 2). The term "emasculated" signals a departure from the script of hegemonic masculinity, where 'real men' are constructed as potent and the male body is constructed as non-permeable and 'endowed with physical closure' (Wood, 2000). The female body, by comparison, is constructed as penetrable and women are treated as *destined* to have their bodily integrity shattered. Male rape victims are therefore positioned as different from female rape victims in having transgressed both socially constructed gender boundaries and constructions of 'normal sex'. Chris and Stella thus argue that male rape victims suffer an 'extra trauma' to women in their experience of the rape act and that they will be treated differently to female victims because they will be judged to have failed (and may tell themselves that they have failed) in their masculine duty to "stick up for themselves" (see turn 3). Chris carefully distances himself as the author of this latter view, building credentials as a neutral, convincing speaker on this topic. He acknowledges that to characterize male rape victims as "emasculated" – as feeble and ineffective (feminized) – "smacks of machismo". In other words, this action is perhaps, in itself, an inappropriate (victim-blaming) display of masculinity. The contentious nature of Chris' description of male rape is also signaled by the hedged ("I don't know", turn 2), equivocal ("whether right or wrong") way in which the description is formulated.

## Discussion

We have seen that the participants raise two issues for discussion in response to the male rape vignette: the societal response to male rape victims in the aftermath of rape and the experience of the rape act itself. In both cases, the participants engage with these issues by comparing and evaluating the treatment and experience of different categories of rape victim. 'Men' are differentiated from 'women' as victims and 'men' as a category are further differentiated according to sexuality. A hierarchy of suffering is established where rape is judged to be worse (more "horrible", "disgusting", "shocking" [extract 1], "destructive" [extract 2], "traumatic" [extract 3]) for heterosexual men than it is for women or gay men. We have argued that norms of sexual expression and sexual identity are socially constructed categories that reflect hegemonic phallogentric representations of gender and heterosexuality. The participants mobilize this socially approved vocabulary to argue that rape and consensual intercourse are similar, and therefore less traumatic, for gay and bi-sexual men and for women. The rape act is evaluated as worse for 'heterosexual' men because it is assumed to deviate from normative heterosexual practice.

In these conversations then, rape is discussed by stressing its similarity, in somatic terms, to consensual intercourse. It is constructed and evaluated as, primarily, a sexual act. Consequently, the violent nature of rape remains hidden and the devastating effects of rape for women and men positioned as homosexual are dismissed. McCaul et al similarly conclude that conceptualizing a specific act of rape more in a sexual versus a violent manner causes persons to blame the rape victim to a greater or lesser extent (McCaul et al, 1990). Smith et al (1988) showed that male rape victims tend to be rated as less deserving of sympathy when raped by a female as opposed to a male stranger. It seems likely that this is because the participants in

their study were able to make sense of the incident in (hetero)sexualized terms and in so doing downgrade its status as a violent assault.

Mitchell et al (1999) found that homosexual victims are held more responsible for rape and are rated as deriving more pleasure and as experiencing less trauma from the incident than are heterosexual victims. Our analysis is consistent with this finding and in addition demonstrates that the issue of victim sexuality is raised spontaneously by the *participants* themselves as a relevant factor when making judgments in conversation about the experience of rape victims.

In their typology of accounts, Semin and Manstead (1983) suggest that one possible way of justifying 'wrong-doing' may be to claim that the effect of an action has been misrepresented, e.g. by minimizing or denying that injury has been sustained. Our analysis demonstrates that social participants actually use this form of account to downgrade or dismiss the trauma experienced by certain categories of rape victim and, by implication, exonerate the alleged rapist.

Validation of our analysis is provided by the way that the participants themselves orient to the possibility that, in arguing that the rape experience is more severe for heterosexual men than it is for any other category of victim, they could be heard as unduly *unsympathetic* towards other rape victims. This is evident in the way that the participants build credentials as basically 'neutral' and 'sympathetic' speakers and in the way that the arguments are skillfully constructed to deny charges of being dismissive towards the rape of women and gay men.

The participants in the present study also argue that, in becoming a victim of rape, heterosexual men will be perceived by 'society' as having departed from hegemonic masculinity. As such, it is argued that they will be forced to suffer in silence (extract one) be

ridiculed (extract two) or ostracized as emasculated man (extract three). This finding is consistent with those of Perrott and Weber (1996) who showed that male rape victims tend to be held responsible for rape on account of their 'failure' to defend themselves or escape from the situation. Hegemonic understandings of femininity are mobilized to argue that victimization is, on the other hand, an expected part of womanhood. The speakers' own position on the legitimacy of ridiculing male rape victims remains ambiguous. They distance themselves from the ridicule of male rape victims, skillfully avoiding charges of victim blaming, but at the same time construct the ridicule of male rape victims as likely to be a commonplace activity.

We noted in the introduction that experimental paradigms for studying reasoning about rape produce overall low mean scores on measures of victim blame and indicate low levels of acceptance of rape myth statements. However, our analysis shows that throughout their conversations, the participants display some awareness that a directly unsympathetic or victim-blaming argument may be censured (Edwards and Potter, 1992) and potentially contentious arguments were produced indirectly. It seems likely that experimental tasks that offer no room for distancing, equivocation or hedging in the production of an argument may also fail to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of rape supportive discourse.

The discursive construction of a hierarchy of suffering for different categories of rape victim has a range of potential consequences for the treatment of rape victims and for recovery in the aftermath of rape. The evidence from an anonymous victim survey carried out by Lees (1997) indicates that the police often believe that rape is less traumatic for gay men and don't treat rape claims made by victims positioned as 'gay' seriously. Our analysis provides some support for this finding by highlighting the readiness with which social participants evaluate



rape claims by reference to categories of sexual identity. If a person is judged to have already experienced a physical act in a consensual context, our evidence suggests that a rape claim isn't likely to be treated as too big a deal. The view that rape is not damaging because it is 'only sex' has been identified by many feminist scholars as contributing to the construction and maintenance of a rape supportive culture (Ward, 1995). Reframing rape as 'sex' serves to minimize the violence and severity of a rape experience and also normalizes the alleged perpetrator's behaviour. Male rape victims positioned as heterosexual are thus likely to be treated more sympathetically than women or men positioned as gay, at least in terms of their experience of the rape act. The evidence suggests that they may, however, also experience some ridicule for having departed from the norms of hegemonic masculinity.

There are clear implications here for education and training in institutional and everyday contexts. The message that 'rape is rape', whatever the gender or supposed sexual identity of the victim, needs to be firmly and repeatedly underlined if rape victims are to receive appropriate support or justice.

### Endnotes

1. In comparison to 4986 recorded cases and 5759 recorded cases of rapes perpetrated against women in 1995 and 1996 respectively.
2. There is some evidence to suggest that men report sexual victimisation even less frequently than women do (Pino and Meier, 1999).
3. Gleaned from discussions in the broader male rape literature on the incidence and characteristics of male rape, survivor's accounts, and modelled on existing items in Attitudes Towards Rape scales.
4. Given that the research requires people to talk about a sensitive topic it was decided to recruit participants who already knew each other, rather than strangers, under the assumption that they would feel more comfortable to discuss the issue of rape.
5. The conversational data used here were initially collected for a doctoral thesis on rape perception that examined gender differences in uses of co-variation information in spontaneous talk (Anderson, 1996). For this reason, two versions of the vignette were used which had two different configurations of co-variation information embedded in the more general description of the incident of rape. One scenario contained the information that the victim had been raped once before prior to the assault (consistency over time) and that no other rapes had occurred in the area (an 'atypical event'). The second scenario contained the information that the victim had been raped before and that other rapes had occurred in the area (a 'typical' event). The two scenarios also manipulated gender of the victim. The present study analyses data generated by the second scenario only and where the victim was male. Interestingly, attribution theory predicts that this co-variation information will tend to produce attributions of responsibility to the circumstances of the assault rather than to the victim.
6. The distinction between 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' as categories of victim is explicitly made in turn 23.

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<sup>2</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that men report sexual victimisation even less frequently than women do (Pino and Meier, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Gleaned from discussions in the broader male rape literature on the incidence and characteristics of male rape, survivor's accounts, and modelled on existing items in Attitudes Towards Rape scales.