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### Behind-the-Scenes With Diana E. H. Russell

#### *The Contribution of Feminism to My Research on Rape*

"You have not made it clear that rape is an important problem or just the concern of a bunch of looney women."

—Gladys Handy,  
National Science Foundation, 1971

My personal experiences of child sexual abuse and my feminism both played major roles in my decision to conduct research on rape and other forms of misogynist sexual abuse and violence against females—starting in 1971 and continuing up until today. A rape trial that occurred in San Francisco in 1971 served as a catalyst for my feminist outrage at the sexist double standard that was manifested by the portrayal of the victim as the one on trial for her active sex life. In contrast, the promiscuity of her rapist, Jerry Plotkin, was used as a defense against her charge of rape. "Why

would he rape a woman if he had no trouble finding consenting female partners?" his attorney asked the jury in a skeptical tone.

My anger at such discriminatory "reasoning" resulted in my joining a feminist protest outside the courthouse with women who shared my feelings about the sexist character of the trial. We handed out leaflets denouncing the "Rape in the Courtroom." Informally, several of the protesters remarked about the many women they knew who had been raped, suggesting that rape is a common male practice. I was astounded by this claim and unaware that any of the women I knew had been raped.

This experience made it clear to me how little I knew about rape from the victim's perspective, and I decided to investigate what the scholarly literature had to say about it. Once again, my feminist perspective enabled me to recognize, with shock, how sexist and victim blaming the literature was. Later, my feminist perspective enabled me to recognize the role of misogyny in the many other forms of sexual exploitation, sexual coercion, and violence against women and girls—in addition to rape.

However, I believe that a traumatic experience of sexual abuse when I was 15 years old was by far the most potent motivator for my lifelong investigation of males' sexual abuse and sexual violence against women and girls. I wasn't aware of this source of my motivation at the time. It was an insight that developed much later.

I was enraged by Plotkin being found "not guilty" by the jurors. Realizing that the jurors had been forced to listen to highly prejudicial testimony, I was determined that my study would present the *victims'* perspectives (the term *survivor* came into use much later), which I predicted would be entirely different from the way they appeared in court records and newspaper accounts.

The ignorant, disrespectful, unprofessional, and sexist response to my grant proposal on rape by Gladys Handy, a staff member at the National Science Foundation whose task it was to evaluate my proposal, is cited in the opening epigram. Dismayed by Handy's hostile reaction, I embarked on an exploratory study of survivors' experiences of rape in Berkeley and Oakland, California, without benefit of funding. I and three student volunteers conducted face-to-face interviews with more than 80 volunteer rape survivors. This study resulted in my book *The Politics of Rape: The Victims' Perspective* (Russell, 1975), in which I argued that rape was not a deviant male act but one that conformed to typical notions of masculinity in our patriarchal society.

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Because the publisher (Stein & Day) demanded the deletion of the main theoretical chapter in my manuscript, its publication was delayed for over a year. Nevertheless, it was the third feminist book to contribute to the revolutionizing of the social scientific literature on rape—and subsequently of large portions of the United States' population (Connell & Wilson, 1974, and Medea & Thompson, 1974, were the first two books published on rape; I was unaware of both these volumes when writing my book).

Having heard several feminists claim that rape was a common crime against women, in contrast to the assumption of most nonfeminists who considered it a relatively infrequent crime, I decided that it was vitally important that I try to get funding to conduct a relatively large scale scientific study of the prevalence of rape in nearby San Francisco to evaluate which of these diametrically opposed views was correct. By this time, the National Institute of Mental Health had provided funding especially for rape research. My proposed survey research project was among their first proposals to be funded in 1977.

In addition to wanting to ascertain the prevalence of rape in a probability sample of women residents who were 18 years and older in San Francisco, I also endeavored to determine the prevalence of incest, extrafamilial child sexual abuse, sexual abuse by authority figures, and the effects on the victims/survivors of all these forms of sexual violation and violence. However, this article will focus on the impact of my feminist perspective on my methodology for estimating the prevalence of rape.

### *Methodology*

I considered subcontracting with the University of California at Berkeley's Survey Research Center to conduct the field work phase of my project. However, I learned that they would not allow me to have any input into the training of the interviewers. This was the major reason for my abandoning this idea. Here's why: one of the most basic tenets of survey research is that it is unnecessary to inform the interviewers about the subject under investigation or to select them on the basis of their attitudes to the topic—even if the topic is considered taboo in society. However, I decided that this standard survey research rule was inappropriate for my study because of the taboo nature of the topics I wanted to inquire about and the victim-blaming attitudes most people had about rape and other

forms of sexual assault at that time. Many women are likely to remain silent when an unknown interviewer asks them about their experience(s) of rape because of their feelings of shame, self-blame, and anxiety about being blamed by the interviewer, especially if the interviewer conveys, even if subtly, that victims are responsible for their victimization. Sending *supposedly* unbiased interviewers into the field without first educating them about the issues involved would have severely undermined my attempt to obtain high disclosure of rape, incest, and other forms of sexual assaults.

Hence, I decided to subcontract only the drawing of my survey sample. I hired Field Research Corporation, a well-known and highly reputable marketing and public opinion research firm in San Francisco, for this task. I ended up with a probability sample of 930 women residents of San Francisco aged 18 years and older. A team of 33 interviewers with different ethnic and class identities interviewed this sample of women during the summer of 1978 (for further information about the methodology of this study, see Russell, 1984).

The 65 hours of intensive training for the 33 interviewers included at least 10 hours of education about rape and incest. This included listening to personal rape and incest testimony volunteered by some of the interviewers and other staff, viewing a feminist movie about rape, and receiving direct instruction about rape—for example, that many women are the victims of multiple rapes. Therefore interviewers were instructed not to be surprised when they found themselves interviewing such women.

However, 10 hours of training cannot transform a bigot into an unprejudiced person. Therefore, interviewers were selected for their nonblaming attitudes toward sexual assault victims as well as for their interviewing skills. In addition, since the survey was limited to female respondents, I did not even contemplate hiring male interviewers.

I also considered it vitally important to construct an interview schedule that would avoid any hint of victim blaming. So, for example, the respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a number of statements that were intended to achieve this goal before they were asked any questions about their experiences, if any, of rape, sexual abuse by relatives and/or nonrelatives, and so on: for example, "Any woman could be a victim of rape or sexual assault"; "Most women experience some kind of sexual assault at least once in their lives"; "Given the

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right situation, most men are capable of committing rape"; and "Rape victims are not responsible for having been raped." Another statement was designed to encourage respondents to disclose their experiences: "It is usually helpful to talk about painful experiences." Conveying bias in this fashion is contrary to a basic tenet of questionnaire design requiring that researchers *avoid* showing any such bias by alternating such questions to convey "objectivity" about the topic under investigation.

My knowledge about rape caused me to avoid using this term unless there was an important reason to do so. For example, one of 38 questions on sexual assault and abuse in my interview schedule used the word *rape* to illuminate how many women conceptualized their experiences as rape—which I defined as forced intercourse, intercourse obtained by threat of force, or intercourse completed when a woman was drugged, unconscious, or physically incapacitated in some way, or attempts at such acts (this was the legal definition of rape in California at that time—except that my study included cases of wife rape). I excluded taboo terms because I anticipated that many respondents would not apply such value-laden terms to their experiences. My expectation was confirmed, as is evident in the next section.

### *Findings on Prevalence Rates*

The wisdom of my feminist understanding of women's experiences of rape was confirmed by the unprecedentedly high disclosure rate obtained by my survey methodology. For example, 22% of the 930 respondents disclosed experiences of completed and/or attempted rape in answer to the one question that used the word *rape*.<sup>1</sup> When completed rape and attempted rape were combined, the standard practice of the official FBI's statistics, 44% of the sample disclosed at least one completed or attempted rape. Hence, the direct question about rape yielded only half the actual rape experiences reported by the respondents.

### *Conclusion*

I believe that the high disclosure rates obtained by my methodology were due to my feminist understanding about rape. Following is a summary of some of the main methodological features that I believe

explain how my survey obtained such relatively high prevalence rates for rape—substantially higher than any comparable study thereafter (see Russell & Bolen, 2000):

- The use of a large range of questions in the interview schedule that helped to tap women's memories of rape experiences
- The inclusion of questions that conveyed a non-victim-blaming attitude or bias on the part of the study
- Avoidance of the word *rape* in all but one of the questions in the interview schedule
- The exclusive use of female interviewers
- Careful selection of interviewers who did not subscribe to the usual myths about rape
- Rigorous training of interviewers in both administration of the interview schedule and education about rape
- Matching the ethnicity of interviewers and respondents, as far as this was possible

For reasons unknown, no researcher in the United States has replicated some of the important methodological features of my prevalence study, except for the use of female interviewers. Is it any wonder, then, that no other survey has even approached finding the prevalence rates for rape obtained in my survey? (This statement is substantiated in Russell & Bolen, 2000.) I believe my survey demonstrates the crucial importance of employing feminist research methodology to estimate the prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual abuse and violence. Only space prevented me from including a similar description of my feminist methodology and findings on the prevalence of incestuous and extrafamilial child sexual abuse. I believe a feminist perspective will be found to be equally important when conducting research on numerous other topics.

Feminist research and analysis of rape has revolutionized the understanding of rape in Western nations and others. I am proud to be one of the initiators with a few other researchers and many courageous rape survivors who were willing to speak up about their experiences.

### *Note*

1. Two coders and I evaluated whether or not each of the experiences respondents described as rape met the study's definitions of rape and attempted rape.