PERSPECTIVES ON RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

JUNE HOPKINS (editor)

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Ken Plummer
5. Thursday, 6 May 1982 Victim: Female, 17 years
Victim, a female prostitute, was threatened by a 'pimp' and told that if she
did not come up with $1500.00 she would be badly beaten. The pimp then
took $350.00 of jewellery from the victim.

6. Sunday, 23 May 1982 Victim: Male, 40 years
Victim picked up a female prostitute and drove to his home. After having
sex, the victim fell asleep. When he awoke, the suspect had gone, also
missing were the victim's wallet containing $800.00, his car and his
passport.

7. Saturday, 29 May 1982 Victim: Female, 22 years
Victim, a known prostitute, was picked up by a male suspect at Gerrard
and Jarvis Streets. She was driven to Pembroke Street where she was
indecently assaulted.

8. 12 May 1978 Victim: Female, 28 years
Victim, not a convicted prostitute, left work on Friday, 12 May 1978 and
got to her apartment. During the course of that evening, male persons
were seen to come and go from her apartment. Upon failing to report for
work on Saturday, the victim's body was discovered in her apartment
having been strangled and sexually assaulted.

After an extremely lengthy investigation, a man was arrested and
charged with second-degree murder. 'Similar fact' evidence concerning
four crimes of violence against prostitutes was tendered in court, and he
was declared a dangerous sexual offender and sentenced to indefinite
incarceration.

4

THE SOCIAL USES OF
SEXUALITY: SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION, POWER
AND RAPE*

Ken Plummer

When one behaves sexually, one is acting out the metaphor of sex as power, sex
as transgression, sex as reinforcing of natural masculine and feminine roles,
sex as the apocalypse.

(Gagnon and Simon, 1974, p. 304)

Clinical work with offenders and victims reveals that rape is in fact serving
primarily non-sexual needs; it is the sexual expression of power and anger.
Rape is motivated more by retaliatory and compensatory motives than sexual
ones; it is a pseudo-sexual act, complex and multidetermined, but addressing
issues of hostility (anger) and control (power) more than desire (sexuality).

(Groth, in Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979, p. 23)

It is men who rape, men who commit incest, men who are paedophiliac,
men who go to prostitutes and men who ‘man’ the control system. It is
women who are the victims of rape, the victims of incest, the victims of
the child abuser and the subjects of the pornographer. There are clearly
exceptions to these statements¹ and there are often terminological
ambiguities involved,² but the broad pattern is clear: it is men who

* Revised version of paper presented at ‘Victims of Sexual Assault Conference’, Teesside
Polytechnic, 21 April 1981.
dominate and women who are made to submit. This is the background to my paper.

Popularly, and parsimoniously, these striking gender differences might be explained in biological and medical terms. Hence both sex and aggression are seen as the manifestations of powerful biological drives pressing for release, and since both these drives are seen as being stronger in men than in women, many of the problems above are explained. Men, having stronger sex drives, ‘naturally’ seek prostitutes and pornography for sexual release; men, being more aggressive, ‘naturally’ rise to dominance more speedily than women and hence ‘man’ the control system; men, being stronger in both sex and aggression, ‘naturally’ tend to become the assaulters – the rapists, the exhibitionists, the molesters, the incestuous attackers, the office harassers. It could thus all be seen in very simple terms, and there is an enormous back-up literature, especially in sociobiology, to sustain such arguments (e.g. Goldberg, 1974; Symons, 1979). Goldberg, for example, has controversially and (in)famously argued that ‘there are no differences between men and women except in the hormonal system … (which) gives men an insuperable “head start” towards attaining those roles which any society associates with leadership or high status as long as the roles are not ones that males are biologically incapable of filling’ (Goldberg, 1974, p. 105).

More recently, Symons – from a sociobiological viewpoint – has enumerated many key differences in male–female sexuality, from men being more arousable by the sight of women than women being of men, to men being more disposed to variety for the sake of variety (Symons, 1979).

Whatever the truth of such theories, and they certainly have their many critics (e.g. Sayers, 1982), they are always open to two major qualifiers. First, whatever else ‘sex’ may be, it must be social, by definition, for human beings to engage in it. ‘Sex’ that is simply biological or ‘natural' has little to do with what human beings experience since their conduct is always embedded in their culture, with its own historically produced set of symbols and meanings. Without such meanings, sex as we know it could not exist. This bald declaration can be appreciated by imagining what human sexuality would be like if it was unmediated by meaning: a world of uncoordinated erections and lubrications, of sexuality without rule or fantasy, of fumbling inabilities to interpret acts, orgasms, objects or people as sexual. This is not to deny biological mechanisms at work, but simply to put biology in its proper place and acknowledge what is distinctive about humans – their symbolic ability (cf. Burke, 1966).

My second qualification is that however biological sex may be, we are also (presumably) moral and political animals (Leach, 1982). Hence biological arguments cannot be produced to legitimate biological male dominance and biological male aggression. The moral is not the same as the biological. As Richards, a nicely sceptical feminist, has put it:

And suppose that men are naturally dominant because of the miraculous testosterone of which we hear so much these days. Why should feminists be reluctant to admit, or anti-feminists to think that it clinches their case? Even if men are naturally inclined to dominance it does not follow that they ought to run everything. Their being naturally dominant might be an excellent reason for imposing special restrictions to keep their nature under control. We do not think that the men whose nature inclines them to rape ought to be given free rein to go around raping, so why should the naturally dominant be allowed to go around dominating?

(Richards, 1980, p. 44)

While the biological should be taken into account, the social level must be given a clear hearing. In this paper, therefore, my aim is to apply a developing social theory of human sexuality – symbolic interactionism – to the study of rape. Rape will hence be seen as a social act rather than a biological drive. A central feature of this analysis will be the recognition of the role that power plays in rape, and from this I will turn to the need for a more focused examination of the links between power, sex and masculinity. I will conclude by suggesting a series of broad problems that need addressing in the study of power and sexuality.

Rape as symbolic interaction

Elsewhere, and in some detail, the emerging symbolic interactionist account of human sexuality has been described (Plummer, 1975, 1982) and hence will not be elaborated here. In a rather polemical fashion, however, I have recently summarized how it differs from many other theories (notably those of Freudians and biologists) as well as much common-sense thinking:

The symbolic interactionist perspective challenges much of our contemporary wisdom about sex. Whereas many presume to know what sex is, interactionists do not; whereas it is commonly sensed as something special, interactionists put it on a par with everything else; whereas it is commonly sensed as being either in need of repression or as a potential source of liberation, interactionists see it as merely reflecting cultural expectations; whereas it is commonly sensed as being the motive force for much human behaviour, interactionists invert this
wisdom and suggest that sex is engaged in for wider social reasons; whereas ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ sex are frequently seen as problems, interactionists see no reason for this; whereas sexual development is usually seen to be determined by childhood experience, interactionists see it as much more fluid and changing; whereas certain patterns of sexual development can be assumed as ‘perversions’, the interactionists see these critically as social constructions. The interactionist is a stranger to contemporary cultural meanings and concocts a heretical view.

(Plummer, 1982, p. 238)

All of these themes make sense when applied to rape, albeit they are not the most conventional ways of approaching the problem. Thus, rape – like all sex – is hardly an unproblematic category: it takes on a multitude of forms, embraces a plurality of meanings and harbours diffuse aetologies (e.g. Amir, 1971). Rape is really not an extraordinary phenomenon: ‘the basic elements of rape are involved in all heterosexual relationships’ (Griffin, 1971). Rape is a product of cultural expectations – ‘it is the mirror image of our ordinary folkways’ (Herschberger, 1970, p. 15). It is not simply a drive that erupts, but is a piece of social conduct used for social (and psychic) ends (cf Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979). The rapist is not ‘made’ in his childhood, but comes into being through a host of situational contingencies in adult life (cf Amir, 1971). For rape to be seen as a social problem, people have to work hard to get it recognized as such – it is not an intrinsic problem (cf Rose, 1977; Schur, 1980).

There are many ways, then, in which interactionism signposts an approach to rape. Below, I will develop just two themes: that rape can be seen as a social meaning embodying power and aggression, and that rape can be used for social purposes.

Rape as social meaning

There is a tradition of thinking about rape in predominantly sexual/biological terms – as if it constituted a reality sui generis. The common-sense view of rape, for example, is to see it as the product either of men who are oversexed (and hence in a way is understandable ‘natural’) or of men whose drive has become twisted (and hence unnatural, even ‘fiendish’). In either case, male sexual drives are the presumed bedrock. At the same time, female sexuality is marked out as the catalytic stimulus to man’s animal drives – a woman provokes and the man cannot help it. As the sociobiologist Symons (1979) puts it: ‘Women inspire male sexual desire simply by existing’ (p. 284). Male and female sexuality thus comes to inhabit a naturalistic, animal-like world (cf Feild, 1978; Smart and Smart, 1978; Howells, 1980; Edwards, 1981).

Yet, as I have suggested earlier, whatever else sex may be, human sexuality is also always symbolic: it can only occur through symbols and meanings. Thus, although rape looks like the clearest example of a natural ‘lust’ erupting before a natural female ‘provocation’, it is in fact highly scripted (Schwartz and Laws, 1977). This is true not only in the sense that many rapes are premeditated (Amir, 1971), but also in the more significant sense that for rape to occur at all the man has to produce some justification to himself of what he is doing. He may, for example, deny his responsibility by arguing that he cannot control his natural male desire, especially when under the influence of alcohol; he may ‘blame the victim’, seeing the woman as acting provocatively, being a ‘cock teaser’ and hence ‘asking for it’; he may deny that he is injuring the woman – ‘she likes a bit of rough treatment really’; he may see it as completely normal – ‘my mates act like this’, ‘women really like it’; or he may see it as a justified act of revenge – a method of getting back at women who have hurt him. Many other such legitimations can be constructed to make sense of the rape act and to facilitate its accomplishment (cf Weis and Borges, 1973; Jackson, 1978). But, more than this, the man will also have to conjure up the most appropriate acts to perform, the most appropriate women as victims, the most appropriate times, places, moods, feelings, etc. Rape cannot occur in a cultural vacuum – it is locked in social meaning.

Research conducted during the 1970s, in a range of different settings with a range of different groups, repeatedly concluded that rape has no simple sexual meaning to the rapist (or, for that matter, to the victim!). Burgess, Holmstrom and Groth have been most strident in this argument:

Any act can have many meanings attached to it, and forced sex is no exception. In our research with victims plus our collaborative work regarding the motivational intent of offenders, we have looked at multiple meanings. We have found that forcible rape always includes three components: power, anger and sexuality. These vary in their proportions, but sexuality is never the dominant theme. In each case studied, “either power or anger dominates and ... rape, rather than being primarily an expression of sexual desire, is, in fact, the use of sexuality to express issues of power and anger (Groth et al., 1977, p. 1240).” In addition, in pair and group rape, our data from victims suggest that there is a fourth component: male camaraderie.

(Holmstrom and Burgess, 1980, p. 435)
In single rape, in group rape and in wartime rape, it seems that sex per se is rarely (probably never) the dominant factor; rather domination, anger and male camaraderie seem to be the central concerns. Rape is not the unleashing of male desire; it is rather the articulation of male meaning.

### The social uses of rape

While sex is orthodoxy seen either as fundamentally procreative or as a pleasurable drive, the interactionist would suggest that these are only two of many uses to which sex may be put. The former use must indeed be comparatively infrequent (even in Kinsey’s days, he reckoned that only one act in a thousand was geared to reproduction) while the latter recreational use is, I suspect, usually less than half the story. Increasingly, it has come to be appreciated that sexuality is pluralistic (cf. Singer, 1973): it takes many forms, has many aetiologies, assumes many meanings and can be put to many uses. The process of learning about sex is always in part a process of learning about the way sex can be used. The following brief list hints at the ways in which sex has been used in recent times (cf. Marmor, 1969):

1. As a resolution of personal problems: tension, guilt, loneliness, depression, anxiety, boredom, or an unconscious trauma.
2. As an affirmation of self: maturity, adequacy, attractiveness, lovability, masculinity, femininity.
3. As a challenge to authority: parents, institutions, society.
4. As a ratifier of solidarity: peer group, bonding couple.
5. As a means of gain: money, power, prestige, favours, security, love, attention, children, immortality.
6. As a form of adult play: recreation, pleasure, novelty, thrill seeking, adventure.
7. As a means of expressing anger, aggression and hostility.
8. As a duty or habit.

Rape may be used in any of these ways. It could be the acting-out of some childhood trauma; it could be a means of establishing a sense of masculinity or potency (cf. Stoller, 1979); it could be a way of getting revenge on society (cf. Cleaver, 1968); it could be a means of establishing a sense of camaraderie with one’s friends (e.g. Blanchard, 1959); it could occur as an adjunct to a robbery (McDermott, 1979); it could occur as a means of experiencing danger and risk; it could be an expression of rage; it could even be a ritual that is habitualized. Now I am not saying that rape is never experienced for ‘sexual kicks’; my argument is that rape’s excitement to the rapist will have in part a social basis, and that at times it may even be purely social.

Clearly, there is no one simple reason for engaging in rape, as the above listing indicates. But it is possible to suggest a broad common denominator for many specific uses of sex – the enhancement of masculinity. This can be shown on both the individual and the collective level.7

At the individual level we must ask how men come to perform acts of rape, and here the two most prominent accounts – the continuity thesis and the impairment thesis – both highlight the issue of masculinity. The continuity thesis sees rape as the logical extension of the male role. The sturdy oak, the achiever, the tough, the virile, the aggressive, the forceful, which are so much a part of expected masculinity, are all found in the act of rape: the active aggressive man dominates and succeeds through the power of his noble penis (cf. David and Brannon, 1976). There is no emotion, but strong sex; no submission, but total dominance; no failure, but clear triumph. Rape could be seen as the epitome of the male role – for the man who takes his role too seriously. When this is combined with the male presumption that women, with their passivity and masochism, like to be overpowered, the mould is set for so much rape. Indeed, casual talk among men displays this sense of continuity – ‘she’s asking for it’, ‘she could do with a good fuck’. And along with such comments are what Medea and Thompson (1974) call the ‘little rapes’ – the wolf whistles, the ‘touching up’, the uninvited socialization.8 Much of the male role seems to encourage versions of rape, and it is probable that some men find themselves raping without realizing what is going on. They just see it as expected of them: what is violent rape to the woman is merely aggressive sex to the man! (cf. Kanin and Parcell, 1971).

The impairment thesis is a little closer to the earlier pathology model for it suggests that men rape because their masculinity is at risk. The threats may sometimes be wider – to their self-esteem or general wellbeing – but many accounts document a devalued self which is quite possibly linked to their masculinity (e.g. West et al., 1978; Levine and Koenig, 1982). Although it is no vindication of the act of rape, a literature is emerging which suggests that the male role is much more hazardous than the female, and that rape is one consequence of this precariousness.

At the individual level, then, rape both means and is linked to power – male power. In summary, Groth sees rape as an underlying potential which:
... in addition to expressing anger and asserting control, also serves to compensate for feelings of helplessness, to reassure the offender about his sexual adequacy, to assert his identity, to retain status amongst peers, to defend against sexual anxieties, to achieve gratification and to discharge frustration. In this sense the act of rape is equivalent to the function of a symptom: it expresses the conflict, defends against the anxiety and partially gratifies or discharges the impulse.

(Groth, in Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979, p. 29)

It might be added that all of this can be seen as a defence of personal esteem or control, and this is a major social source of sex. Sex is, in short, used to establish personal worth at the expense of someone else: it extends the individual's own significance through negating that of another. It is personal.

This approach is psychological, reducing rape to personal power. But rape may also be used collectively – as a way of maintaining the existing social order – and it is here that many feminist writers have made prominent contributions. The concern switches from social aetiology to social functions.

Although differing in specifics, the core of this thesis runs as follows. First, all women inhabit a mental world where they are constantly in fear of being raped.9 As Griffin started her pathbreaking article in 1971:

I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age, I, like most women, have thought of rape as part of my natural environment – something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning, I never asked why men raped; I simply thought of it as part of one of the many mysteries of human nature.

(Griffin, 1971, p. 26)

This 'fear of rape' suggests the second argument: that men have a 'trump card' to play in keeping women in their place. Thus, Reynolds (1974) suggests that rape is a prime mode of social control:

Rape is a punitive action directed towards females who usurp or appear to usurp the culturally defined prerogatives of the dominant role ... (it) operates in our society to maintain the dominant position of males. It does this by restricting the mobility and freedom of movement of women by limiting their casual interaction with the opposite sex, and in particular by maintaining the male's prerogatives in the erotic sphere. When there was evidence that the victim was or gave the appearance of being out of place, she can be raped and the rapist will be supported by the cultural values, by the institutions that embody these values, and by the people shaped by these values – that is by the policy, courts, members of juries, and sometimes the victims themselves.

(Reynolds, 1974, pp. 62–68)

Stay in your homes; stay in suitable attire; stay loyal to your husbands; stay submissive in your manner – this is the message of rape to women. Working outwards, then, from the actual impact of rape on women, the third argument starts to suggest what is happening. Brownmiller, perhaps the most famous polemicist in this field, has put the thesis at its bluntest:

From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.

(Brownmiller, 1975, p. 5 – her emphases)

Such a thesis has been taken up by many feminists, notably Dworkin (1982), and used as the basis for a kind of man-hating separatism. It is couched in terms of a gender war and leaves little room to see men as anything other than the enemy.10 Other commentators have been a little more cautious: Clark and Lewis (1977), for example, state that they are not 'anti-male' but they are opposed to 'any social system erected on the assumption of inequality between kinds of persons such that power and authority accrue only to a pre-elected subset' (Clark and Lewis, 1977, p. 166). Suggesting that marriage and rape laws have developed side by side, they argue that rape notions are linked to the idea that a woman is a man's property. A woman's sexuality thus becomes – in law – the property of her husband, and rape 'is simply theft of sexual property under the ownership of someone other than the rapist' (Clark and Lewis, 1977). If a rape victim is a married woman and is therefore, according to Clark and Lewis, owned, then her husband must seek vengeance from the thief – the rapist – but if she is not so owned, she is at risk all the time for being so autonomous.

There may be criticisms that can be made of these 'feminist' arguments, and there are indeed many points of disagreement even within this extensive literature. But my point has simply been to reiterate what feminists know, but others may not: that rape – far from being a simple sexual release for men – can function to keep women in their place. Not all men or all women or all of history need be implicated in this: it is sufficient for the purposes of my argument to simply recognize
that a major social function of rape is to uphold the existing gender arrangements.

The male fear

There is, then, a substantial literature which suggests that rape is the symbolic means at some men's disposal of establishing power; studies of the social meanings, the aetiologies and the social functions of rape have all converged on this thesis. Yet there is one further example which gives additional strength to the argument: it is the strange case of male rape.

Male rape is hardly ever a question of women raping men; indeed, if this were the case, then the argument that rape was centrally linked to masculinity would not hold. It is, rather, almost exclusively homosexual rape — although that term may itself be a misnomer since male-on-male rape rarely, if ever, involves men who are 'gay' in the modern sense of the word (cf. Plummer, 1981). Instead, male-on-male rape seems to epitomize power and masculinity. It does not concern the release of male sexual desire, of men whose uncontrollable passions get blocked in their sexually frustrating environments until they erupt uncontrollably in acts of rape. On the contrary, a number of studies suggest that what happens is a form of scapegoating in which men use other men to establish their power and masculinity where they have been deprived of conventional means to such power (i.e. through women).11

The social meanings of prison rape

At the most general level, Gagnon and Simon (1968) started to point to the meanings of sex in prison during the late 1960s:

What is occurring in the prison situation for both males and females is not a problem of sexual release ... For the male homosexuality serves as a source of affection, as a source of validation for masculinity, or a source of protection from the problems of institutional life.

Of course not all prison homosexuality is rape; within the prison homosexuality can be used to establish intimate ties. But when it is coercive, it may be difficult to suggest that this is simply a matter of homosexual lust. Rather it is a way of resolving the problem which makes many men very vulnerable: the sense of their masculine identity and role. Usually, this can be done through women — male identity is defined in contrast (even opposition) to the identity of a woman. A man's identity makes no sense on its own; its strength frequently comes from his assertion over women. If the woman is removed — as in the prison context — then the man must prove himself over other men by turning them into women. The most central way for many men to achieve this is through sexual aggression.

Male-on-male rape seems to be very common in the American prison system, though there is little comparable documentation on the English situation. It occurs in juvenile institutions (cf. Bartollas et al., 1967), in prison vans (Davis, 1968) and in the prison system itself (Scacco, 1975; Lockwood, 1980), and in America it has a strong racial component: it is usually blacks who rape whites (cf. Scacco, 1982). Although the studies differ in emphasis, they nevertheless agree that male-on-male rape can be viewed as a form of scapegoating, of marking out new orders of dominance within a closed system. Thus, Davis can comment (after recording about 2000 rape incidents in a two-year period):

It appears that the need for sexual release is not the primary motive of a sexual aggressor. After all, in a sexually segregated population, autoeroticism would seem a much easier and more 'normal' method of release than homosexual rape ... A primary goal of the sexual aggressor, it is clear, is the conquest and degradation of his victim. We repeatedly found that aggressors used such language as 'Fight or fuck', 'we're going to take your manhood', 'You'll have to give up some face' and 'We're gonna make a girl out of you'. Some of the assaults were reminiscent of the custom in some ancient societies of castrating orbuggering defeated enemies.

(Davis, 1968, pp. 15–16)

Likewise, Scacco (1975) views such prison rape as 'an act whereby one male (or group of males) seeks testimony to what he considers an outwards version of masculinity' (p. 3). His subjects are no less colloquial than those of Davis above — 'a male who fucks another male is a double male' (Scacco, 1975, p. 86).

Now it must surely be a great paradox that to assert their masculinity these men are willing to engage in what many would see as homosexual acts. Of course, the men do not see it this way. For them, sexuality entails the 'doers' and the 'done to'; the 'doers' are the men and the 'done to' are the women; homosexuals are the queers who are like women, they are the sissies and the fags. One is not a homosexual, then, if one retains one's masculine aggressor role. It is curious indeed that something which would look like homosexuality to an outside observer can be so far from homosexuality in the participant's mind. But to even suggest to the
participant that he was homosexual would be to invite the most extreme rage.

It is at this point that an interesting parallel to the problem of female rape begins to emerge. For if female rape is one strategy which functions to keep women in their place, the fear of homosexuality is a strategy which helps keep men in their place. The homosexual man is a victim whom this conference has bypassed, yet every year a great many homosexuals become the subject of attacks, often resulting in disablement or even death (cf. Meldrum, 1980). Such attacks have much in common with rape: they involve direct physical violence from men through a sexual theme; they involve double victimization (the gay's existence, like that of the female rape victim, is seen as the cause of the trouble and officials may hence 'blame the victim'); they involve many gays in a constant fear that exposure and victimization are always in the offing. It is this threat which often keeps the gay man 'in his place'. He must not 'come out' too much, must not be too visible, must try and be as 'straight' as possible.

The fear of homosexuality—or the homosexual taboo—does much more than simply keep gay men in their place. It may also be one crucial mechanism to keep most non-gay men in their place. As rape is to women, homophobia may be to men. For homosexuality often symbolizes two things that men fear: the possibility of being intimate with another man and the possibility of experiencing the world as women might. To display emotion or empathy, to be affectionate or vulnerable, to cry or even to touch are signs of stepping outside of the strictly confined role of male toughness: it is to become, however momentarily, effeminate. The male homosexual—whatever he may be in reality—has come to symbolize this fear. Lehne (1976) has put this well in a lucid discussion of the problem:

Homophobia is used as a technique of social control by homoseuxist individuals to enforce the norms of male sex role behaviour ... homosexuality is not the real threat, the real threat is change in the male sex role ... Men devalue homosexuality, then use this norm of homophobia to control other men in their male roles ... Homophobia is a threat used by homoseuxist individuals to enforce social conformity in the male role, and maintain social control. The taunt 'What are you, a fag?' is used in many ways to encourage certain types of male behaviour and to define the limits of acceptable masculinity.

(Lehne, 1976, pp. 77–78)

The hazards of being male

The above observations on female rape and prison rape point to an unfashionable viewpoint: some men (maybe most) seem to be extremely vulnerable to their masculine role. Knowing that they are men—defined predominantly in power terms—is vital to their daily functioning. Males define themselves through their culture as needing to be in control—a process which they start to learn in early childhood. If this core of control is taken away or thrown into doubt, then a reaction to this vulnerability could occur. For some the reaction may involve 'throwing off' the restrictions imposed upon them by the male culture—to become men sympathetic to the feminist viewpoint. But for others, a 'fight back' may occur (cf. Hoch, 1979; Pleck, 1981). This crisis in the male role may be the central dynamic requiring analysis if the many facets of rape are to be grasped. It may also help to explain why it is that although all men are vulnerable to such crises, those in the lower social groups seem especially vulnerable. For the working class and racial minorities this crisis may be at its greatest: at the bottom of the heap, their sense of masculinity is absolutely pivotal. The implications of all this for change and practice are enormous; but it is clear, I think, that simple punitive responses like imprisonment for the rapist are not likely to solve anything at all (cf. Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1981, pp. 19–22).

Conclusion: the problem of power and sexuality

Research into the social uses of sexuality, and more specifically into the problem of rape, has brought me repeatedly to the problem of power. Sex may be used to establish power, and rape is the clearest example of this. To conclude this speculative paper, I would like to turn to the more general relationship between power and sexuality and open up a few wider issues for debate.

During the past decade the whole topic of 'sexual politics' has become extremely prominent, though of course it is hardly new: throughout history there has been an intimate connection between political matters and sexual experience. What is perhaps new about some of these recent debates is the way in which they seem to make power and sexuality co-terminous: it is hard to see where power ends and sex begins. Foucault's dazzling reconstruction of history as 'power–knowledge' is one such debate: for him (as indeed for the interactionist) sex is a social construct, but it is one which is constituted by power: power is knowledge and knowledge constructs sex. In addition, 'Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1979, p. 93). Such a conception of power is fundamentally Nietzschean: power is the life force which can potentially
cut through our all too banal, ‘all too human’ existence. Its roots could take us back to de Sade (cf Carter, 1979). But it is so wide, so challenging as to be of little immediate practical use; indeed, its value lies in transcending the world of the mundane.

Another of these expansive, and compelling accounts comes from Dworkin (1981). She writes from a position of lesbian-feminist-separatist rage. For her, men hold the power: the power to assert their selves (at the expense of woman’s self), the power to terrorize women, the power to name the world, the power of owning, the power of money, pure brute physical power and, of course, the power of sex: ‘fucking – the penis thrusting – is the magical, hidden meaning of “it” – the reason for sex, the expansive experience through which the male realizes his sexual power ... the woman is acted on; the man acts and through action expresses sexual power, the power of masculinity’ (Dworkin, 1981, p. 23). Hers is an account of man’s inhumanity to woman but it is a unidirectional account: men terrorize women, power is all one way. If for Foucault power is everywhere, for Dworkin it resides firmly and exclusively in men.

These ideas – of men dominating women or of sex being constituted by power – are currently much debated by certain separatist-feminists and enthusiasts for certain French theories (viz. discourse and deconstructionism). They may prove to be of great value, but for myself they are too grand and global. For power is a hybrid monster concept which has generated a huge literature in the social sciences. If nothing else, this literature has shown power to be defined in many ways (as a capacity, a relationship or process), to exist on many levels (as a psychological need, as interpersonal, as structural), to have many bases (as coercive, as utilitarian, as normative), many dimensions (as extensive, comprehensive and intensive), many uses (as a means to some end or as an end in itself) and many forms (as force, manipulation, persuasion or authority). Debate and analysis abound, and this expansive literature awaits any researcher wishing to examine the links between power and sexuality. To conclude this paper on a rather general note, I will simply suggest six questions that need to be asked.

First, and perhaps a little curious, when is sexuality not connected to power? Given the approaches of Foucault and Dworkin it might be helpful to suggest boundaries to the analysis, to show where power does not seem to be engaged in sexuality. For example, in an earlier section I argued that sex may be used for many social ends, and although some of these are linked to power, others are not. For instance, if sexuality is used as a form of adult play, must it inevitably be linked to power? Or if it is used as an act of caring, ‘warmth and human bonding’, does this mean that power is involved (cf Libby and Straus, 1980)? Of course, such terms may be stretched to mean ‘power’, but there is clearly a difference between this and sexuality that is used solely to dominate another person. Distinctions and boundaries on some such lines need to be made.

Secondly, what are the different ways in which power and sexuality may be related to each other? Rape, for instance, may be interpreted in a number of ways: as an act of power to gain sex (the conventional view), as an act of sex to gain power, or something more complex (as I have argued): an act of sex to gain power to enhance something else (masculinity). The general question thus becomes: is power a means or an end? And if a means, what is the end?

Thirdly, what are the different levels of power and how may they be interconnected? Rape may be seen as an instance of interpersonal power – of the male gaining control over the woman. But it may also be seen as an instance of collective power – of structurally keeping women in their place within society. There are other levels of power involved too: for instance, the psychological components in motivating people to seek sexual power, and the role of the state in defining rape as a legal problem (or not defining it as a problem). When talking about power we need to be quite clear on what level of analysis we are working.

Fourthly, how may these different levels be interconnected? There is a tendency to see the collective as defining all the other versions of power, and this can lead to some curious stances. For instance, because on the collective level women are dominated by men, some feminists have argued that it is wrong for women to sleep with men on the personal level. It is nothing more than colluding with the enemy. The only appropriate sexuality becomes same-sex relationships where there is no collective inequality. Such a view gives absolute priority to the collective and denies that the interpersonal realm has any validity of its own. This may be right, but I for one will not concede it until a lot more analysis has been done! (cf Coleman, 1982, p. 38).

Fifthly, what are the different forms that power may take? Power is not a unidirectional, zero sum straightforward matter; it comes in many guises which need to be located and analysed. Rape, for example, is only one kind of power – unequal and non-consensual. It entails the least acceptable face of power – force and violence – which occurs when other forms of power break down. It is power of the ‘last resort’, and clearly sex could be used to establish other forms of power. For instance, a simple
continuum could be produced in which relationships are ranked through their equality and their consensual nature. In this way, sex may be used to establish non-consensual inequality, but it could be used to establish some form of consensual equality. Morgan would call this latter ‘democratic sexuality’, and she describes it as egalitarian ‘give and take’:

The possibility of their naked minds and bodies engaging one another – a joyous competition which must include any assumption of defeat as (i) temporary and (ii) utterly lacking in humiliation; of any triumph as obversely, impermanent and meaningless. (it is) the giving and taking of turns.  
(Morgan, 1977, p. 237)

Such an idea could not be further removed from the notion of rape, but there are a number of intermediate stages. For example, sex could be used to establish authority – as legitimate (consensual) but unequal power. Arguably, such a use is very common indeed – it is the pattern where the man may display his role as head of the family through his sexual rights over the wife and where the wife may agree to have her sexuality defined through her husband’s needs. Or sex could be used to establish persuasive power: here legitimacy is under threat, and to establish dominance resources of persuasion are evoked, like wealth or reputation (sexual harassment may be a good illustration here). This is only the most simple starting point, but some classification of the forms of power would seem to be a priority.

And, finally, a sixth question: can the analysis of power and sexuality guide us in making judgements about sexually acceptable and unacceptable conduct? We have inherited scores of clinical taxonomies of sexual perversion; they are the reality in which we still largely think, the disorders of aim and object. But maybe such variations, with their moral and medical judgements of what is permissible and impermissible, should be reconceptualized in social terms – perhaps, for example, along a democratic-force continuum such as I have described above. The more sex is used to gain unequal and non-consensual power, the more it should be viewed as a problem. In this view, rape would remain a key area of prohibition, the sexual harassment of women (and men) would be elevated to one, and even marital sexuality, where it is used to establish inequalities, would be identified as a problem. Some existing deviations’ would lose their stigma; homosexuality, for instance, would only be a problem when it is used to establish illegitimate power. And some other areas – maybe sadomasochism and paedophilia – would need a complete rethinking in order to elucidate their different power forms.  

Conclusion

The prime aim of this paper has been to place the specifics of this conference in a broad and social context, drawing on the concrete research findings of others. Taking ‘rape’ as a case study, I have tried to show that it is appropriately viewed not as mere sexual release but as a social meaning organized largely around the themes of power and aggression. It is used for social purposes – to gain power and enhance masculinity – and the case of male-on-male rape makes this doubly clear. The problem of rape becomes largely the problem of masculinity and it is this which needs to be scrutinized if the problem of rape is ever to be resolved. Finally, I suggested that rape was only one instance of the linkage between power and sexuality, and concluded with a series of questions to open up this broader analysis.

Notes

1. When men are the victims of rape, incest and child abuse, or when they are the subjects of pornography, this is usually at the hands of other men.
2. For instance, ‘paedophilia’ is a phenomenon constructed in male terms and thereby the definition excludes women.
3. For further instances see, for example, Barash (1981). Such writers are very sensitive to the accusation that they are ‘sexist’ – ‘it will be a gross abuse of science if evolution’s insights are used to support the culturally mediated exaggeration of sex differences in behaviour. Modern society continues to exploit women intolerably and to deprive them of their rights to an extent that demands redress. (but) ... A just society demands objective, unbiased facts’ (Barash, 1981, p. 90).
4. One area which is central to feminist analysis, but which I will largely ignore here, is that of the rape victim. The work of Burgess and Holmstrom (1974) is particularly prominent here, and it is informed by an interactionist perspective. For a useful review of the literature on rape victims, see Katz and Mazur (1979). For a recent summary of the general sociological approaches to rape, see Deming and Eppy (1982).
5. Amir’s study (1971, p. 341) suggests that 71 percent of rapes are planned, but others suggest a lower proportion (e.g. Clark and Lewis, 1978, p. 75).
6. Note that for the woman the story is different: if, as is usually the case, she has not anticipated the male entering a rape script she is left momentarily scriptless — without expectations, meanings or rules to use in the encounter. It is almost certainly this scriptlessness which causes women’s severe mental stress during the rape act — though this should not minimize the physical distress caused by the acts of aggression.

7. Sexuality, then, lies at the intersection of both social and psychic use. Sometimes such uses may be conscious and intended — the prostitute learns she may use sex to make money, the woman may learn she can use sex to affirm her attractiveness, the young (and moral crusader!) may learn it can be used as a symbol of challenge to parents (or social order), the couple may see it as symbolizing their ‘love bond’. These uses are well documented. More difficult, because they are less amenable to immediate discovery, are the zones where sex is used unconsciously or with unforeseen consequences (the psychodynamic views or the functionalist). Stoller’s view, for example, suggests that sexual excitement solves the problem of unresolved trauma, enabling hostility to one’s partner to be momentarily solved by sex. But, as he himself says, many people would deny that their sexuality has to do with hostility (Stoller, 1979, p. 22). Is this ‘denial’ or is it ‘truth’? The same goes for social analyses: for example, sex may come to be seen as a massive ratifier of the existing social hierarchies of dominance without ever being consciously engaged in for such reasons. This is a view I discuss later in this paper, but it is of a different order to that which focuses on conscious meaning.

8. There is a growing interest in ‘little rapes’ and especially in the whole problem of sexual harassment. This includes ‘verbal suggestions or jokes, constant leering or ogling, brushing against your body “accidentally”, a friendly pat, squeeze, pinch or arm against you, catching you alone for a quick kiss, the indecent proposition backed by the threat of losing your job...’ (see Evans, 1978; Farley, 1978; Mackinnon, 1979).

9. Clearly not all women seem to have this fear (e.g. Faust, 1982, p. 126). Some highly regarded women researchers have written huge volumes on ‘the female world’ and have not mentioned the ‘fear of rape’ that is so central for other women (e.g. Bernard, 1981). I am led to conclude that this fear is central for many, but by no means all women.

10. Brownmiller’s book Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (1975) is an exciting read — certainly a must for anyone looking at this area. It is full of historical detail and stimulating polemic. But it has been much criticized — for its unproblematic history, sweeping generalizations, underlying conception of the ‘natural’, its ‘law and order’ tone and its penchant for drastic overstatement. See, for example, Curtis (1976), Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1981) and Faust (1982).

11. Interestingly, in women’s prisons, where relationships usually embody friendship, it is intimacy and closeness and not power and dominance which are found extensively. Hence the lesbian subculture emerges as a mode of sustaining emotional ties. See Ward and Kassebaum (1966).

12. For an interesting recent discussion of the problem of homosexual victimization, see Miller and Humphries (1980).

13. Feminists often decry this interest in men’s insecurity. It is, they say, like worrying about the white man when he oppresses blacks, about the ruling class as they oppress the poor, or about the Nazi who gasses his victim. According to feminists, men need to be seen for what they are — the oppressors. Yet the problem of rape — which women bear the brunt of — is a problem of masculinity and it will not do to simply ignore it. To say that men are insecure is in no way to condone their conduct, but it is to argue that it needs to be understood. Only when it is understood will there be any hope of reducing/eliminating rape.

This is part of a wider worry. The growth in feminist studies during the 1970s has brought the study of women into sharp focus and much has been learned from it. However, men and masculinity have rarely been a focus of study: very little is known about the problem of masculinity. In my view, women’s plights cannot be comprehended without focusing on this problem of masculinity. See David and Brannon (1976), Tolson (1977), Hoch (1979), Hite (1981) and Pleck (1981) for some interesting attempts in this direction. For a scathing attack on masculinity — written by a man — see Stoltenberg (1975). The work of Dworkin (1981, 1982) remains the best example of feminist rage against men.

14. This is too large for me to document here. Two useful overviews are those by Wrong (1979) and Lukes (1978).

15. I am currently working on a book which deals with some of these problems.