Perceiving the continuum of sexual harm and the need for varied responses to sexual violence

In the late 1980s the Feminist scholar Liz Kelly (1988) proposed her 'continuum of sexual violence' that suggested that women's experience of sexual harm could not be contained within legal parameters that defined sexual offences. Her research showed that women experienced many unwanted sexual acts within what could be considered to be 'consensual' relationships (for example marriage or long established intimate relationships). This concept continues to be influential (see for example Gavey 2005) in developing theories of sexual violence that incorporate non-reported, reported, and convicted acts of sexual harm.

The present issue contains articles that consider sexual violence across this continuum: dating violence (Pradubmook-Sherer), sexual sadism and paraphilia nonconsent (Richards & Jackson) and sexual homicide (Chan et al).

Pradubmook-Sherer explores the attitudes of 1,296 male and female Thai adolescents in relation to 'dating violence' (which includes forced sexual activities). The sample is drawn from three educational sub-groups – High School; Vocational School; and 'out of school' groups. Whilst the study shows the strong presence of attitudes supportive of violence within 'dating' relationships, the author identifies these attitudes as being supported by the dominant culture of Thailand, which, it suggests, is supportive of 'double standards' in relation to the sexual conduct of men and women. However, within the group of young people studied, there are key variations in attitudes – men are more supportive of (sexual) violence. This endorsement appears to be a part of a wider masculine misogyny that is most strongly expressed by men who have not completed any formal education. People who have completed high school education are least supportive of gender-based violence. People who describe themselves as having negative family experiences are also more supportive of (sexual) violence in personal relationships. This study strongly points to the importance of education as a key part of a strategy to reduce gender based violence.

It is important to situate the Pradubmook-Sherer study within the context of similar studies from other parts of the world. Two studies undertaken in the UK (Burton et al 1998, Burman et al 2006) found very similar attitudes – particularly held by young men – in relation to coerced sex and violence in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, the work of social anthropologists (e.g. Sanday, 2003) and 'rape proclivity' studies undertaken, primarily, by psychologists (see Stermac 1990) point to rape and sexual coercion being a significant part of many cultures worldwide.

Richards & Jackson seek find ways of discriminating between the diagnoses of 'paraphilia not otherwise specified – non-consent' (PNC), and 'sexual sadism' (SS). Using case files of a sample made up of 39 civilly committed sex offenders who had the diagnosis SS and 39 civilly committed sex offenders defined as PNC, both 'offender and offense variables' are examined. The focus is on identifying the symptomatic differences between the two groups. Although the study provides a thorough literature, the scrutiny reveals a certain degree of

ambiguity. The authors note that there is no clear discrimination between SS and PNC, although they do identify the following common characteristics of SS – confinement of victim for more than 90 hours; beating and cutting the victim during sexual acts; use of restraints; threats to evoke fear; and attempts to introduce a degree of mutuality into the offence.

It has been suggested, particularly by feminist critics (e.g. Dworkin 1981), that medicalising the behaviours of those (men) who sexually harm others is a way of enabling the (male) offender to deny his responsibility for his behaviour and for the community to see such acts as 'rare' illnesses in an otherwise healthy community. Whilst such views have value, the importance of developing and refining diagnosis lies, in part, in providing an alternative credible means for identifying and secluding sexually harmful people. The attrition rate between crime report and criminal conviction for sexual offences is low (Karmen, 2010 – see especially Chapter 10). Civil commitment of people identified as dangerous provides an alternative means of protecting communities from people whose behaviour causes concern. Accurate diagnosis plays an important part in this process.

Chan et al acknowledge that sexual homicide is relatively rare (1-4% of the overall homicide rate in US, Canada & UK). They seek to develop an 'integrated theory' of the crime incorporating social learning theory (SLT) and random activities theory (RAT). RAT suggests for a crime to occur there has to be a potential offender with motivation, a suitable target and an absence of protective elements in relation to the target. Chan et al suggest that motivation for sexual homicide is sustained and developed by sexual fantasy. The offence occurs when the offender is motivated, has assessed the routine activities of the target/victim and understands when they are most vulnerable and easily accessed. The focus of this theory is on the pattern(s) of offending behaviour and it has the potential to draw seeming random activities into a coherent account of sexual homicide. SLT focuses on the influence of childhood experiences (particularly parent/child interaction, and social and cultural traditions) in shaping adult attitudes and behaviours. Reviewing a wide range of literature Chan et al note the high prevalence of abuse (sexual and non-sexual), the use of drugs and alcohol and violent pornography in the formative years of those convicted of sexual homicide. Through such experiences perpetrators learn particular ways of interpreting and acting upon their feelings. Moreover, they fail to learn other, more empathic, ways of being. The integrated theory brings together a focus on the phenomenology and the aetiology of sexual homicide.

These three papers highlight the necessity for a multi-tiered approach to understanding and responding to sexual violence. Whilst Richards and Jackson point to the importance of diagnostic definitions in shaping interventions with people known to sexually harm others, Pradubmook-Sherer's recognises the importance of challenging (sub)cultures that endorse sexually harmful behaviours. Chan et al similarly highlight the importance of culture and family in understanding the origins of sexual homicide, but they also draw attention to the environmental specifics of this crime. Together these papers contribute to understanding and responding to acts of sexual harm at a range of levels.

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