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Male rape, masculinities, and sexualities

Aliraza Javaid

University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically engages with the different layers and dynamics of discourse pertaining to sexual violence, hegemonic masculinity, and male rape in the UK. This is achieved through the use of empirical data surrounding police officers, male rape therapists, counsellors, and voluntary agency caseworkers' attitudes toward, and responses to male rape victims (N = 70). The data were collected using interviews and questionnaires. The primary data not only give suggestions of how male rape is perceived and responded to by societies, state and voluntary agencies, but also give suggestions of how male rape victims may embody their 'broken' masculinities, considering that male sexual victimisation is embedded within destructive and painful taboo and stigma. Perhaps the most severely under-reported and under-recorded, male rape is one of several forms of sexual violence that goes unrecognised and unnoticed in academia and in western society. This paper, therefore, critically explores male rape discourse. It critically examines male rape from a masculinities and sexualities perspective, explaining how male rape is closely connected to hegemonic masculinity. The paper argues that taboos and stigmas of homosexuality and male rape challenge and contradict hegemonic masculinity. It also argues that prevailing and powerful discourses relating to hegemonic masculinity make male rape invisible, denying its existence and worth, whilst maintaining and supporting heterosexuality, patriarchy and harmful gender expectations of men. Male rape, then, is actively 'forgotten'.

1. Introduction

According to recent figures from the Crime Survey for England and Wales in 2013, approximately 9000 men are victims of rape or attempted rape each year (Ministry of Justice, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, 'male rape' is defined as an act of psychological, physical, and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, which is inflicted on a male without his consent by either a man or a woman, while also including a broad spectrum of other unwilling sexual acts in the critical discussions within this paper, such as non-consensual object penetration. Non-consensual anal and oral penetration come under this working definition. The rate of men who feel comfortable to report their rape to the police and the voluntary sector locally, nationally, and globally is considerably low in comparison to women (Javaid, 2017b). This low rate may be due to negative police attitudes and responses directed at men as victims of sexual violence (Javaid, 2014c; 2015a, 2017b). Although support is available for male rape victims across England and Wales, there are cultural, social and emotional barriers that hinder men from coming forward to report and to seek help, which means that such victims are often not referred to the most suitable agency to manage their needs (Badenoch, 2015). This is problematic for a number of reasons; for one, these victims may be left isolated, alone and emotionally damaged. Another implication is that societies may continue to deny the existence of male rape.

Building on an earlier analysis (Javaid, 2015b), with the support of the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, which is a form of masculinity that legitimates unequal relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and between

E-mail address: Ali.Javaid@uwe.ac.uk.

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masculinities, this paper critically engages with the discourse and language associated with male rape. This language and discourse is gleaned from primary data, involving police officers, male rape therapists, counsellors, and voluntary agency caseworkers', unveiling their attitudes toward and responses to male rape victims. It is important to become aware of such attitudes and responses since police officers and practitioners in voluntary agencies are often the first port of call for male rape victims. The voices of male rape victims themselves are not presented in this article but are documented in a different paper (see [Javaid, 2017a](#)). This paper will focus on adult male rape victims as opposed to male children who are victims of male rape. Setting this focus up will help meet the research aims more specifically. The article is about the narratives around male sexual victimization: how state and voluntary agency practitioners “construct” it and talk about it. This paper is based on the following research questions:

- How do notions of sexualities and masculinities affect and shape state and voluntary agencies' understanding of male rape and their views of men as victims of rape?
- What roles do sexualities and masculinities play in the discourse of male sexual victimisation?

2. Unique contributions of the current study

The current study contributes to theory, method and practice in a number of ways:

- 1) The current study contributes to current debates in gender and sexuality studies, adding to current understandings of social and cultural constructions of masculinities and sexualities. Identifying the links between gender, sexualities and male rape has largely been absent in gender and sexuality studies. The current study makes these links to recognise and understand the different ways in which practitioners navigate through different masculinities and sexualities, how they perpetuate or dispel certain gendered and sexualized male rape myths that can inform their service delivery, and how the practitioners position male victims in certain categories.
- 2) The current study also contributes to research methods and methodology. The qualitative data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires. The prior research on male rape rests mainly on quantitative research to recognise the frequency and patterns of male rape, and on interviews directly with male rape victims—both approaches are important to build a better and holistic understanding of male rape—but what is currently overlooked in the existing literature is a qualitative empirical insight into practitioners' worldview and their attitudes and responses to male rape. Generating detailed and contextual understandings of practitioners' understandings of male rape can add to the existing body of knowledge relating to male sexual victimisation, supplementing the current published studies on male rape.
- 3) Finally, the current study also contributes to policy and practice. The paper offers recommendations for policy and practice that can help shape better service delivery for male victims of rape. The paper offers ways wherein to dispel potential male rape myths and problematic attitudes in state and voluntary agencies, so that policy and practice can better meet victims' needs.

3. Hegemonic masculinity and male rape

Through social and power relations, male rape victims are placed at the bottom of the gender hierarchy because of their identification, emasculation and stigmatisation. Consequently, these victims are seen as challenging and contradicting the status quo, and the gender expectations and social ideals of men. Men are not expected to be victims, vulnerable, hurt, damaged, emotional and sensitive; by enacting these traits, however, they are not achieving hegemonic masculinity and are not seen as ‘real’ men ([Connell, 2005](#)).

[Connell \(1987\)](#) developed hegemonic masculinity as a form of masculinity within a given society-wide and historical setting that legitimates and structures hierarchical gender and power relations between women and men; between femininity (although femininities can be constructed in and through male bodies) and masculinity; and between masculinities, such as ethnic minority masculinities and gay masculinities. For Connell, enacting hegemonic masculinity is un-meaningful outside its relationship to non-hegemonic masculinities and femininities; in other words, the essence and meaning of hegemonic masculinity is unraveled through the legitimization of the relationship between femininity and between subordinate and subjugated forms of masculinities, such as ethnic minority masculinities and gay masculinities. Thus, hegemonic masculinity cannot stand-alone. It needs these other forms of subordinate masculinities to recognize and perpetuate the power of hegemonic masculinities.

Shedding some light on the primary data and on literature surrounding male rape, sexual violence, masculinities and sexualities, this paper will give an understanding of the issue of male rape in contemporary society and how hegemonic masculinity is appropriate to understand and explain male rape.

For this paper, the working definition of hegemonic masculinity is the one employed by Connell: to embody and enact hegemonic masculinity, it depends on the situation, context and setting in which one situates and it is a set of practices. The working definition of hegemonic masculinity will also include patterns of ‘masculine’ behaviors, whereby men enact the gender expectations of men. They embody, for example, power, control, dominance, maleness, self-reliance, invulnerability, unemotionality, aggressiveness, sexual promiscuousness, violence, physical strength when they draw on hegemonic masculinity.

The present paper contributes to the academic discussions of sexualities and masculinities by applying the concept of hegemonic masculinity to male rape. Employing this theoretical framework will advance our sociological understanding to help us understand and elucidate the different ways in which male rape is constructed and responded to. In what follows, the paper first contextualises male rape, masculinities and sexualities, so as to set the stage and to give some background context to the article. Following this, the

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