

SEPARATION/DIVORCE SEXUAL ASSAULT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Walter DeKeseredy, et al (2003)

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This paper is based on research done by DeKeseredy and his colleagues in Ohio and examines the incidents of and issues surrounding the sexual assault of women in rural areas during separation and/or divorce. It is an exploratory research project that uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This paper is based on the data that has been gathered thus far in what is an ongoing research project.

Theoretically, the authors examined the data using radical feminist, male peer support, and collective efficacy theories. 84% of the women in this project stated that the men who abused them felt that “men should be in charge at home.” This reinforces a radical feminist theoretical view that holds that men’s violence stems from men’s sexist beliefs in which women are devalued and men are overvalued.

Male peer support theory (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2002) suggests that men’s violence results, in part, from men who have male peers who “encourage and legitimate woman abuse.” 42% of the women in this study (so far) reported that their abusive partners had friends who abuse women. It seems fair to assume that some portion of the women aren’t aware of their partner’s friends use of violence or abuse which means this is likely an under-counting.

The notion of collective efficacy was developed by Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1998) to describe the degree to which mutual trust among neighbors along with a willingness to intervene on each other’s behavior.

DeKesederedy and his colleagues, in this current study, also examined the role of pornography in the sexual assaults and violence that the rural separated and divorced women experienced.

The authors begin with a broadened definition of sexual assault – based on Koss et al, 1987 conceptualization of sexual assault (4 categories of sexual assault: Sexual Contact, Sexual Coercion Attempted Rape, and Rape). This broadened definition includes alcohol and drug related sexual assault as well as “unwanted sex out of obligation.” This broadened definition better fits the realities and experiences of battered women than a more traditional, legal or limited definition. 89% of the women who were separated or in the process of divorcing the men who abused them experienced more than one type of sexual assault (base don the 4 types described by Koss, et al, 1987). 70% of the women experienced rape, 74% experienced sexual coercion, and 68% experienced sexual contact.

The women in this study reported higher rate of violence than married/cohabitating counterparts (the sexual assaults being just one form of the violence), which mirrors the findings of Websdale, 1998; with a substantial majority of the women reporting that they experienced other forms of violence in addition to sexual violence during the separation/divorce period (84% report physical violence, 89% report psychological violence, and 68% report economic abuse). Although one cannot draw causality between separation/divorce and increased levels of violence, “it is fair to assume that the relationship between separation/divorce and women abuse is more than a coincidence” (p. #6).

Women were sexually assaulted at various points in the separation process. 53% reported being sexually assaulted when they wanted to leave, 32% while they were leaving, and 37% after they had left.

74% of the women who were sexually assaulted at some point in the separation or divorce process reported that they knew that the men who abused them viewed pornography.

Women used a variety of social support systems which they found both helpful and unhelpful. Women reported that their friends were their best source of social support, followed by family members and shelters. The criminal justice system as a whole was ranked worst in providing social support, and (seemingly paradoxically) friends were second worst.

REFERENCES

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