Muted Men within Sexual Assault: Examining the Possible Causes of Their Muteness

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Abstract

This research project employs the muted group theory to examine men's muteness in relation to sexual assault. The purpose is to examine factors that lead to men's muteness in relation to sexual assault. Some of these factors are social services, the legal system, social constructions, which create stigmas about both sexes and society's overall idea of what a typical victim/criminal looks like.

Language is something that forms a culture; it is something that can unite a culture, but language can also be the cause of the separation of people within a culture, because those who created it will be held at a higher standard than those who are simply a part of it. "A part of it," meaning people who are taking part in the language but were not a part of its development. Language holds power in a relationship and can determine how you are treated.

The muted group theory is a critical and phenomenological theory that was developed in 1975 by British anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener discovered that "ethnography is biased toward observation of males in a culture that the actual language of a culture has an inherent male bias-that men created the meanings for a group and suppressed, or 'muted,' the feminine voice" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010, p. 149). Shirley Ardener

contributed to the theory by suggesting that women are less comfortable expressing themselves in public settings versus private settings (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). The theory suggests that we live in a world dominated by men. The language we speak is a male-made language that women have not contributed to. Besides gender relations, the muted group theory is applicable to any asymmetrical, minority/marginalized groups, whether that be in regards to race, culture, sexuality, socioeconomic class, age, or many more. For example, "People attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have relatively little power to say it without getting into a lot of trouble (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55).

When discussing topics based on gender through the muted group theory, the research in muted group theory seemed to focus more on women. Through my

research, I noticed that it was almost as if men could not be muted. I recognize that, in the majority of situations involving sexual assault, the workforce, and public settings women always appear more muted in a society; however, it is also worth recognizing that men can be muted, especially within the culture of sexual assault and in situations in which their behaviors do not match the norm. It is a topic that has not been explored enough. This is exactly why the muteness of male victims within sexual assault was chosen to be examined. Sexual assault being "any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient." Falling under the definition of sexual assault are sexual activities as forced sexual intercourse, forcible sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape ("US Department of Justice," 2015). To explain this further, comparisons were made between men and women. Women were included in this discussion simply to explain the differences and reveal the importance of men being overlooked, but the primary focus of this topic was men.

Findings

Social Services

There are services in today's society that are open to sexual assault victims, but many of those services are geared towards women. According to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Center, about sixteen out of forty-five (48%) organizations in Pennsylvania are specifically for women. Sixteen may not seem like much, but out of those forty-five none are specifically for men. Support services recognize and ensure that others recognize that victims of sexual assault include all people, but have yet to take necessary actions to show that through their organizations. It makes sense to have many services geared toward women because the

vast majority of victims are women. While knowing this, we unintentionally ignore the minority at the same time (men).

Support also deals with the education that a community gets regarding sexual assault. As a student, every time I am educated on sexual assault and consent, all I ever hear are stories about women's experiences. I am grateful for that because those stories may motivate other women to report their experiences. But, I have yet to hear any stories about the male experience; we need to be willing to educate people on all possible situations not just about the ways that assault commonly happens.

Legal System

The legal system is why some victims both female and male may not report their assaults. Women have struggled for a very long time with law enforcement and their treatment of victims, law enforcement is one of the reasons why female victims of sexual assault are muted. Victim blaming or the long processes that a victim must go through to get justice discourages victims from reporting assaults.

For a man, going to the police can be easy because some may have a sense of duty. More than likely, it may be difficult because the fear of them not believing they are victims especially if their perpetrator was a woman, keeps them from reporting. "Reporting to male dominated law enforcement agencies is intimidating for men who fear that they are to blame for the assault and are worried that others may think they are homosexual" (Paterson, 2008, p. 74). Reporting does not come easy to all men because they do not feel like they have a lot of power. The gender of the police officer does play a role in a male victim's comfort. Although it seems like gender does not play a significant role in the therapeutic

relationship, it might be less intimidating for a male victim to disclose their assault to female officers" (Paterson, 2008, p. 88).

Social Constructions

The social constructions of what a woman and a man should be like in today's society can contribute to the muteness of both men and women. Women are supposed to be well-mannered, kind, caretakers, not loud, not overly sexual, and emotional (Brannon, 2010). Men are supposed to be strong, emotionless, very sexually active, and the breadwinners (Brannon, 2010). Women experience victim blaming after an assault has occurred, if they have stepped out of the constraints of what society says that a woman should be. For example, if a woman was assaulted while wearing revealing clothing she might be asked, "Why were you wearing those clothes?" Or if someone heard that she has a wild sexual history people may say, "She probably wanted it, she's a whore." This is the kind of language that mutes women that is most commonly heard coming from a man.

The victim blaming experience for a male may be completely different. If a man was assaulted by a woman, then "she probably wanted it" becomes "seriously, why wouldn't you want to have sex?" or "you're supposed to want to have sex." Being assaulted by women is still laughable to some today. "Victims who were assaulted by female perpetrators may question why they did not enjoy the sexual interaction…doubts about their sexual identity" (Paterson, 2008, p. 81). When a man is sexually assaulted by another man, "Myths pertaining to masculinity and male sexual assault contribute to victim's attributions of self-blame. Adhering to the myths that only homosexuals are raped, or that all perpetrators are homosexual, a victim may question his own sexual

orientation or masculinity" (Paterson, 2008, p. 80). Normally beneficial social constructions hinder men when dealing with the culture of sexual assault.

Typical Criminal/Victim

We are so blinded by the fact that the majority of victims are women that we mute men in the process. "The existence of rape myths related to male rape victims, which include: (a) men cannot be raped; (b) "real" men can defend themselves against rape; (c) only gay men are victims and/or perpetrators of rape; (d) men are not affected by rape (or not as much as women); (e) a woman cannot sexually assault a man…" (Turchik & Edwards, 2012, p. 211-212) all are contributing factors in the muteness of men especially by other men.

As a society we also have a central idea of what a 'typical criminal' looks like. The typical criminal is usually thought to be a man; this contributes to their muteness. "In the survey by King and Woollett it was discovered that men "found it difficult to give reasons why they had not reported to police. Six were too ashamed, two were trying to forget the assault, two were too frightened, one could not talk about it, and saw no point in reporting" (Rumney, 2008, p. 70). The reasons why men do not report sexual assault should be studied intensely. Although their reasons may be similar to women, they also differ from women because their experiences are different. We have to ask ourselves as a society if our view of whom a 'typical criminal' is mutes men when it comes to reporting.

Discussion

Overall, the muted group theory makes a lot of sense. It highlights the subordinate groups that are not heard in comparison to dominant groups. My biggest critique of the theory as a whole would be that it allows too

many generalizations. Even if two people are a part of the same marginalized group, that does not mean that their muteness will be the same. For example, I highlighted the muteness of men in relation to sexual assault. With every example I gave, I did not specify specifics about men individually I generalized all men. Not taking into consideration that the muteness of an African American male victim might be completely different from the muteness of an Asian male victim. The same can be said when women's muteness is compared to men. Again, generalizations are being made and other factors like race, cultural background, and socioeconomic class are not being looked at. My final critique of the theory as a whole is that too many applicants of the theory involve the muteness of women. I agree 100% that women are muted more than men. At the same time, I do not believe that men are incapable of being muted or that there are not situations in which men are muted more than women. The theory does not do a good job of showing that. Not all women are the same and not all men are the same; many do not fit in the social categories that the muted group theory places them under. The differences within groups can be greater than the differences between groups (West & Turner, 2004).

During my secondary research process, I noticed that there was not a lot of research done about male victims. I was completely capable of finding research, but the lack of research made my research process more difficult. Through this research I would say that I have gained a deeper passion for this topic, because it is very relevant today and it is important. It is important because with all of the increasing media attention that this topic has been gaining, we need to make sure we get it right. This is a sensitive topic that affects many lives. We need to be inclusive of all people when speaking of victims, understand how to help all victims not just the majority, and also how to use or change the legal system so it is beneficial and fair to all. Which means that we need to do our very best to educate people not only within our country but globally. The methods section of my poster explains how I would begin to expand the research if I were to continue it and do an independent study.

Conclusion

The male-made language that we speak today that is usually in favor of men fails to support them in a beneficial way in relation to sexual assault. Instead of trying to make the male language dominate in this situation, we need to try to create a language that is moving with the evolving definition of who a victim is, so that the definition is beneficial to all in regards to sexual assault.

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