THE PRIMARY ROLE OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SEXUAL ASSAULT EDUCATION Unit is to train health workers who respond to sexual assault. When we are running a course, one of the first things we do with a group is look at the dimensions of the problem of sexual assault. When this is done, the reaction of the group—or a large proportion of the group—is surprise. One of the reasons this is done in training is because it is important for participants to understand that sexual assault is not something which occurs to people 'out there' and in places remote from us.

Not all the participants are surprised at the results of this discussion as there are always at least four or five people who have been sexually assaulted out of a group of about fifteen participants. Often an anonymous tally of the range of abuses people have experienced is done, in order to make this point and to ensure that participants are sensitive in the way they treat the topic of sexual assault. The language used when talking about the impact of sexual assault is important as language can be used to minimise and isolate people's experiences. One could argue that the use of the word 'victim', for example, operates to distance ourselves from the problem, as if it happens exclusively to some sub-group. When one becomes a 'victim'—and not a person who has experienced sexual assault—the rest of one's identity is obscured. Sexual assault is not something that happens to people somewhere else; it is something that has happened to a significant number of people in any group, community or setting.

So what are the dimensions that allow such generalisations? Sexual assault is an area in which it is notoriously difficult to gather statistics, as reporting rates to police do not reflect the real incidence. Some of the best research to date has been done in the USA. The studies undertaken by Russell (1984) and Koss (1988) have provided important data because large, random groups of people were asked focussed, detailed questions about their experiences of sexual assault—in Russell's study (1984), 930 women participated and in Koss's study (1988) over 3,000 students participated.

Other crime surveys have been undertaken which have yielded lower figures. However, a number of studies—such as those studies undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics
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(1986) and the US Bureau of Justice (1989), through their methodology—could have compromised a higher disclosure rate. The reasons for this expected lowered rate of disclosure are that some of these studies involved joint household surveys. The household can be an environment in which women do not speak freely, especially if the offender is a part of their household. Other studies asked interviewees whether they had been sexually assaulted. This is a question that some respondents would be unable or unwilling to say 'yes' to, even if they had experienced sexual assault. Both the US studies described the behaviours that can constitute sexual assault and simply asked interviewees to say whether or not this had happened to them.

In Russell's study, 44 per cent of the women reported at least one experience of rape or attempted rape, 24 per cent reported at least one completed rape, and 31 per cent reported at least one attempted rape. These figures relate to respondents' experiences as adults and did not include childhood experiences of assault (Russell 1984). According to Koss, 15 per cent of college students have experienced rape, and a further 12 per cent have experienced attempted rape. Therefore, 27 per cent of twenty-one-year-old women have experienced rape or attempted rape since the age of fourteen. The equivalent figure for men was 13 per cent (Koss 1988). If we look at incidence, Russell (1984) suggests that 3 per cent of women are raped or experience attempted rape each year. The risks seem to be higher for younger women, as Koss (1988) suggests that 7.6 per cent of college students are raped each year.

It seems we are a society in which nearly half of all women experience some serious sexual violence. Yet this fact, which must certainly have significant repercussions, is not widely known—although it is not deliberately hidden. Sexual assault is not reflected in public policy, government platforms, the preoccupations of the media, school curricula or any of the fora in which issues of social concern are discussed.

The fact that there are significant repercussions from this level of sexual violence is being documented by research emerging from psychiatric institutions and drug and alcohol recovery programs (see Beck & Van der Kolk 1987; Steiner-Crane et al. 1988; Bifulco, Brown & Adler 1991; Jacobson & Herald 1990; Rohsenow, Corbett & Devine 1988; Cohen & Densen-Gerber 1982; Yandow 1989). These studies suggest that the majority of people in such programs have experienced sexual assault as children; in fact, the study by Rohsenow, Corbett & Devine (1988) suggests that this figure is 90 per cent. Drug and alcohol workers have assured the researcher that, once workers have become aware of the issue of sexual assault, they discover that it is the exception amongst their clients not to have been sexually assaulted. It is clear that most people who experience sexual violence do not become psychiatrically ill or develop addictions—if that were the case, mental hospitals and rehabilitation programs would be the size of suburbs—but for a minority of victims this is a consequence.

Why are we so reluctant to name and acknowledge the extent of sexual violence that occurs? We are able to express outrage about the crime of sexual assault and unconditionally support those it happens to in only a very small number of cases. Burt (1991), an American researcher, argues that most people have an idea of 'real rape' that is a good deal narrower than any legal definition and excludes many types of rape which happen more frequently than the classic 'real rape'. When people hear of a specific incident in which a woman says she was raped, they look at the incident, compare it to their idea of a 'real rape' and, all too often, decide that the woman was not 'really' raped.
The classic 'real rape' for many people is rape by a stranger who uses a weapon, an assault done at night, outside (in a dark alley) with a lot of violence, resistance by the woman (it is always a woman in 'real rape') and, therefore, severe wounds and signs of struggle (Burt 1991). In fact, in every respect except one—the time of day—every element of this scenario is missing in most rapes. More than half of all rapes are committed by someone known to the person, most do not involve a weapon or severe injury, most occur indoors in either the victim's or the offender's home. These are the assaults which are dismissed or minimised, although acquaintance rapes are just as likely as stranger rapes to involve choking, beating, and the offender twisting the victim's arm or holding her down (Koss 1988).

The idea of 'real rape' protects us from the need to address the extent of the crime. It protects us from having to address the fact that not only do many people experience serious sexual violence each year but that many men must be guilty of committing such acts. The research suggests that many of us support sexual violence.

According to Giarusso et al., 50 per cent of high school boys believed it was acceptable:

for a guy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse in instances such as when she gets him sexually excited or changes her mind (1979 cited in Lottes 1988, p. 211).

In Koss's study (1988), 25 per cent of the men revealed involvement in some form of sexual aggression, and Malamuth (1981) found that 35 per cent of male college students would admit that there was some likelihood of committing a violent rape if they were assured of getting away with it.

Unfortunately, they do get away with it. Sexual assault could be thought of as the perfect crime. Perhaps one in twenty sexual assaults are reported to the police (Koss 1988). In New South Wales in 1989 and 1990, there were in both years almost exactly 3,500 cases of sexual assault accepted by police. In 1990 there were about 500 convictions through the lower and higher courts for sexual assaults (New South Wales. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1991; 1992). Even though direct correlation is not possible, a comparison suggests that only about one in seven cases accepted by police results in a conviction. It could also be suggested that this figure is an over-estimate because in 1990, of all the sexual assault charges that went to trial, only 17 per cent were found guilty by verdict. Statistics that related to actual offenders—as there is often more than one charge—could not be located. Of those persons found guilty of sexual assault charges, less than half received prison sentences (New South Wales Sexual Assault Committee 1992).

There is little scope for comfort in the idea that the situation is at least improving. Although the number of cases proceeding to trial seems to be increasing each year, since 1988 the conviction rate in New South Wales seems to have fallen from 20.7 per cent to 16.8 per cent in 1990. The imprisonment rate has also dropped from 51.94 per cent to 44.27 per cent in 1990. The increase has been in periodic detention, 5.7 per cent to 11.47 per cent in 1990 and bonds, 31.34 per cent to 36.24 per cent in 1990 (New South Wales. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1991).

Three years is not really long enough to claim as a trend. It is salutary to take for a moment at least, the very long view. In 1990, 32 per cent of all sexual assault charges were
upheld in the courts. In 1890, four of the fourteen rape cases tried in New South Wales led to convictions (Mukherjee, Scandia, Dagger & Matthews 1989).

Sexual assault is not only widespread but, given that so few offenders are imprisoned for it, the deterrence against committing the crime is clearly extremely low. The notion of 'real rape' plays a distinct role in this. Regarding certain rapes as not being 'real rapes' make assailants' actions less risky because women are less likely to report them to police. Prosecution is made more difficult because actual events appear improbable or not serious; for example, being dragged into a front garden and raped at sunset, or being dropped off at home after the rape. The notion of 'real rape' is built into legislation and rules of evidence which are still based on outdated assumptions such as 'rape victims resist and call out' and 'rape victims report the assault straight away'.

The other consequence of the notion of 'real rape' is that it makes the victim's recovery more difficult. In my experience, women whose assaults do not fit the criteria are more likely to blame themselves, less likely to tell anyone and get support, more likely to be disbelieved or blamed for what happened. Almost half of the women (42 per cent) who admitted to having been sexually assaulted in Koss's study (1988) had never told anybody about the assault. Perhaps their silence is a reflection of the denial that perpetrators display. In the same study, 88 per cent of the men who reported perpetrating an assault that met legal definitions of rape were adamant that their behaviour was definitely not rape (Koss 1988).

There is a clear public responsibility then to disabuse ourselves of the notion of 'real rape', of the myths that shift responsibility away from offenders and thus enable us to believe that rape is a rare occurrence, that it does not happen to people like ourselves, and that it is acceptable in certain circumstances. Until changes in the perception of rape occur, rape will continue to be the perfect crime—under-reported, rarely convicted and resulting in isolation and reprobation for those to whom it happens.
References


Steiner-Crane, L. et. al. 1988, 'Prevalence of a history of sexual abuse among female psychiatric patients in a state hospital system', *Hospital & Community Psychiatry*, vol. 39, no. 3.
