The phantom epidemic of sexual assault

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NEWSPAPERS and television broadcasts have recently reported that a plague of sexual assaults is sweeping the country. Detailed accounts of this problem appear not only on Oprah and Geraldo and in the National Enquirer, but also in steadier sources such as Time, the New York Times, and network newscasts, all of which claim that we are in the midst of a “silent epidemic.” The epidemic is said to be silent, in part, because it involves a wide range of behavior that is not yet understood to be abusive. The feminist movement seeks to eradicate it by advancing programs that teach and enforce radical prescriptions to alter intimate relations between adults and children, and between men and women.

Reports of the epidemic frequently quote experts on social relations who present the kind of figures that incite moral panic and lend urgency to the call for public action. Thus a recent story in the Los Angeles Times cites a study of 3,200 California schoolchildren, 19 percent of whom “had told an adult that they were being sexually abused.” Additionally, 25 percent of the children in this study reported that “they had gotten away from someone trying
to kidnap them." Assuming that only a small proportion of respondents experienced both types of assaults, altogether about 40 per cent of the children surveyed were victims of either sexual abuse or attempted kidnapping.

Isn't such a figure unbelievably high? Not to some, such as the University of Chicago professor of social work who conducted the study; in his view, the results simply indicate that California's extensive statewide program to provide children with training to prevent sexual abuse "is effective in teaching youngsters how to deal with the threat of physical and sexual abuse."

While the finding that 25 percent of the children surveyed in California were victims of attempted kidnappings cannot be taken seriously, the claim that 19 percent of children have been sexually abused is conservative compared with other estimates continually recited by authorities in this field. At least fifteen surveys conducted since 1976 have attempted to gauge the prevalence of sexual abuse of children by tabulating victims' reports; although one of these studies shows that 6 percent of women have been sexually abused during their childhood, another puts the figure at 62 percent. The most frequently repeated forecast is that one girl in three or four will be sexually molested before leaving high school.

From age eighteen to the early twenties the figures are equally alarming, particularly for college women. Mary Koss's survey of 6,159 college students, sponsored by Ms. magazine, is the most widely cited study of sexual assault on campus. Her findings (reported in the New York Times, Newsweek, the Boston Globe, and Time, among other publications) reveal that at some time in their lives, 15 percent of the female students had been raped and another 11 percent had experienced an attempted rape, usually by an acquaintance. Forty-one percent of the women raped were virgins at the time of the attack. Less frequently cited is the finding that in just one year on college campuses, the 3,187 female respondents in this survey reported suffering 862 incidents of rape or attempted rape. While many of these women experienced more than one episode, this annual count represents a level of sexual assault that would claim victim to the vast majority of women at some point in their college careers.

These results are bolstered by several smaller studies and impressionistic accounts. For example, interviews of 930 women in San Francisco led Diana Russell to estimate that at least 46 percent of American women will be victims of rape or attempted rape
at some time in their lives. A survey of 2,400 students at Stanford University reveals that one-third of the women have suffered incidents of date rape. Offering a more intuitive view, the coordinator of the Rape Prevention Education Program at the University of California’s Berkeley campus reports that from her observations of campus life, female students stand a one-in-four chance of being raped by an acquaintance. Another expert in the field, Andrea Parrot, reckons that more than 20 percent of late adolescents outside of college are victims of rape. Drawing on Koss’s findings, Parrot came to this conclusion by assuming that college women experience a lower rate of acquaintance rape than women of their age cohort in the general population.

Taken together, the most frequently cited estimates of acquaintance rape and the sexual molestation of children indicate that close to half of the women in the United States are sexually assaulted before age twenty-one. Other figures, however, tell a different story, which is seldom reported by the media.

Under the Uniform Crime Reporting Program, the FBI routinely gathers statistics on almost all major offenses reported to local law-enforcement agencies throughout the country. According to these data, the number of attempted and completed rapes disclosed between 1979 and 1988 rose from 76,390 to 92,490. It is true, of course, that many incidents of rape are not officially reported, and no one knows exactly how many have occurred. Estimates of unreported crime can, however, be gleaned from the National Crime Survey of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), which draws on a probability sample of 59,000 households. Findings from these household interviews generally disclose rates of rape 50 percent to 140 percent higher than those reported to the local authorities. Disturbing as these figures are, the problem that they reveal is still orders of magnitude smaller than the epidemic highlighted in the media accounts.

The figure below provides the FBI and BJS data; for purposes of comparability, the raw BJS data have been converted to the format of the FBI data, which show the number of rapes per 100,000 women. Measured by either survey, the incidence of rape climbed significantly between 1970 and 1980. Since 1980, however, officially reported rates have leveled off, and the rates derived from household surveys have declined substantially. As the data show, between 1980 and 1987 the rate confirmed by household respon-
dents fell from 150 reported and unreported cases for every 100,000 women to 113.

The situation conveyed by the figure is still, of course, deeply disturbing. Rape is a heinous offense, and the 141,000 cases reported and unreported in 1987 represent an enormous amount of human suffering. However, there is a staggering difference between a problem in which one of every thousand women is victimized and an "epidemic" of sexual assaults that harms one of every two before they reach their mid-twenties. What accounts for this discrepancy?

A matter of definition

The obvious answer is that it is just a matter of definition. And to some extent this is true. Part of the variance among these findings can be attributed to the distinction between incidence rates (the number of cases per year) and prevalence rates (the proportion of women who, at some point in their lives, will be victimized); different sampling procedures; and assorted methods of gathering

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data. But the most telling factor is the investigators' different working definitions of sexual molestation.

For example, Diana Russell claims that 54 percent of her respondents were victims of incestuous or extrafamilial sexual abuse before age eighteen. This prevalence rate is based on a broad definition of sexual abuse: children who merely receive "unwanted kisses and hugs" are classed as victims, as are others who have not been touched at all (e.g., children who encounter exhibitionists). A lower rate of 38 percent was registered with a narrower definition that involved "unwanted sexual experiences ranging from attempted petting to rape" by nonrelatives and "any kind of exploitive sexual contact or attempted contact" by relatives. The information used to determine whether sexual abuse occurred was based on responses to fourteen screening questions such as these:

- Did anyone ever try to or succeed in touching your breasts or genitals against your wishes before you turned fourteen?
- Did anyone ever feel you, grab you, or kiss you in a way that you felt was threatening?
- At any time in your life has an uncle, brother, father, grandfather, or female relative ever had any kind of sexual contact with you?

In addition to finding a 38- to 54-percent rate of sexual abuse during their childhood, Russell discovered that more than a third of those included in her sample had been victims of rape or attempted rape after reaching age sixteen.

In the Ms. survey on campus sexual assault, Mary Koss was guided by what she calls a strict legal definition of rape: acts that involve the penetration of a woman "against consent through the use of force or threat of bodily harm, or intentional incapacitation of the victim." To identify victims of rape by this definition, survey respondents were asked ten questions about their sexual experiences, a few of which follow:

Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn't want to, because you were overwhelmed by a man's continual arguments and pressure? Because a man gave you alcohol or drugs? Because a man threatened or used some degree of physical force to compel you?

The report that one out of three female Stanford students has experienced date rape derives from a survey in which respondents
revealed that they had “full sexual activity when they did not want to.”

The results of these surveys, however, are misleading; in their efforts to capture the full extent of sexual molestation, the studies cast a large, tightly-woven net that snares the minnows with the sharks. If unwanted hugs and kisses are equated with the sexual abuse of children, we have all been victims. Russell’s more restrictive definition may come closer to what people think of as sexual abuse, but it is hard to judge when she includes conduct that ranges from attempted petting to any kind of exploitive sexual contact.

Unlike Russell’s perception of sexual abuse, which encompasses all sorts of physical contact, Mary Koss’s view of rape is limited to sexual behavior that involves penetration. Koss, however, takes a strict legal definition and gives it a loose empirical interpretation. For example, if a woman said that she had had sexual intercourse when she did not want to, because a man gave her alcohol or drugs, Koss would label her a victim of rape. Presumably this is a case of “intentional incapacitation of the victim.” Still, circumstances matter; it makes a difference what the man’s intention was, how much alcohol the woman had ingested, and whether and how she expressed her lack of consent. Fifty-five percent of the women identified by Koss as rape victims had been drinking or taking drugs just before the episode. Did the man order a beer or a bottle of wine during dinner? Did she select the brand and split the bill? Was she too intoxicated to reason with the man? Did she physically resist his advances or run away?

The behavioral referents for Koss’s classification of attempted rape are equally ambiguous. Consider the following case. After having a drink, a young man and woman are sitting on a couch kissing in a tight embrace; she offers no objection, perhaps she even offers some encouragement. As he embraces her, with the thought of having intercourse in mind, the man touches the woman’s genitals. She pushes his hand away and breaks out of the embrace. Although the man then stops and sheepishly apologizes, he has already committed a sexual act that involves alcohol, force, intent to penetrate, and lack of consent. Many would say that the young man misbehaved. As Koss would have it, this encounter qualifies as attempted rape.

Koss’s empirical definitions of rape and attempted rape imply an understanding of sexual encounters that does not square with human attitudes and experiences. According to this view, a young
woman who embraces a man who attracts her must know decisively whether or not she wants to have sexual intercourse at every given moment. Moreover, she must communicate these sentiments explicitly before any physical contact occurs. This perception does not allow for the modesty, emotional confusion, ambivalence, and vacillation that inexperienced young people may feel during the initial stages of sexual intimacy. (Remember that 41 percent of the women defined as victims of rape were virgins at the time of the incident.)

According to Koss, respondents were identified as victims of "sexual coercion" if they had engaged in sexual intercourse because they were "overwhelmed by a man's continual arguments and pressure." The conventional script of nagging and pleading—"Everyone does it," "If you really loved me, you'd do it," "We did it last night," "You will like it"—is transformed into a version of sexual assault.

Under these definitions of rape and sexual coercion, the kaleidoscope of intimate discourse—passion, emotional turmoil, entreaties, flirtation, provocation, demureness—must give way to cool-headed contractual sex: "Will you do it, yes or no? Please sign on the line below."

How do reasonable women view this matter? Most of the female students surveyed disagreed with the operational definition of rape in the Ms. study. Seventy-three percent of those whom the researcher defined as having been raped did not perceive of themselves as victims. Indeed, 42 percent of the women who were defined as having been raped had sex again with the men who had supposedly raped them. Among the college men surveyed, 84 percent of those identified as having committed rape disagreed with the researcher's interpretation of the incidents. Evidently, so did the women with whom they were involved, as 55 percent of these men had sex again with their putative victims.

There are several ways to interpret these reactions. Some would concur with Robin Warshaw's explanation that women who return to have sex with their attackers do so because they are confused and "fall back on typically self-blaming female explanations: I must have misunderstood him, I didn't make myself clear, I am wrong for feeling bad about this. He must really like me, because he asked me out again." Others would say that if reasonable people feel confusion rather than outrage, perhaps there is something to be confused about.
It would be correct, then, to say that the vastly different estimates of the size of the problem are largely a matter of definition. But this explanation misses an essential point. What is at stake here is more than the semantic quibblings of social science.

**A feminist prescription**

A definition describes the essential character of a phenomenon and marks its boundaries. The definitions of sexual abuse and rape employed in the studies noted above extend the boundaries and transform the character of what is to be considered sexual assault. Most of the women in the *Ms.* survey did not regard their experience as rape—although according to Koss, they should have. Purporting to provide a strict definition of rape, her study actually issues a radical feminist prescription for the empowerment of women that is notably uneasy about physical intimacy between the sexes.

In her view, the slightest pressure constitutes use of force; all degrees of intoxication are the same; sweet talk and efforts at verbal persuasion are coercive; above all, the faintest demurral means no. The authorized script for male-female relationships precludes "Maybe," "I don't know," "If you would...," "As long as...." There is no place for qualification, uncertainty, and confusion, except perhaps when a woman says "yes." "Many feminists," according to Susan Estrich, "would argue that so long as women are powerless relative to men, viewing 'yes' as a sign of true consent is misguided." Estrich herself agrees that "yes" may often mean "no."

The feminist prescription redefines conventional morality so as to give women complete control of physical intimacy between the sexes. Advances by males, in almost any form, that do not receive clear and explicit consent are deemed coercive or assaultive. Passion, spontaneity, and the smile or nod that implies assent are all ruled out of intimate discourse, to be replaced by rational calculation and formal understanding. The awesome complexity of human interaction is reduced to "No means no" (even though "yes" may also mean "no").

But research that defines almost half of women under twenty-five as victims of sexual molestation is only part of the radical feminist effort to impose new norms governing intimacy between the sexes.
Inoculation or indoctrination?

The movement to prevent sexual abuse was launched in 1971 at a “Speak-Out on Rape” conference sponsored by the New York Radical Feminists. Since then training programs to prevent sexual abuse have enrolled millions of women and children in thousands of schools throughout the country. In 1984, for example, California implemented a $10-million-a-year comprehensive program of classroom-based training to prevent sexual abuse, given to all children in the state four times during their school careers. These programs seek to provide “inoculation” against the “silent epidemic” of sexual abuse.

Since it is always best to inoculate early, programs start with three-year-olds. The Child Assault Prevention Program (CAPP), developed in the 1970s by Women Against Rape in Columbus, Ohio, is among the oldest and most widely used curricula in this area. (Over half of the programs in California schools were based on this model.) CAPP or other variants of this prevention curriculum aim to empower children by teaching them to be assertive. The main form of such instruction involves telling children to say “no” firmly and to yell in a loud voice if an adult tries to touch them in a way that is impermissible. Taking the idea of empowerment a bit further, the CAPP curriculum also teaches children, even preschoolers, to fight back—to kick, stomp on a foot, pinch, bite—if cornered by an assailant.

These programs also teach children how to interpret impermissible sexual behavior. Here the two basic approaches to training rely on children’s intuition and social rules about being touched. While sometimes couched in different terms (e.g. good touch/bad touch, safe touch/unsafe touch, red light/green light), the intuitive approach instructs children that any physical contact that does not feel good is bad or inappropriate, and should be resisted and reported to adults. Examples of “bad” touches given in various curricula include everything from unwanted hugs and kisses to pats on the head, as well as intimate contact with a child’s private parts. If a touch feels confusing, children are advised to listen to the little voice within, the one that says “uh-oh,” which as it turns out is really a warning against danger. The message is that when children feel mixed up or confused by physical contact, they have received a bad touch. It is a lesson that conveys feminist efforts to resolve the question of ambivalence at an early age.
But children's feelings cannot always be trusted to judge whether physical contact is bad or unsafe. Sometimes being patted or rubbed may feel good, even on private parts of the body. Thus many programs also transmit simple rules to discourage touching, regardless of how it feels. These rules forbid anyone—even a parent—to touch any part of the body covered by a bathing suit (with a halter for girls), except when the child is being bathed or examined by a doctor. Not only do these rules narrow the compass of physical relations in family life (try picking up a six-year-old girl without touching her chest), but they may also suggest that sexuality and physical intimacy are unwholesome. As David Finkelhor and Nancy Strapko have asked: “How many children exposed to these programs get the idea that sexual touching is always or almost always bad or dangerous or exploitive?”

Some would argue, of course, that that idea is worth planting in young minds. If half of the nation's women are sexually assaulted before reaching their mid-twenties, then intimate relations between the sexes are indeed a perilous affair to be approached defensively. This view is clearly reflected in the typical guidelines for preventing sexual molestation that experts on date rape recommend to adolescents and college students. These guidelines advise a woman to tell her date the precise limits of sexual activity in which she wishes to engage; to be assertive; to stay sober; to investigate her date and his plans for the evening; to remain in control by paying her own way and taking her own car or arranging to have a friend available to pick her up if necessary; and to be prepared to protect herself by taking a course in self-defense. While not explicitly suggested, the thought may also be conveyed that a sure way to prevent date rape is not to date men at all.

Beyond consciousness raising

The estimates of sexual assault calculated by feminist researchers are advocacy numbers, figures that embody less an effort at scientific understanding than an attempt to persuade the public that a problem is vastly larger than commonly recognized. Advocacy numbers are derived not through outright deceit but through a more subtle process of distortion. Under the veil of social science, rigorous research methods are employed to measure a problem defined so broadly that it forms a vessel into which almost any human difficulty can be poured. Some argue that efforts of this sort can serve a useful purpose, because social problems are
sometimes larger than commonly recognized. And since the
media gravitate toward alarming numbers, a bit of definitional
stretching may be necessary to bring the problem into public view.
Among those who practice social advocacy, this is known as
"consciousness raising" and is deemed a respectable function of
advocacy numbers.

One way of looking at the tremendous estimates of sexual as-

ault, then, is to see them as part of the struggle to influence social
policy for a good cause. From this perspective feminist advocates
may claim a measure of success, when we consider the prolifera-
tion over the last decade of publicly subsidized rape crisis centers
and training programs to prevent sexual abuse, along with the
-growing support industry of consultants, books, videos, and other
educational paraphernalia. There is some indication, though, that
public support for these efforts may be on the wane. In 1990 Gov-

ernor Deukmejian eliminated all of the funding for California's
extensive program of training to prevent sexual abuse. These funds
were cut in the wake of a budget deficit and a report from the leg-
islative analyst's office that found both the effects and appropri-
ateness of the prevention program—particularly when directed at
young children—highly questionable.

In one respect the use of advocacy numbers to measure sexual
assault is unique. Most consciousness raising requires that the pub-
lic be exposed to the problems of other people. The people who
have the problem—whether it is homelessness, mental illness,
poverty, or AIDS—are well aware of it. According to the feminist
researchers who promulgate advocacy numbers, sexual assault
raises a different sort of issue: it not only afflicts a much higher
proportion of people than other social problems (perhaps half of
women under twenty-five and many more afterward), but most of
the victims are also unaware of their affliction or unwilling and
unable to acknowledge it. In this case the function of advocacy
numbers is to alter consciousness more than raise it, to change
social perceptions of what constitutes common experience in
heterosexual relations. The difference between a sexual-assault rate
of 25 or 50 percent and one of 0.1 percent is more than a matter of
degree. It is the difference between the view that male-female
relations are normally enjoyable for most people and the view that
they are inherently antagonistic and dangerous. To argue for the
higher rate is to try to shift our understanding of the battle of the
sexes; the model suggested by Spencer Tracy and Katherine
Hepburn is to be replaced by one in which Conan the Barbarian violently thrashes his cavemate.

While the problem of sexual assault may well be greater than is suggested by the National Crime Survey figures, it has certainly not reached the epidemic proportions indicated by the advocacy numbers. Radical feminists who promote advocacy numbers aim not so much to solve the problem of sexual assault as to change social perceptions of its basic nature. In pursuit of this objective, they find it necessary to instill belief in an epidemic that would justify the feminist-prescribed social inoculation of every woman and child in society.

To argue that the advocacy numbers are implausible is not to deny the terrible gravity of sexual assault; after all, deplorable things that seldom occur are still deplorable. And the case against the advocacy numbers should be made, because their promulgation trivializes ruthless cases of abuse and feeds off the suffering of real victims. Yet the burgeoning rates of sexual assault advanced by radical feminists have been almost immune to critical examination, especially by other women.

It is tempting to suggest that the silence of the majority explains the relative absence of public debate over the size of this problem: the few women who are disaffected monopolize the discussion, while the many others with no ax to grind go quietly about their business. This may account, in part, for the ready acceptance of the advocacy numbers. But I think that a more complete explanation must take into account women's experiences over the last few decades. During that time, an unprecedented number of women have become heads of single-parent families and have begun to receive the minimal pay of entry-level workers. Not surprisingly, many feel socially and economically oppressed. Advocacy numbers on sexual assault may resonate with their feelings of being, not literally raped, but figuratively "screwed over" by men. If this is the case, it will require more than objective analysis to dispel the phantom epidemic of sexual assault.