

Book review: Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Assault: Challenging the Myths

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Published version

PICKLES, James (2019). Book review: Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Assault: Challenging the Myths. *International Review of Victimology*, 026975801988481-026975801988481.

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Corina Schulze, Sarah Koon-Magnin and Valerie Bryan

Foreword by Amber Pope

Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Assault: Challenging the Myths.

London, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019, ISBN 9781626377783 (hbk.), xvi + 235p.

Reviewed by: James Pickles, Sheffield Hallam University, *UK*

In their comprehensive book, Schulze, Koon-Magnin and Bryan unpick and scrutinise sexual assault using an inclusive scope that covers all instances of sexual violence, from a queer perspective. The main premise addressed in the book can be surmised with its opening sentence: “No other violent crime is as saturated by gendered societal biases regarding victims and offenders as is sexual assault” (pg. 1). Theoretically rich and empirically laden, this book offers criminologists, sociologists, and victimologists new ground to pursue the study of sexual violence.

Demarcated into seven chapters, the authors pursue and unpack the myths surrounding sexual assault and rape through the lens of identity, focusing specifically on gender and sexuality. Written in an accessible way, each chapter opens with a direct quote taken from a research participant that foreshadows the chapter content ahead. A comprehensive overview of the literature is provided - from classics like Susan Brownmiller to real life rape cases like Brock Turner - paving the way for a queer analysis of empirical data.

The authors detail how they presented an array of rape myths to 22 queer participants and conducted interviews with them to explore their reactions to and perspectives of these myths. As a reader, I found the participant narratives to be both personal and moving. One small criticism is that the book relies excessively on tables and figures, which are not always embedded or explained appropriately to align with the narrative being told, leaving the reader to speculate about their relevance. The richness of the interview material that is presented, however, is the real merit of this work.

Although Schulze, Koon-Magnin and Bryan do not direct the reader for points of reflection, I found myself immersed in the rape myths being scrutinised in this book, compelling me to consider my own complicity in mythologizing queer sexual assault. For example, the authors discuss how masculine women are often disbelieved if they are sexually violated by their feminine partners, due to the myth of butch lesbians being the dominant aggressor over their femme girlfriends. The chapters presented in this book forced me, as a queer person, to reflect on the way I have internalised prejudices and preconceptions pertaining to queer sexual violence as part of my subjectivity. For queer audiences, this is both a personally and academically stimulating read - a commendable success for the authors. I would encourage *all* readers of this book to situate their own gender and sexual identities - and the experiences, biases, and subjective positions that come with these - against the narratives of the participants that are presented throughout, for a more personal, analytical, and reflective reading experience.

Promoting and developing an Identity Inclusive Sexual Assault Myth Scale, the book evaluates existing rape myth instruments and concludes that current measures are based on heteronormative assumptions that ignore how rape and sexual assault culture impacts queer communities. Schulze, Koon-Magnin and Bryan advocate that identity-specific and inclusive models of analysing sexual assault, and the myths surrounding it, are necessary as “genderqueer, nonbinary, pansexual, asexual, intersex, and other identities present unique needs and concerns similar to those of transgender and bisexual persons” (pg. 162). Not only do these marginalised people present specific needs, when presenting rape myths to participants, the authors found that “both the identity of the person being described in the rape myth statement and the identity of the individual rating their level of agreement with the rape myth significantly influenced levels of adherence” (pg. 150). The book contains insightful recommendations and suggestions to centralise identity within the current discourse on sexual assault.

Several critiques can be made about Schulze, Koon-Magnin and Bryan's contribution. It is maintained, throughout the book, that heteronormative perspectives shape legislative and social assumptions of rape. For example, the authors explore how lesbians have historically been excluded from legal frameworks in the U.S., as up until 2012, rape was legally specified as a male-on-female crime. This is a promising premise to examine, given that in other parts of the world, such as England and Wales, a penis is still required for an act of rape to be committed under current law (see Sexual Offences Act 2003). However, there is little comparative legislative or legal scrutiny here, pertinent to the United States, for international audiences. This may discourage some criminologists and legal scholars from pursuing to read the analysis presented in this book. The analysis is perhaps more suited to those seeking a comprehensive sociological discussion of sexual assault myths.

Additionally, despite the book's "explicitly Black feminist theoretical scaffolding" (pg. 191) and the authors advocating for identity specific analyses, they largely neglect the area of race in their discussion. Remaining aware of this limitation and imploring further research into the area, they remark that "the majority of participants were white, which precluded any meaningful discussion of racial identity" (pg. 191). Critical race scholars may wish to challenge this viewpoint by offering a critique on the fallacious 'racelessness' of whiteness as a point of discussion.

Overall, this is a multi-purpose book suitable for all with an interest in sexual violence. It is a useful introduction for those seeking a theoretical understanding of sexual violence *per se* and sexual violence pertinent to queer communities. For those seeking a more specific reading on the unique concerns surrounding queer sexual assault - such as lesbian and bisexual erasure, the fetishisation of trans and queer people, transphobia, and internal conflicts within queer communities - the data presented in this book is contextualised within the broader debates regarding LGBT+ oppression. Based on empirical merit alone, Schulze, Koon-Magnin and Bryan do significant justice to their research participants by presenting their narratives comprehensively, thoughtfully, and respectfully.