



**Rape is a huge issue in this country: discursive constructions of the rape crisis in South Africa**

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## Article

### **“Rape is a *huge* issue in this country”: Discursive constructions of the rape crisis in South Africa**

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#### **Abstract**

This article considers how the issue of rape in South Africa is discursively constructed by women who have not experienced it. Taking a feminist discursive analytic approach to data from 15 semi-structured interviews, the article identifies four interpretative repertoires which the women used in their talk of rape. These are the: statistics repertoire, invoking putatively objective rape statistics; crime repertoire, locating rape within a crisis of crime; race repertoire, naming the racial Other as the rapist; and gender repertoire, explaining rape in terms of normal gendered dynamics and practices. The women chiefly deployed the statistics, crime and race repertoires. These repertoires intersected to construct rape as horrifically prevalent in South Africa yet concerning a classed, raced and spatially-distanced ‘Other.’ They also elided a focus on the gendered scripts and power relations which South African feminists implicate centrally in what they deem a national rape crisis.

#### **Key Words**

rape, South Africa, discourse, statistics, crime, race, gender

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#### **Introduction**

Rape is widely said to constitute a crisis of epidemic proportions in post-apartheid South Africa, and alarming statistics and stories of it circulate in local media, research and everyday talk (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Moffett 2006; Nuttall 2004; Posel 2005).

Rejecting the notion that acts of rape have simply spiralled since the formal dismantling of apartheid in 1994, du Toit (2005) and Posel (2005) suggest that it is *talk of rape* which has

escalated in a greatly liberalised political, media and policing climate. The struggle against apartheid prioritised matters of race over all others. Thus the transition to democracy and lifting of the apartheid police state helped to render a gendered issue such as rape more speakable. The new constitution enshrining women's rights also helped to enable greater feminist and legal activism around gender violence and related issues (Bennett 2008; du Toit 2005; Posel 2005). Du Toit argues, then, that the post-apartheid rise in reported rapes should be "interpreted as the 'normalization' of statistics in a climate of greater political stability and as an indication of women's determination to make the new democracy work for them" (2005: 269).

A "media blitz" first brought the issue of rape to wide and outraged popular attention in South Africa in 2001 (Posel 2005). Public engagement with rape heightened again in 2006, the year of the research presented in this article. That year, the new black political leadership became directly implicated in the crisis. Jacob Zuma, then vice president of the ruling party (and now president of South Africa), was accused of rape by a younger woman. His ensuing trial exposed "the underbelly of post-apartheid South Africa. Beneath the heroic façade of the Constitution, it seemed, a vicious cocktail of violence, sexism and hatred brewed" (Hassim 2009: 57). Zuma's supporters congregated daily outside the courthouse chanting statements such as 'burn the bitch' and burning images of his accuser. Feminist and other activists also rallied at the scene in solidarity with this woman and others who would dare seek justice in such a hostile climate. Their placards invoked South African women's extensive constitutional rights and criticized the state for its continued failure to protect women (Bennett 2008).

Feminists in South Africa have also faulted the ways in which rape is put into discourse, from the law to the media. Indeed with local headlines such as 'SA: NATION OF RAPISTS' (*The Sun*, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2006) – which I saw on a Cape Town billboard while en

route to interview one of the women in this study – rape inhabits a particularly fraught, contested and politicised discursive terrain. The white-dominated press has tended to racialise rape as a black issue, suggesting that it “represents a generic act on the part of black men” (Erlank 2005: 205; also Bonnes 2011; Posel 2005). Moffett (2006) contends that such assumptions shape popular talk, too. Such representations may instigate anger and defensiveness among black South Africans, as was most prominently the case with former president Thabo Mbeki who expressed skepticism about the rising rape statistics (Posel 2005). Conversely, racialised and sometimes frankly alarmist media representations of rape may fuel white South African anxiety about the prospects of the new nation (Nuttall 2004).

South African feminists historicize what they deem a national crisis and indeed culture of rape, however, variously understanding it as a manifestation of gendered norms scripted by South Africa’s intersectionally violent and oppressive past (e.g. Nuttall 2004; du Toit 2005; Gqola 2007; Moffett 2006). Moffett argues that in the post-apartheid context, rape is “fuelled by justificatory narratives that are rooted in apartheid practices that legitimated violence by the dominant group against the disempowered” (2006: 129). Hegemonic masculinities *across colour lines* are deeply patriarchal and normalise violence as a male resource, particularly against women (Bennett 2005; Gqola 2007; Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Moffett 2006; Nuttall 2004). Jewkes and Abrahams state that “male control of women and notions of male sexual entitlement feature strongly in the dominant social constructions of masculinity in South Africa” (2002: 1238). Gqola (2007) theorises a complementary “cult of femininity” which continues to cast women into subordinate roles, especially in the private realm. Gender violence and women’s vulnerability to it are further exacerbated by the poverty and social inequality which most South Africans continue to endure (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002).

This article concerns ‘lay’ perspectives on rape in South Africa, exploring how women who attest that they have not experienced rape discursively construct the said crisis around them. There are few studies of how rape is constructed as a social issue or crisis in South Africa. Most focus on general media discourse or on particular cases. For instance, Buthelezi (2007) and Bonnes (2011) look at representations of gender, race and class in local newspaper coverage of rape; Nuttall (2004) and Posel (2005) map scandalised public responses to the reported rapes of very young girls in 2001; Reddy and Potgieter (2006) analyse the discursive meanings surrounding rape that emerged from the Zuma trial. It is from such media sources and from comments by public figures that Moffett (2006) makes inferences about popular perspectives. The present article is significant, then, for empirically mapping everyday talk of rape in South Africa. Moreover, the article does so considering a set of women’s imaginations and fears of rape rather than their experiences of it. In this regard it adds to feminist research on gender violence in South Africa which has centred thus far on women (and men’s) accounts of personal experience (e.g. Boonzaier 2008; Boonzaier and de la Rey 2003).

A key finding within this research on gender violence is the extent of sexual violence and coercion in ‘normal’ heterosexual relationships. Among others, this has implications for naming rape. For instance, Boonzaier (2008) cites women in abusive relationships who describe their forced sexual experiences not as rape but ‘like rape,’ while Wood *et al.* (1998) find that young women are encouraged by their peers to silence such experiences, with some even coming to see their male partners’ violence as expressions of love. Given such findings and indeed the prevalence of rape in South Africa, it is arguable that popular attitudes and perceptions that drive rape, or that may serve to counter it, are empirically under-researched. Attitudes that blame victims and excuse perpetrators of rape, or justify male sexual power and female subordination, for instance, have been explored only in small-scale cognitive

studies (e.g. Heaven et al. 1998; Sikwewiya *et al.* 2007). Such attitudes have also emerged in research on themes such as youth sexualities (e.g. Wood and Jewkes 1997; Wood *et al.* 1998) and HIV/AIDS transmission among at-risk populations (Kalichman *et al.* 2005).

‘Rape perception’ research is well-developed beyond South Africa, however, particularly within mainstream psychology (e.g. see Anderson and Doherty 2008; Ward 1995). According to Anderson and Doherty’s critical review, rape perception studies tend to draw upon attribution theory and utilise positivist and experimentalist methods to explore “causal reasoning about rape, attributions of fault, blame and responsibility and the beliefs and attitudinal characteristics of social observers (2008: 25). The most common method is for researchers to present respondents with vignettes of rape scenarios varying perpetrators’ and victims’ traits, and a recurring finding is that participants tend to blame victims. Yet Anderson and Doherty (2008) show how culturally dominant rape myths, including victim-blaming, are built inadvertently into the epistemological and methodological premises of such research. Most notably, the mere fact of asking participants to assess different rape vignettes and identities implies that some rapes are more or less deserved or understandable, and assumes that respondents can cognitively distinguish these.

Anderson and Doherty (2008) make a case instead for discursive approaches towards research participants’ understandings of rape, to allow meanings to emerge rather than predefining or imposing them. This is the approach I take in this article. However, the article does not present a study of rape perception *per se*, as briefly characterised above. The focus is not on how respondents define rape, legitimate or assign blame for any particular rape scenario, or express attitudes towards rape perpetrators or victims. It is on how a set of women talk of rape as a particular issue in South Africa: where they socially locate it, what and whom they implicate in its occurrence, and the political and practical effects of these constructions. The larger research project from which the article draws explored how the

women's constructions of the rape crisis impact their gendered subjectivities (Dosekun 2007a).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This article presents and analyses data from semi-structured interviews which I conducted with 15 women based at the University of Cape Town (UCT), an elite South African tertiary institution. All of the women were students at UCT except one who was an administrative staff member. Thus the sample was distinctly educated and, in the course of the interviews, many women indexed other aspects of their socio-economic privilege. A mature student and the staff member were in their 40s while the other respondents ranged from 19 to 26. Seven of the women identified as white, five as black or African, and three as coloured.<sup>i</sup> One woman identified as bisexual while the others identified as heterosexual. Black lesbians in South Africa face an explicit homophobic threat of rape (Mkhize *et al.* 2010), hence are likely to have brought important perspectives to bear on my research questions. Their omission constitutes a regretted gap.

12 of the women in the study responded to posters that I placed around the UCT campus inviting women who had “not experienced rape” to participate in a confidential interview about it. The other three women learned of the study via similarly phrased email or verbal calls for participants. None of these calls for participants presumed to define rape, nor could they practically, meaning the women self-identified according to their subjective understandings of what constitutes rape. While methodologically consistent with a discursive analytic approach, this raised other methodological and also ethical concerns. One was that participants might have experiences that I or others *would* define as rape. I did not probe this in the interviews as it was not the research purpose, and the women's talk gave me no

obvious indication to, yet the consideration remains. A second ethical concern of mine was that the framing of the calls for participants could seem ominous to women who identified with them, in a national context in which the odds of being raped were said to be high. If this heightened participants' consciousness or fear of rape, it may have then shaped their orientation to the interviews.

Similarly, as I interviewed the 15 women for over one hour on average about rape and related themes, my primary ethical concern was that they should not come to feel (more) anxious or afraid about their risk of rape. To mitigate this, and as formally required, I sought participants' informed consent and reconfirmed their voluntary participation before each interview. I also endeavoured to listen for conversational cues that could signal their anxiety or discomfort as we spoke. Themes discussed in the interviews included the women's experiences and perceptions of crime and gender violence in South Africa, including rape as a possible threat; their safety maps and strategies in daily life; and their social and sexualised interactions with men. Through these themes the women's understandings of rape as a social issue tended to surface, if not I asked directly. In addition, my own experiences, opinions and preliminary research findings became material for discussion when I proffered them as relevant or when the women asked.

I participated as such in the interviews because understanding meanings as intersubjectively constituted by the researcher (Wetherell and Potter 1992), and because of my feminist commitment to minimising hierarchies in the research encounter (Oakley 1981). Practically, I was a peer to the women with much in common: a UCT master's student, 24, heterosexual, middle class and also attesting to a non-experience of rape. But I was also a foreign black student who, at the time, had been in South Africa for less than a year. I would venture that both my social familiarity and foreignness encouraged what were largely free-flowing discussions and many women's disclosure of sensitive information. Most seemed



keen to share their local perspectives and experiences with me, from safety tips for navigating Cape Town to insights about relating with South African men. I imagine, also, that had I been black South African, the white women who spoke about their fears of black men might have less readily done so. I admit here my continued ambivalence about these women's candour: grateful, as researcher, that they felt comfortable enough to speak about race and thereby generate 'interesting' data; ashamed, personally, for my silences and nods as they spoke, which felt like complicity in the production of knowledges that I would ordinarily reject.

My analysis of the interview data is informed by a feminist poststructuralist understanding of rape as a patriarchal cultural script, constituted by normative gendered and hetero-sexualised discourses, practices and subjectivities (Marcus 1992; Gavey 2005). My analysis is also directly informed by South African feminist understandings of rape in the post-apartheid context (e.g. du Toit 2005; Gqola 2007; Moffett 2006), and by the work of critical scholars on the continued salience and imbrication of race with South African sexual imaginaries (Ratele 2005, 2009). I take a feminist discursive analytic approach to the data, concerned to identify the key themes and logics in the women's constructions of rape and to consider their implications for patriarchal power relations. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to delve into the still largely bifurcated debates within discourse analysis (see Wetherell 1998). Briefly, my approach draws on Wetherell's (1998) proposal of a 'synthetic' or 'two-sided' analytic framework. This marries insights from both Foucauldian and conversation analytic perspectives to understand discourse as a circuit of power-knowledge that is thoroughly constitutive of social reality and subjectivity, and an action-oriented cultural resource in everyday talk and practice.

Bearing truth claims, discourses "offer competing, potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world" (Gavey 2005: 85). Thus they are not equally available to socially differentiated subjects. At the level of talk, subjects use their available discursive

resources rhetorically, orienting to their conversational context to persuade and to account for the various positions that they take up. It follows that the work of analysis entails looking at once at the detail of how research participants talk and the broader cultural forms of intelligibility that this talk invokes and relies upon (Wetherell and Potter 1992; Wetherell 1998). I draw on Wetherell and Potter (1992) to propose ‘interpretative repertoires’ as units or building blocks of discourse which lend themselves to such analysis. Interpretative repertoires are “broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images” (1992: 90). They are the patterned meanings that make up an account. Fluid and closely intersecting in talk, their separation in analysis is heuristic.

Below I propose four repertoires of rape that emerged from my immersed reading in and across the 15 interview transcripts. These are the: statistics repertoire, invoking putatively objective rape statistics; crime repertoire, locating rape within a crisis of crime in South Africa; race repertoire, naming the racial Other as the rapist; and gender repertoire, explaining rape in terms of normal gendered dynamics and practices. I show that the women chiefly deployed the statistics, crime and race repertoires, while the gender repertoire featured with less frequency and assuredness in their talk. The statistics, crime and race repertoires intersected to construct rape as horrifically prevalent in South Africa yet concerning a classed, raced and spatially-distanced ‘Other.’ These repertoires also elided a focus on the gendered politics of rape. Thus I argue that the women did not sufficiently account for the patriarchal norms and power relations which South African feminists implicate centrally in the rape crisis. This left the women both politically and practically vulnerable: without strong feminist critiques of rape and without adequate imaginaries of where they could possibly be at risk of it.

### **“It’s Probably *Double That*:” The Statistics Repertoire of Rape**

Nine of the 15 women deployed the statistics repertoire of rape in their talk. This repertoire constructed rape in South Africa as a clear crisis in terms of putative rape statistics that were, however, overwhelmingly unspecified and unattributed. Thus in effect the repertoire constructed rape in terms of a “statistical imagination” (Nuttall 2004: 19), that is a sense or imagination of “the rape statistics” or indeed “the stats,” as many of the women familiarly termed them. That the women had this imagination reflects the centrality of numbers, rates and probabilities in public discourses of rape in South Africa. That this imagination functioned or was intelligible, signifying ‘crisis,’ reflects that while the many statistics are far from unanimous or uncontested, they are all horrific (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Moffett 2006).

Of the women who spoke of rape statistics, only one, whom I call Sasha,<sup>ii</sup> attempted to specify a number. Explaining why rape was “a legitimate worry in this country,” Sasha recalled:

There’re always adverts on TV: ‘one in every,’ ‘a woman is,’ ‘one woman is raped every three seconds’... It is a reality that it is happening the whole time.

That Sasha stumbled to arrive at or even phrase the putative rape statistic points to the ready availability of competing numbers, while the statistical construction of crisis is reflected in her proposal of a particularly appalling rate of rape. Sasha’s statistic in fact grossly exceeded any that I learned from government, academic or even anecdotal sources in the course of my research.<sup>iii</sup> Thus even if she did not imagine or proffer this statistic literally, her use of it

instantiates Nuttall's (2004) insight about how easily the statistical imagination of a social problem like rape may construct imaginaries that come to exceed the problem itself.

A second woman, Sarah, was simultaneously more imprecise and emphatic in imagining the rape statistics. Echoing feminist claims and research findings that the vast majority of rapes in South Africa go unreported (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002), Sarah stressed:

Rape is a *huge* issue in this country, it really is you know. And it's so under-reported you know. The stats as they stand are horrific and a lot of women don't report rape so it's probably *double* that.

As with Sasha, for Sarah the statistics had a strong truth effect, constituting a 'knowledge' or 'truth' or 'reality' of rape as horrifically prevalent around her. It is of course a commonsense belief that statistics are objective and authoritative, that they reveal facts rather than social constructs (Best 2001). Hence for other women like Vanessa and Alex, the imagination of the rape statistics superseded their experiential lack of knowledge of actual rape cases. Alex recounted the story of the only woman, a friend, whose rape experience she knew of. She then said of rape:

Otherwise it's not all that close to home. But then you hear the statistics, it's like the AIDS statistics, you hear them all the time and you like, well you know it's out there but you – people don't talk about it.

Alex's comment introduces a distinction between "home" and "out there" that was pivotal to her and many other women's constructions of the issue of rape in South Africa, as I will show. While Alex acknowledged that the typical silencing of rape could mean that she was simply unaware of how close and common it was, other women rhetorically invoked statistics to firmly distance the rape crisis, and to appear to be objective in doing so. A key finding in

my research was that a number of the white women explicitly imagined the rapist as a non-white man. Violet, a black woman, cited statistics to quash this notion when I raised it in the course of her interview. That she could not specify these statistics did not render her position any less assured:

I read this in a *Varsity* [UCT student newspaper] article a few years back that said that the majority of rapes are not by strangers, they're by date rape, and they stated some statistic which I can't quote, but speaking about how there were more white date rapes than black date rapes.

By contrast, Sasha, a white woman, asserted that in South Africa the problem of rape was directly correlated with poverty, hence located in the "townships," historically black or coloured neighbourhoods. Asked how she knew this, Sasha explained:

I think the statistics that are – because I suppose in my environment I feel like it's not happening. Ok part of it comes from the statistics I hear, and another part would have to come from my own personal bias that in my environment I feel *so* sort of separated and away from it that it can only be these *other* groups of people.

Undefined statistics served to corroborate Sasha's sense or feeling about the low prevalence of rape in her immediate communities, as well as her admitted "bias" about the social and spatial location of the problem. Yet Sasha returned to again unspecified statistics minutes after the above statement to reiterate that her mapping of rape was not merely bias.

"Statistically," she repeated, rape happened "more in the townships," "where there're gangs around," in "the poorer areas."

The juxtaposition of Violet and Sasha's statistical claims about the colour of rape in South Africa clearly demonstrates that the statistical imagination is no neutral matter. Imagination itself is socially situated; "our imaginary horizons are affected by the positioning

of our gaze” (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002: 327). Yet statistics themselves are not neutral. Only one woman, Neo, recognised this, questioning the objectivity of *any* rape statistics. Telling Neo, a black woman, that almost half of the women in my sample were white, she interjected: “they fear black men.” She next said:

Statistics that we read about, because the media has so much control here, usually the culprits tend to be black. So I can understand why they [i.e. white women] think that way. I would never call them racist just for saying that, you know. But having said that, the rape behind closed doors if you, you – it’s not reported so I don’t know.

Neo proposed that publicly available rape statistics *do* disproportionately implicate black men, but questioned which statistics the media cite and which kinds of rape these statistics measure. As she imagined it, “marriage” and “date” rape occurred across racial groups but beyond the gaze of both researchers and the media. Feminist and other research findings support Neo’s position: in South Africa, rape is primarily intra-communal, hence underreported, and it knows no bounds of race, culture, class or space (Bennett 2005; Jewkes and Abrahams 2002).

### **“Some Creepy-Looking Stranger”: The Crime Repertoire of Rape**

The crime repertoire of rape dominated the talk of all but two of the fifteen women. This repertoire was characterised by the notion that rape is the random, violent act of a crazy or criminal man; that the rapist is “some creepy-looking stranger lurking down the path at the side of your road,” as Suzanne vividly put it. The crime repertoire had diverse sources in the women’s talk. It featured in five stories recounted of other women’s actual or attempted rape experiences. It was explicit or implicit in self-defense talks or training seven women said they

had received. The image of a “psycho” rapist was assumed in casual safety advice and “urban legends” that a number of women shared. Vanessa was jokingly ambivalent about the “tips” that her mother regularly emailed to her, such as:

you shouldn't go into parking lots alone cause the most attacks on women occur  
*in* parking lots at night... rapists in particular look for women who are not  
holding like some sort of weapon so like an umbrella or a set of keys is good  
[for women to hold]. And [rapists look for] clothes that they can easily rip  
open. And apparently some people – I don't know if this is true – carry  
around scissors.

These safety tips exemplify the trope of ‘stranger-danger.’ In them, a strange, premeditating man is envisaged victimising unknown women in lonely public spaces for no reason other than his strangeness. Feminists have denounced such tropes as rape myths which construct imaginaries of ‘real rape’ and ‘real rapist’ that belie the everyday gendered politics, enactment and identities of rape (Estrich 1987). In South Africa, as elsewhere, most rape is perpetrated by familiar men in ordinary domestic and institutional spaces (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002). Stranger-danger myths such as those Vanessa recounted also burden women with responsibility for their safety, for example recommending weapons of self-defense which they should carry and mapping sites in which they dare not be found.

The home is normatively safe, according to such myths of rape, except if breached by the criminal stranger. In the post-apartheid urban landscape, housebreaking has a particular classed and racialised imaginary: “it is around the violation of the [privileged] white body in domestic space that the image of the criminal has been most potently deployed, that an entire security industry has been created” (Bremner 2004: 463). For Sarah, a white woman, a housebreaking was *the* paramount rape scene. Sarah imagined that rape would be “a foregone conclusion” if ever criminal men broke into her home. This imagination linked directly to her

theory that the high prevalence of rape in South Africa was a direct result of the high prevalence of other kinds of crime:

Because crime is so accepted here... there's more opportunity for [rape].

I think, cause I think a lot of the men necessarily that do rape aren't

[*short pause*] serial rapists... I don't think they go out to rape a woman.

I think they, if the situation arises, then they might. And maybe one

given night they do and the other night they don't.

In Sarah's theory, most men who perpetrated rape were already violent criminals. Their criminality provided them with the choice and "opportunity" to rape. More fundamentally, their criminality was the very reason *why* they raped. This reasoning again forecloses gendered analyses of rape of the kind feminists advocate, for instance that male violence should not be taken as a self-explanatory, founding cause of rape (Marcus 1992: 387). Crucially, Sarah's theory also excludes from consideration men who do not look the part: men who look 'normal,' 'nice,' 'wealthy,' say. Thus it constructs not only the home but the normative community as inherently safe. Such reasoning shaped most of the women's personal risk and safety strategies and maps (Dosekun 2007a, 2007b). Consider Sarah's unequivocal, sweeping response to my question of if she ever imagined the possibility of gender violence among men whom she knew:

Definitely no-one in my immediate circle of friends or boyfriends or ex-boyfriends... Definitely no-one that I interact with or am friends with, or are friends with my friends.

We could reasonably assume friends of Sarah's friends to include men whom she would not actually know, strangers in the literal sense. But as Ahmed (2000) argues, 'the stranger' is always already known and recognised. "This recognition operates as a *visual economy*: it involves ways of *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange others as they are



(re)presented to the subject” (2000: 24, original emphases). And, indeed, in the crime repertoire of rape, the criminal rapist stranger was always already imagined to appear abject/poor/dirty/uneducated/skulking. Therefore, following discursive and material legacies of apartheid, his imagined appearance was often black/coloured. This racialisation was mostly implicit or indirect, for instance couched in terms of “poverty” or “the townships,” as we earlier heard.

In short, then, the crime repertoire of rape constructed the rapist as ‘the Other.’ The repertoire figured the rape victim as a woman whom the rapist randomly happened upon, thus it rendered her ordinarily a member of the rapist’s community to whom he had relative ease of access. In this way, the probable victim also became a raced, classed and spatially-distanced Other. For instance, Mimi, a coloured woman, spoke about her fear of a strange man who begged her for change on her daily train ride to UCT. Included in her fear was the possibility that, frustrated by her constant refusal to give him money, this man might one day try to rape her. When I asked Mimi if she ever took the train at night, she laughed incredulously, saying this would be “like asking to die... because rape is so high in this country.” Mimi explained that she got a car ride home with a family member if she left campus after dark. Yet she recognised that working-class women on night shifts were unlikely to have any such option. Like Mimi, most of the women I interviewed envisaged the typical victim of rape in South Africa as less socio-economically privileged and so less protected than they were from the rapist – an obviously violent, creepy and unknown man.

### **“You Think of Black Guy”: The Race Repertoire of Rape**

The race repertoire directly implicated the racial Other in the problem of rape in South Africa. It identified the rapist as the racial Other and thereby reiterated the image of the rape victim as the Other woman, although two white women additionally imagined non-white men

driven by post-apartheid revenge to rape white women. The race repertoire attributed rape to the cultural norms or historical and material conditions of the racial Other. Thus, as with the crime repertoire, it elided a focus on the gendered politics and scripts of rape. Moreover, by making rape a function of one or another racial identity, the race repertoire precluded the women's recognition and critique of the ways in which, in South Africa, women have been positioned historically as the spoils of a phallogentric struggle *between* differentially racialised men (Ratele 2005: 149; Scully 1995).

In all, three black and three white women made explicit comments about race and rape. One such comment by a black woman, about alleged white date rape statistics, was discussed earlier. I make a case in the next section of the article for reading a second comment by a black woman in terms of gender. The third explicitly racialised comment by a black woman was from Janet who said:

there's a myth, and I'm not too true [sic] how this is, but apparently it's quite true that with Afrikaners like you know, the fathers sleep with their daughters to like take away their virginity.

Here, Janet alleged that incest was a Afrikaner cultural rite. She termed her claim a "myth," indicating that it was popularly rumoured, but she nonetheless asserted that it was "quite true." However, when I asked Janet why Afrikaner men would rape their daughters, she immediately conceded that she could not explain, saying "I'm not sure. But like I said it's a myth." By returning to the mythical status of her claim, Janet could appear to be abandoning it. Yet, rhetorically, a disclaimer may serve to reassert an admittedly contentious position (Wetherell and Potter 1992). It is precisely as a myth that an unsubstantiated and offensive claim about a cultural group may continue to circulate and function among subjects who disidentify with the group.

The category of ‘experience’ seems authoritative by contrast, but it too is discursive and its apparent sense may rely on prior, silent myths (Scott 1991). Anna, a white woman, effectively reversed Janet’s myth to name black men as the culturally-sanctioned rapists of young women. Anna claimed to have learned directly from a black colleague who had been raped as a teenager by an older black man that the ultimate cause of her experience was “black culture,” because it deemed such men’s actions “*fine*.” It is impossible to know how closely Anna was citing her colleague. Regardless, I would argue that for her to re-deploy the notion of ‘black culture’ to account for the rape in question was to call up a set of established, historic myths about the putative culture, including that it is essential, primitive and populated by hyper-virile men and subjugated women (Fanon 2008 [1986]; Lewis 2011).

Racism “always involves a sexual warping of identity politics,” Ratele theorises (2005: 142), because race is a fetish or construct that is historically sexualised. In South Africa, the apartheid state vigorously instituted a performative practice of “racist sexualisation,” attributing sexual salience to race to thereby prohibit inter-racial sex and the ‘degrading’ of whiteness that it believed would follow (Ratele 2009). Arguably the sexual warping of racism is evident in Janet’s and Anna’s comments above. That is, it is racism that allows race to suffice as an explanation for rape; that constructs the racial Other as sexually warped, hence rapist. Racism thereby obscures the centrality of gender and sexual norms in motivating rape, as well as the fact that these norms and rape itself cut across racial and cultural constructs – which could potentially be a point of anti-rape solidarity for South African women of different races.

For instance, Anna happened to share two personal teenage experiences of inappropriate sexual advances from two adult Afrikaner men. Presumably lacking or eschewing a repertoire of ‘warped Afrikaner sexual culture,’ more readily available to a black woman like Janet, Anna dismissed these men’s behaviour in terms of her recollection that

their entire respective families had been “rather odd.” A discursive resource she also seemed to lack was a gender-political or feminist repertoire on rape and its ‘cultural scaffold’ (Gavey 2005). This may have enabled Anna to trace the similarities between her own experiences and her black colleague’s rape, thus between Afrikaner and black patriarchal masculinities.

Anna also shared another story she had heard, this time secondhand, of a non-white woman who was nearly raped by a non-white man until he realised her colour. This man was allegedly seeking white victims. Anna suggested that his motives could include “hatred and envy” over South Africa’s past. Alex elaborated emotively on the possible rape of white women by non-white men as a form of historical revenge. Alleging and describing various crimes directed at white people in the post-apartheid era, Alex added:

I get the impression that rape is too. Like I don’t have stats and stuff to back it up but just the way it’s portrayed, comes across quite often as like, angry black guy who’s cross about the country’s situation and the fact that he’s [*short pause*] poor and stuff, getting his revenge by raping a white woman.

In this repertoire of rape, the imagined violation of white women by black men was problematised for its racialised aspect, ignoring that it rendered white women pawns in a black and white male power struggle. Alex admitted that the hypothetical rape scenario might just be a “stereotype,” prompting me to ask her who portrayed rape in South Africa in this way. Her response:

stories that are told [*short pause, voice drops*] yeah, I’m not sure exactly. I suppose [*voice rises*] it’s just, just the things you hear... just stories that kind of filter around. Sorry I’m not sure where I get that from but I know that’s definitely very clear in my head, that I’ve got – when, when you think of rape you think of [*short pause*] black guy.

Although of vague and ultimately unknowable origin, it was clear to Alex that ‘black rapist’ was a common trope. This trope has a long, hegemonic and brute history in South Africa: the spectre of black men sexually violating white women was used by colonial and apartheid authorities to justify white male policing of white women’s sexuality, white male violence against black men, and forcible racial segregation (Ratele 2005, 2009; Scully 1995; Moffett 2006). Alex went on to characterise as “terrible” the fact that she thought of black men when she thought of rape, but then she realised that the same applied when she thought of crime. With a short laugh she concluded: “it’s horrible but I know I’m not the only one that thinks like that.”

Moffett (2006) decries that *all* South Africans now think like this because the repertoire of black rapist is so dominant in public representations of the rape crisis. I would qualify Moffett’s claim. The repertoire of black rapist may be dominant but the *telling and hearing* of it are specific and located. None of the black or coloured women whom I interviewed told stories of “angry black guy” or “black culture” like those above, even though most indirectly imagined black or coloured men as the rapist by citing crime or poverty as the causes of rape. To a coloured woman like Olivia, stories of black men being the rapist *because* black, which she expected to hear, sounded like white fear. Ratele writes that, perhaps inevitably, South Africans “continue to live out the sexual identities, desires, fears, and relationships that apartheid fathers sought to cultivate” (2009: 290). Of the women who directly spoke of race and rape, and indeed of those who spoke indirectly too, Suzanne, a white woman, was the only to admit that her views were rooted in racism. If she instantly associated rape with black men, if she felt duly afraid encountering black male strangers, Suzanne reflected: “there is sort of a racist perception in my mind I think.”

### **“Just A Normal Guy”: The Gender Repertoire of Rape**

The gender repertoire constructed rape as a function of everyday, uneven social and heterosexual norms which advantaged men and disadvantaged women. It followed that the rapist was potentially any man and the potential victim any woman. This is not to say that the gender repertoire constructed all men in South Africa as rapists or all women as bound to be raped. Rather, in locating gender at the crux of the matter, this repertoire did not delimit the identity of the rapist or victim to constructs of crime, class, race or space. Seven of the fifteen women deployed the gender repertoire of rape. However, all but two of these women did so tentatively or in passing or after having found other interpretative frames inadequate to account for a particular position or experience. Thus gender and sexual norms were *not* central to most of the women’s understandings and imaginings of the issue of rape in South Africa.

Neo was one of the two women to insist on understanding rape as an outcome of men’s multi-dimensional social power over women. Hence she explained that if imagining her personal risk, she had no prejudice as to what the potential rapist might look like. In Neo’s words, the rapist could be a corporate or homeless or working class man:

Could even be my lecturer. *Anything* goes for me. You see ‘oh his fantasy is to have sex with a black girl and look at this vulnerable little one sitting here by herself, let me try it.’

Neo’s voicing of a hypothetical lecturer’s “fantasy” about sex with a black woman indicates that she was imagining a white man. It was a reference to longstanding white masculinist imaginaries of black women as exotic and hyper-sexual (Lewis 2011). I would argue that, rhetorically, and in the context of Neo’s repeated assertions that gender explained rape, her comment differs from the kinds of claims about race that I problematised in the foregoing section of the article. Neo was not suggesting that the rapist was ordinarily white or that

whiteness accounted for rape. Instead she was imagining a scenario in which her gendered vulnerability to rape could be exacerbated by her intersecting racialisation. Moreover, she was recognising this intersectional vulnerability as discursive, that black women were historically *constructed* as sex objects to be fantasised about. The fantasy, then, was not essentialised.

Similar to Neo, Violet said that she knew that rape was not about sexual desire in itself but a “power struggle” over “what does it mean to be a man and in relation to a woman.” In other words rape concerned dialectically scripted and empowered masculinities and femininities (Marcus 1992). Yet Violet characterised this as an almost academic knowledge. In practice, she said that she tended to negotiate her embodied safety and risk on the basis of what she termed the “irrational” assumption that the more men were educated and so aware of women’s rights, the less likely they were to be violent towards women. It is significant that it was in reference to stories and experiences involving *male peers*, men with commensurate education and socio-economic status, that three other women arrived at gender to begin to make sense of rape. One of these women, Tumi, repeated in her interview that she was quite ignorant about the issue. Only in passing did Tumi say that she had “heard” that rape most often involved men whom one knew. She made this remark while reflecting on two separate incidents involving UCT students that had been relayed to her by the two women involved. According to Tumi, these women had been compelled to physically fight off the unwanted sexual advances of their male friends when:

chilling at [the men’s] room until whatever time and the guy seems to get the impression that this is going somewhere. And when you say ‘no, wait, what are you talking about, I’m going home,’ then they act all rough.

These men had apparently assumed that the women’s mere presence in their rooms after a certain late hour signaled their sexual interest and availability. This is a standard rape myth,

as is the related notion that women are not sexually agentic such that men must initiate sex and proceed on the basis of the most implicit, presumed cues of consent (Gavey 2005). Tumi framed the men's behaviour and the possibility of rape, by extension, as driven by such heterosexual norms that structure women and men's mundane social interactions. These norms included men acting "all rough," physically insistent and entitled, if women refused sex.

Suzanne shared her experiences of two such sexual assaults by white male schoolmates, including an attempted rape. She explained that these two experiences had begun to shift her discursive understandings of rape. The fact that "good-looking guys" from top South African private schools had sexually assaulted her made Suzanne question the sufficiency of the popular crime repertoire of rape which would warn her only to look out for eerie strangers. Instead, Suzanne began to question how everyday notions of masculinity and male privilege may have motivated her assaulters. Realising that both young men were nonchalant after each incident, Suzanne at first wondered if they could see no contradiction between being "respectable" men and assaulting her. She later began to wonder if there was any contradiction at all. Referring to her attempted rapist, Suzanne said:

I wanted everyone there to sort of see what a scumbag he was and like to recognise it. But he wasn't, he was just a normal guy.

Ultimately, the gender repertoire of rape led the women who used it to propose that the crisis of rape in South Africa was about largely normalised discourses, practices and cultures of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality. In the course of the interview, and certainly in reaction to my comments, Sasha briefly considered this conclusion. Having invoked statistics to validate a theory in which rape in South Africa was driven by poverty and gangsterism, thus located in the townships and thus, implicitly, non-white, Sasha was very troubled by my remark that her logic unintentionally implied that "rich white men don't rape." This prompted



her recollection of the one friend whose rape she knew of. Pondering this incident, Sasha was unsure how to make sense of it all:

that a wealthy white boy will slip a rohypnol tablet into a girl's drink and then proceed to date rape her. I want to – I don't understand what ment[ality] [pause] you know, what [pause] forces are driving him to do that. So is it an individual, like psychological thing, or is it [pause] like a general attitude of men *across* the country like from all different [pause] socio-economic brackets? Is it like some attitude that they have towards women in general, that's a culture in this country as a whole?

Where repertoires of statistics, crime and race failed to account for a particular rape experience, as they inevitably would, anxious and tentative questions of gender crept into the talk and imagination of rape in South Africa.

### **Conclusion**

This article considered how 15 women who attest to never having experienced rape understand and imagine it as a critical social issue occurring around them in post-apartheid South Africa. Using interpretative repertoires as heuristic categories of analysis, the article argued that these women framed rape in terms of four repertoires focused on statistics, crime, race and gender. The statistics repertoire concerned the national prevalence of rape and served to establish that there is a crisis. The crime, race and gender repertoires then variously explained the particularities, logics and spaces of this crisis. The article showed that the women predominantly relied upon statistics, crime and race repertoires. These repertoires had the individual and entangled effect of othering and distancing rape, constructing both its typical perpetrators and victims as 'Other': a figure not like the women; one belonging to a

lower socio-economic and educational bracket; a member of a different racial and cultural group; located metaphorically and sometimes quite literally ‘across town.’ The gender repertoire, however, brought rape potentially home and close by constructing it as a matter of everyday, asymmetric gender and sexual norms. Yet the article showed that the women deployed the gender repertoire relatively infrequently or without complete conviction.

The article mapped the various sources of information that the women drew upon to construct rape in South Africa as such: unspecified statistics; media representations; myths, stereotypes and stories that filter around; friends’ rape accounts and the women’s own personal experiences, including the experience of never having faced rape. Many of these sources are publicly available and shared, as the women themselves indexed. Thus I would argue that, small sample size notwithstanding, the findings of the research presented in this article may indicate something of what is more widely said and imagined of rape in South Africa. Indeed some aspects of the findings are already established in feminist literature, in particular the popular tendency in South Africa for the rapist to be imagined as black (Erlank 2005; Posel 2005; Moffett 2006) and the more general hegemony of stranger-danger representations (Estrich 1987).

If, then, we may consider that women in South Africa may conceive of the threat of rape as embodied by black/coloured/poor/violent/criminal men only, moreover *because* these men embody these identities, this is a feminist problem and challenge. It is a feminist problem if women imagine that rape is only happening elsewhere. This may lead them to miss the ways in which rape may be hidden and silenced and normalised within their own communities, or even closely stalking them. It may leave them without adequate imaginaries of where the risk of rape may lie. It is also a feminist problem if women do not have the critical lens and language to make sense of why rape is happening at all, which they could use to establish inter-racial and cross-class solidarities to counter it. It is by now a feminist truism

that the very manner in which rape is put into discourse is political (Marcus 1992). Thus one of the many challenges for feminist activists and scholars in South Africa is to continue to oppose the reductive, sometimes clearly distorted and racist politics shaping the discursive construction of the national rape crisis.

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## Notes

- i. 'Coloured' is a distinctively Southern African racial construct, referring to a population of mixed racial heritage. Apartheid granted the coloured population grossly diminished rights and 'status' relative to the white population, yet greater than the black population.
- ii. All names are pseudonyms but mirror the ethnic or cultural origins of the women's real names.
- iii. Sasha's imagined rate of rape would amount to over 10 million South African women raped *in a year*, or almost half the female population as of 2006. This is over 300 times the rate of 143 rapes per 100,000 women published by the national statistical agency (Statistics South Africa 2000), albeit referring back to 1997 data and widely deemed inadequate. It also far exceeds Moffett's conclusion, referencing a number of quantitative studies, that "at least one in three South African women can be expected to be raped in her lifetime" (2006: 129).

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