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An Explanation of Human Rape: An Integration of Sociobiology and Social Science

Krystle George*

The study of human rape within a sociobiological framework has been a topic of public debate for decades, most notably after the release of biologist Edward O. Wilson's book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975). As sociobiology is based on the theory of evolution, Wilson's book analyzed the social behaviour of animals, thus asserting that their social adaptations can be compared to the social behaviours of human-beings (Clark, 1991). Through this sociobiological framework various social behaviours of humans were addressed for further study, including the controversial subject of human rape (Clark, 1991). Among the supporters of this framework, none are as infamous as biologist Randy Thornhill and anthropologist Craig Palmer, who co-wrote *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (2000). This notorious book outlines several possible human rape adaptations, virtually all of which concern reproductive strategies. The works of such authors have been criticized by the social sciences, including feminist academics like Susan Brownmiller, who claim that rape is not about sex, but power and domination (Thompson, 2009). Meanwhile, many sociobiology supporters, including Thornhill and Palmer (2000), maintain that rape is about sexual desire, and claim that the social sciences lack merit in their research on rape because their theories do not consider the evolutionary causes of human behaviour (p. xi). As this essay will demonstrate, both cultural and evolutionary forces have been shown to have considerable effects on the occurrence of rape. Therefore, I argue for an integration of both approaches in order to successfully understand and thus potentially prevent and eradicate rape.

The inglorious act of human rape and its possible causes have been widely debated by evolutionists and social scientists for decades. Sociobiology in particular has been subject to mass scrutiny, as it takes an evolutionary approach in understanding rape. In this methodology, rape is theorized to be an element of sexual or natural selection. As such, rape is understood as a form of social behaviour that has evolved over time to enhance the procreative powers of rapists (Crawford & Galdikas, 1986). Thus, sociobiologists theorize that rape is an adaptation chosen through sexual selection in order to enhance reproductive success and fitness. However, many social science and feminist scholars, such as Susan Brownmiller, have disagreed with biological explanations of rape and, instead, argue that it is a culturally learned phenomenon that is about power and control,

rather than the act of sex itself (Thompson, 2009). In contrast, Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer (2000) contend that sexual motivation is central to rape, and that the social sciences have based their explanations of rape on ideologies rather than science. Nonetheless, both approaches have viable evidence supporting the existence of both power and sexual motivation as explanations for human rape. As a result of this, I argue that there is no sole cause or explanation for the occurrence of rape. Rape, in itself, is not a single category of human behaviour, as females of reproductive age are not the only victims. It affects many different ages, both sexes, and can occur in many different situations. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to the study of rape. As such, in order to successfully understand and thus prevent rape, there must be an integration of the evolutionary and social sciences.

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The following essay deconstructs both sociobiological and sociocultural explanations of rape, by questioning the limitations posed by *both* approaches, as well as select hypotheses within each perspective that may contribute to a better understanding of rape. I will do this, in part, by arguing that rape, as a reproductive strategy, is consistent with statistical research, but is hindered for many reasons including the hetero-normative descriptions that have led to a monolithic explanation of rape. This essay will conclude with a brief summary, reaffirming that an interdisciplinary approach must be taken in order to potentially prevent the act of human rape.

The Rise of Sociobiology and Definitions of Rape

In 1975, biologist Edward O. Wilson unleashed his book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* unto the world, an almost seven hundred page model outlining the innate causes of human behaviour. As the basis of sociobiology lies in the theory of evolution, Wilson (1975) focused his studies on animals and their social adaptations, asserting that sociobiology would further explain the behaviour of humans. Wilson's book created a sociobiological framework in which human behaviour was intensely studied by other leading biologists, essentially laying the foundation for the study of rape (Clark, 1991). For instance, in regards to the sexual aggression of animals, he stated that males might intimidate or force themselves upon their victims as a procreative strategy or to coerce "them into a more prolonged sexual alliance" (Wilson, 1975, p. 242). Consequently, an evolutionary explanation of rape was born, and would be further investigated and publicized by numerous sociobiology supporters in search for answers as to why human rape occurs.

Before delving into the various approaches used to explain human rape, it is important to first define what rape is. I define rape as forced sexual contact with a person of any

gender that results in the penetration of the vagina, rectum, or mouth, by penis, or other body parts such as fingers, or objects. Definitions have varied across time periods and people and have been contested for more inclusive definitions, most notably since the second wave of feminism. In 1983, Randy Thornhill defined rape in *Human Rape: An Evolutionary Analysis*, as "forced copulation of a female by a male" (p. 140). He later revised this definition of rape in 2000 to "[sexual intercourse] resisted to the best of the victim's ability unless such resistance would probably result in death or serious injury" (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000, p.1). This injury could be towards the victim themselves, or someone close to the victim, such as their child (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). The problems associated with this definition will be addressed, however it is crucial to first discuss the two levels of causation that evolutionists use to understand human behaviour, and the possible theories as to the causes of human rape, as posed by Thornhill and Palmer (2000).

The

Causes of Human Behaviour: Ultimate vs. Proximate

To begin, it must be mentioned that sociobiologists do not use evolution as an excuse for rape, rather as an explanation that could possibly lead to prevention. In the preface of *A Natural History of Rape*, Thornhill and Palmer (2000) assert that they would like to see the social problem of human rape eliminated from society. The solution to this problem, they believe, can be answered by studying the origins, or *causes* of social behaviour (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). In essence, sociobiology seeks to explain, not justify, the causes of human behaviour. Thornhill and Palmer (2000) define cause "as that without which an effect or a phenomenon would not exist" (p.4). There are two levels of causation that sociobiologists study which are *proximate* and *ultimate* (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Proximate causes of behaviour are described as being the instant causes of human and animal actions (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Thornhill and

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Palmer (2000) claim that many social scientists and feminists are preoccupied solely with the proximate causes of rape, which limits the potential for ultimate explanations. For example, Thornhill and Palmer (2000) argue that when a man rapes a woman, it is usually assumed that he raped her because he had an exploitative childhood or enjoys making women feel powerless, and so forth, which would be focusing on the proximate causes of the man's actions. However, if people were to ask why the proximate causes occur to begin with, they would be concerning themselves with the ultimate cause of the man's behaviour (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). In other words, "proximate explanations have to do with how such developmental or physiological mechanisms cause something to happen; ultimate explanations have to do with why particular proximate mechanisms exist" (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000, p. 4). Thornhill and Palmer (2000) look at both explanations, but their main goal is to discover the ultimate causes of behaviour in order to make sufficient change. Moreover, they believe that the only way to find the ultimate causes of human behaviour is through the study of the evolution of adaptations (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000, p. 5).

The Sociobiological Explanation of Rape

Thornhill and Palmer (2000) suggest that ultimate causes of human rape are produced by either adaptations in natural selection or by by-products. By-products are traits or behaviours that are shaped secondarily by the forces of the selection process (Thornhill & Palmer 2000). Firstly, rape may be an adaptation because it improves the chances of fertilization (Thornhill & Palmer 2000). Secondly, rape may be a by-product of other adaptations such as "those that function to produce the sexual desires of males for multiple partners" (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000, p. 60). The majority of their book focuses on rape adaptations, rather than by-products, and thus I will focus on the former as theorized by Thornhill

and Palmer (2000) to explain the ultimate causes of human rape.

Thornhill and Palmer (2000) assess six possible human rape adaptations caused by a variety of "psychological mechanisms" (p. 65), which are all based on possible reproductive strategies. Of the six, there are two that deserve mention. Firstly, they argue that these "mechanisms" or "factors" may cause men to rape women because they do not have an immediate means to a female relationship that may result in consensual sex (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Essentially, men who rape women, do so because they do not have an adequate means to women, and are therefore forced to rape in order to reproduce (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Secondly, Thornhill and Palmer (2000) argue that these factors may influence men to rape females according to the victim's sexual fertility, which is linked directly with her age (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). This latter mechanism is the most viable hypothesis and has been supported by statistical research. This theory suggests that men are more likely to rape women who are young and fertile, and therefore rape is an adaptation that was formed in order to capitalize on its procreative functions (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Therefore, it is possible that sexual selection "might have produced a psychological mechanism influencing males to be more likely to rape highly fertile females" (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000, p.71).

In the U.S. approximately 32,000 pregnancies per year occur as a result of rape (Thompson, 2009). However, it must be established that this is an underestimate due to under reporting, emergency contraceptives, and birth control (Thompson, 2009). Furthermore, countless studies reveal an overrepresentation of young women as rape victims. In 1993, the National Crime Victimization Survey Report indicated that the highest instances of rape occurred in young women ages 16-24, with the second highest range being 12-15 years old

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(Thompson, 2009). Moreover, in a study conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2000, nearly 78% of female rape victims were between the ages of 12 and 34, and nearly 57% of the victims were between 12 and 24 years old (Snyder, 2000). Although these statistics can be used to verify a connection between reproductive age and rape as posed by Thornhill and Palmer (2000), it is important to note that this is not an excuse for men to rape, rather a theorized subconscious adaptive trait formed out of evolution. Thornhill and Palmer (2000) conclude that rape among humans occurs for the reason that “selection” did not lead towards the kind of adaptations that could potentially eliminate rape. For instance, they argue that if, during sexual selection, females had been designed to always agree to engage in sexual intercourse, there would be no such thing as rape (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000). However, only the adaptations that facilitate rape survived, therefore they argue that it is crucial to examine the evolved sexuality of both genders, formed through natural selection, in order to accurately explain the “ultimate” and “proximate” reasons for rape (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). As such, they both contend that sex and sexuality are fundamental aspects to rape (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000), and disagree with sociocultural explanations that are based on notions that rape is about power and not sex or sexual desire.

The Sociocultural Explanation of Rape: Feminist Perspectives

It is a common view within mainstream feminist discourse that rape is a derivative of patriarchy; it is culturally learned and propagated, not for sexual purposes, but in order to maintain power and control over women (Vandermassen, 2011). Feminist scholar Susan Brownmiller (1976) has played a significant role in publicizing this view and rejects all notions of evolutionary perspectives on rape. She essentially ignores all empirical evidence posed by sociobiologists and denies that rape exists within the animal kingdom (Brownmiller, 1976). She does acknowledge rape

as a historical occurrence, but argues that it began with man and not primates (Brownmiller, 1976). She believes that when men learned that their phallus could be used to produce terror in order to maintain power over women, the act of rape manifested into “a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, 1976, p.5). Therefore, she argues that society needs to deconstruct the cultural elements that naturalize and promote rape within our cultures (Brownmiller, 1976). It is true that culture can have a significant impact on the promotion and proliferation of rape. Patriarchy is far from its demise, and women in many cultures are still considered to be inferior to men.

Moreover, Alyn Pearson (2000) refers to rape as a “cultural disease” that has been propagated by rape myths and media depictions of women (p.13). She argues that we live in a society that has become complicit in rape culture, in which rape and violence against women have been naturalized and accepted, especially in regards to media and film (Pearson, 2000). For instance, she argues that rape scenes in movies display rape as a form of sexual desire and are framed to “turn viewers on,” rather than show the criminal aspects of the forced sexual assault (Pearson, 2000, p.14). In doing this, she asserts that many films with rape scenes actually depict rape as “sexy,” presenting women as weak and helpless and men as powerful (Pearson, 2000). She contends that it is a myth that rape is about sex, and as long as society continues to buy into the falsehood that rape is about sexual desire rather than power, rape culture will continue to grow and have detrimental effects on the lives of women (Pearson, 2000). As Pearson (2000) views rape as an “endemic social disease” (p.14), she believes that the only way to potentially “cure” rape is to recognize the cultural elements within society that breed the acceptance of rape, and abolish them. Cultural determinants for the existence of rape cannot be denied, as societal forces have been proven to have undeniable effects on the behaviour of human populations.

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Rape culture and rape myths do exist, and their existence is proof that culture, in itself, is a propagator of rape. However, to claim that rape has nothing to do with sex is a falsehood that needs to be further explored.

Conflicting Theories and Critical Analysis

Thornhill and Palmer (2000) acknowledge that there may be several different proximate motivations as to why men rape. For example, they assert that a man may resort to raping a woman if she rejected his prior attempts to engage in sexual relations, solely out of spite (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000). However, regardless of what the proximate causes of the rape are (e.g., power or dominance), it does not diminish the sexual aspects or motivations of the attempted or achieved rape. Although power and supremacy over women may be a proximate cause as to why men rape, if it were purely about hostility, men would most likely release their frustrations by physically assaulting the victim, versus raping them (Rada as cited in Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

In contrast, Brownmiller (1976) believes that there are no connections between sexual desire and rape. She confirmed this by arguing that, because rape victims are wide-ranging in age and do not always represent societal notions of beauty, rape could not possibly be about sex (Brownmiller as cited in Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). She states that rape can occur at virtually any age, which is valid, however it is a mistake to claim that, just because a woman is old or “unattractive,” there is no sexual motivation. Irrespective of her claims, as previously noted, young women are more likely to be raped than any other age group (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). Thornhill and Palmer (2000) link the ages of young women who are overrepresented in rape cases to the age of their “peak female attractiveness” (p. 138) and conclude that sexual attractiveness and sexual desire are key motivations to rape. This idea is further confirmed by statistics that state that men who rape young women are more likely to use

penis penetration into the vagina as a means of fulfilling the rape, as opposed to when they rape or molest females who are not within the reproductive age (e.g., children and the elderly) (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). For these reasons, it would be incorrect to propose that rape is not a sexually driven crime, as sex and power are both essential elements to rape. However, many evolutionary biologists and feminists have refused to acknowledge the necessity of the convergence of their research materials, in order to potentially eradicate and prevent rape.

To enumerate, Thornhill and Palmer (2000), among others, have strategically demoralized social science methods in rape research, and have completely disregarded important cultural explanations as “ideological” rather than empirical. For example, Thornhill and Palmer (2000) reject the notion of “learning theory” as posed by many social scientists as a mean to explaining rape (p.123-24). The effect that culture and socialization have had on populations has been proven by numerous sociological studies, and branding social science explanations of rape as “ideological” is an ideological claim in itself. Moreover, Thornhill and Palmer (2000) have failed to realize their own shortcomings within their sociobiological framework. For example, a reproductive strategy does not explain the rape of males by other males, which affect one in ten males in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). It is for these reasons that sociobiology has created a hetero-normative explanation of rape.

Stevi Jackson (2005) asserts that sociobiology naturalizes heterosexuality as the only form of human sexual expression, especially in regards to the notion of the “reproductive imperative: the ‘need’ to find a mate and pass on...genes to the next generation” (p. 143). This concept is central to human rape adaptations, as the fundamental reason why men are hypothesized to rape is to spread their sperm to inseminate the female in order to produce potential offspring. As mentioned, this can

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possibly explain the majority of rapes of females, but what about the rape of males by other males?

Moreover, the rape adaptation theory (e.g., “lack of sexual access”), posed by Thornhill and Palmer (2000), could have been a potential theory as to why men rape other men, in spite of the “reproductive success” hypothesis. For instance, a potential area of study could have researched the high incidences of rape within male prison systems and the military. However, because of the hetero-normative nature of sociobiology, this area of study has remained virtually untouched. Instead, the “lack of sexual access” rape adaptation theory suggests that when men do not know a woman who is willing to consent to sex, the only alternative they have, in order to *reproduce*, is to commit rape (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). However, this theory fails to recognize the phenomenon of acquaintance rape, which accounts for the majority of rapes, in which case the attackers are usually in relationships and have sexual access to their partners (Thomson, 1991). In fact, one in thirteen American women are raped by their spouses (Thompson, 1991). Thus, theorizing that rape may exist because men do not have the ability to find consenting females is not a viable hypothesis.

Summary and the Need for Joint Research

By only looking at reproductive strategies as possible causations for sexual assault, sociobiologists have created a monolithic explanation of rape. A human rape adaptation geared for reproductive success can explain the rape of young women who are overrepresented as rape victims; however it fails to explain the cause of the rape of children, both male and female, the rape of elderly persons, the rape of persons with non-bodily objects, and the rape of men by men. By suggesting that rape is an adaptation for reproductive success, it normalizes heterosexuality within the sociobiological framework, which inevitably leaves limited room for further research on other forms of rape.

The revised definition of rape, as previously noted by Thornhill and Palmer (2000), is not inclusive of the numerous forms of rape that victims are subjected to. In the revised version, they substitute “female” with “victim” but the definition still alludes to hetero-normative standards. For instance, their revised definition of rape concludes with this sentence: “other sexual assaults, including oral and anal penetration of a man or a woman under the same conditions, also *may* be called rape under *some* [emphasis added] circumstances” (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000, p. 1). The use of language in this statement reveals the limits of their research and a lack of interest for other forms of rape that do not comply with their rape adaptation theory. More breadth is needed within their framework to include the wide range of human rape that currently exists. This is where the cultural explanations of rape come into play. Rape culture has perpetuated male power and dominance over women within many societies, which has led to the mass victimization of females on a global level. Cultural forces do have an impact on the perpetuation and normalization of rape; however it is a falsehood to claim that rape is solely an act of domination. As this paper has shown, rape should be considered an act of sex and power; you cannot have one without the other.

As revealed above, there is no single hypothesis for the ultimate cause of rape. Rape, in itself, is not a singularity, as this essay has shown that there are many different types of rape and possible reasons for its occurrence. In an ultimate sense, “men may rape because it increases their biological fitness and thus rape may serve, at least in part [in regards to fertile young women], a reproductive function.” However, “in an immediate proximate [or cultural] sense it is as likely that they rape because they are angry or hostile” (Shields & Shields, 1983, p.122). Therefore, it is possible that rape may occur for both evolutionary and cultural reasons, and the only way to test this

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hypothesis is by a convergence of research by both the evolutionary and social sciences.

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