

Discourses in accounts of rape by sex offenders in Limpopo province, South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa is known for having the highest number of sexual violence cases in the world. In response to these reports, the government has declared rape as a priority crime, and various measures have been put in place to address this scourge. Despite these measures, rape statistics have continued to escalate. It is against this background that this study sought to explore accounts of sexual offences, particularly reports of rape, from a sample of sex offenders. Data were drawn from five Correctional Centres in the Limpopo province. Nineteen sex offenders were selected through a purposive sampling approach and interviewed face-to-face. Discourse analysis was used to identify and analyse the patterns of talk that sex offenders drew upon to account for their sex offences. Findings revealed that 'blame' was the most dominant discourse cited. The 'rhetoric of blame' revolved around uncontained sexual desires, sexual entitlement, absent mothers, provocative dress code by women, and unfair laws that discriminated men when they asserted their sexual power in relationships with women. Multi-sectoral intervention strategies are recommended for deconstructing blame discourses that perpetuate rape offences in South Africa.

Keywords

Blame, discourse analysis, Limpopo province, rape offences, sex offenders, South Africa

Violence against women and children is a global problem that cuts across all racial groups (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013). South Africa is one of the countries that has struggled to reduce the high number of rape cases that seem to increase annually. The recent national outcry against the epidemic of

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gender-based violence is symptomatic of a long-standing and enduring human rights problem. The government has tried to introduce various strategies to curb this problem, but it seems the battle has already been lost. Instead, the country has earned the 'title' of the 'world's capital of rape' (Langa-Mlambo & Soma-Pillay, 2014, p. 18). Recently, the country was labelled as the most unsafe destination for female travellers, and rape was cited as one of the negative factors that scare off female tourists (Fergusson & Fergusson, 2019). According to Maluleke (2018), there has been a drastic increase in violent crimes against women between 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. These crimes were reported to have affected women both physically and psychologically, and their quality of life has suffered. For instance, it was found that 30.9% of women in South Africa were afraid to walk freely in parks or open spaces (Maluleke, 2018).

Despite the negative reports, rape is still under-researched (Jewkes et al., 2013). Previous studies have tended to focus on rape victims and have not included the perpetrators. In this way, the problem of sexual violence in South Africa has been viewed through a limited lens that has restricted the understanding of the causes of such violence. It appears that such a limited understanding has made it difficult for the South African government to design appropriate and effective intervention strategies for both the victims and the perpetrators (Sigsworth, 2009). Since the previous studies have traditionally focused on the victims, interventions have focused on the provision of victim support services (Ellsberg et al., 2015).

Given the dearth of research with perpetrators of sexual crimes, this study sought to explore the accounts of the sex offenders regarding their rape offences. The focus was to delve into the toxic discourses they use to account for their sexual violence. The lens of understanding sexual violence was shifted from the victims to the perpetrators because Abramsky et al. (2014) stated that gender violence is perpetuated by gender discourses that support the inequality between men and women. Ademiluka (2018) also stated that in a patriarchal society such as South Africa, violence is perpetuated by discourses that position men as more valued than women. Consequently, women are seen by most men as inferior and therefore unworthy of respect. For instance, previous studies (Hunter, 2006; Sigsworth, 2009) have highlighted that since 1994, many women in South Africa have become empowered and financially independent. At the same time, many men have become unemployed and financially disabled. According to Reid and Walker (2005), this role reversal troubles men and increases their likelihood to use violence (including sexual violence) to reinforce their perceived male superiority, dominance, and authority over women.

The aim of the study was to explore the accounts of sexual offences by sex offenders, and the objective of the study was to explore the discourses that these offenders use to account for their sex offences.

Since the toxic masculine discourses are generated within communities and cultures, social constructionism was used as a theoretical framework in this study to explore the accounts of sexual offences through accessing a sample of incarcerated sex offenders. More specifically, the study sought to identify discourses that offenders used to account for their crimes with the hope of drawing unique insights into their beliefs and behaviours.

Method

The aim of the study was to explore the accounts of sexual offences by sex offenders, and the objective of the study was to explore the discourses that these offenders use to account for their sex offences.

Participants

This was a qualitative study, and a purposive sampling technique was used to select study participants. This technique was preferred since it provides rich information based on participant's

experiences of their sexual crimes. Nineteen male sex offenders who were 18 years and older were recruited, and the selection criteria included offenders who were convicted for the rape of women (who were 18 years and older). The participants were fluent in Sepedi or English. The study focused primarily on heterosexual offences because of the high prevalence of this phenomenon in South Africa. Most of the participants were from middle to low socioeconomic backgrounds, and most of them were from single-parent families. Only a few were raised in families where both biological parents were present. The majority were raised by their mothers, and some with the help of their extended families, which would include their grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. Their parents were either divorced or never married. In some cases, one of their parents (mainly fathers) had died. As a result, most of these participants depended on their elder brothers, uncles, or community members as role models. Most of them had not completed Grade 12. One participant had obtained a diploma in Human Resources. Most were serving sentences ranging from 5 to 12 years. However, the majority were about to be released. During the interviews, the majority reported that prior to their conviction, they had drunk alcohol. Some had taken drugs, such as marijuana. Apart from their current sexual offences, most had previously been convicted of sex offences, robbery, and murder. Only a few were first-time offenders.

Interview guide

For this study, face-to-face interviews were deemed the most appropriate method of data collection. Based on previous research and consultation with social workers and psychologists working in the prison environment, an interview schedule was drafted and used as a guide to assist the interviewer (first author of this article) when conducting the interviews. Questions in the interview schedule covered areas related to the sexual crimes that had led to conviction. The interview guide was relatively open-ended, to encourage interviewees to talk about their experiences in an in-depth manner (Mathews et al., 2011). Prompts and probes were used to encourage the interviewees to elaborate on particular views emanating from the dialogue. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hr with each participant. This was followed by a further session for member checking and a debriefing process.

Procedure

The study drew its data from Polokwane, Thohoyandou, Kutama Senthumule, Makhado, and Tzaneen Correctional Centres. These centres are all in Limpopo Province. Modimolle Centre in the Waterberg District was excluded from the study since it only caters for juveniles who did not fit into the parameters of the study. After permission was granted by the Department of Correctional Services to conduct this study, further permission was obtained from the provincial Area Commissioner who approved access to targeted centres. Initial meetings with Centre Directors were scheduled to request permission to enter each facility and conduct the research.

At each centre, an Internal Guide was assigned to support, orientate, and assist the interviewer with the necessary documents for the study. For security reasons, only the Internal Guides were allowed to call the potential participants from their cells to the interview room. To some extent, this process could be seen as 'coercive'. However, to address this ethical dilemma, during the first meeting with potential interviewees, the purpose of the study was explained and it was emphasized that participation in the research would be voluntary, and that there would be no negative consequences for those who did not want to participate. To ensure the right to privacy, interviews were conducted in a small room in full view of the Internal Guide, but out of their listening range. Again, participants were informed that they were at liberty not to answer questions which made them

uncomfortable. Furthermore, participants were asked not to share information about crimes they were not prosecuted for, since the researcher would be obliged to pass on such information to the police (Cowburn, 2005).

At the start of each interview, the interviewer read out a standardized content information sheet (stating the purpose of the study) to the participant before they agreed to participate. To ensure the credibility of the data gathered, a second meeting with the participants was held to check the accuracy of the data that had been captured from the previous session. Interviewees were given a chance to clarify or elaborate on particular views that had emerged during the encounter.

A saturation approach was used for exhausting themes that emerged during the one-on-one interviews. This meant that new participants were continually brought into the study until the information gathered was replicated and considered redundant (Bowen, 2008). To identify this redundancy, data were analysed after each interview session. Eventually, 19 sex offenders were considered as suitable participants of the study.

To ensure the credibility of the study findings, the first author spent time with each centre's personnel (wardens, social workers) to understand the context and culture of the prison environment. According to Anney (2014), this exercise is important because it gives the researcher an opportunity to get immersed into the world of the participant, thereby minimizing the distortion of the information. In qualitative research, the researcher is the 'primary instrument' in both data collection and analysis (Patnaik, 2013, p. 68). To assist with the data collection process, the first author kept a journal in which she recorded and reflected her personal ideas, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings that resulted from her encounters with the participants. Furthermore, regular consultations with academic supervisors assisted with identifying and addressing personal feelings that could have affected the data collection process.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the College Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (HSS/1463/013D). Further permission was obtained from the Research Committee of the Department of Correctional Services. Consent to participate, and record the interviews, was received from the study participants.

Data analysis

Discourse analysis was used to analyse the data in this study. This approach was preferred because the aim of the study was to broadly explore the discourses that sex offenders drew from, to account for their sexual offences. The research was guided by the broad tenets of social constructionism. In this way, the analysis of discourses was approached from a *macro level* that focused chiefly on the broader patterns of talk in participants' accounts. The analysis is centred first on codifying meaning units in the data and then deriving overall patterns in the discourse, that is, speech acts that were accomplished by the whole text. To achieve this, we adopted guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Willig (2008), which included (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) transcription of verbal data, (c) generating particular meaning units, and (d) identifying broader patterns of discourses. Below analytical discourses derived from the data are presented with illustrative quotes.

Findings and discussion

Perceived victimhood

Uncontrollable sexual desires. To account for their sexual offences, most of the participants positioned themselves as victims, blaming their sexual crimes on their innate, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable sexual desires. These participants believed that men always needed sex and could not live without it. This discourse positioned women as sexual objects that should always be available to ‘service’ men’s sexual needs. Instead of owning up to their crimes, participants positioned themselves as victims of their biology.

... I also had a problem of *uncontrollable desire for women*. I wish I could have shared this with others, maybe they could have advised me. I had this desire from childhood. I don’t know what happened. I wanted to stop but I could not ... (Participant 18)

Their narratives suggested that men are trapped by their biology over which they have no control. These findings are consistent with those of Everitt-Penhale’s (2013) and Campbell’s (2001) where discourses of ‘uncontrollable sexual desire’ were used to justify sexual offences. Based on these narratives, sex is constructed as a gendered activity that subordinates women and empowers men because men have uncontrollable sexual urges, while women are seen as objects that should always be available to rescue men from their unfortunate situation.

Rape is constructed as a response to temptation. Another related discourse was that of women who were positioned as encouraging rape since they wore provocative clothes that were transparent, short, and tight, which tempted men to have sex with them:

Women today attract men with their clothes. Some of their clothes are short and transparent. Then when we propose to them they refuse, forgetting that we have feelings and we are tempted. (Participant 4)

Participants blamed women for wearing ‘provocative clothes’, which some described as ‘unAfrican’ and ‘not decent’. From their responses, sex offenders attributed blame myths to the victims. They positioned themselves as victims who are powerless and lacked control over their urges. In this way, they shifted the responsibility for stopping rape onto women. They claimed that women are raped because they have not dressed ‘properly’. As a result, they did not deserve to be pitied when they are raped.

In addition to their improper dress code, women who were alone and in taverns without male companions were labelled as temptresses and socially immoral. The moral explanation to their narratives was that women are expected to be in the ‘right places’, with the ‘right people’ at the ‘right time’. In their opinion, taverns are exclusively for men. Women who happened to visit a tavern, especially without a male companion, were seen as vulnerable and available to be taken advantage of.

Men are the victims of drugs. Participants positioned themselves as victims of the effects of alcohol. Although Jewkes et al. (2012) indicated that there is little scientific literature that has demonstrated the relationship between drug use and rape, some participants mentioned that they raped because they were under the influence of alcohol. In this case, they blamed the alcohol for their actions and positioned themselves as victims:

I was arrested for rape. It was a mistake. *I was under the influence of alcohol . . . I just saw myself in her house and I raped her.* (Participant 2)

Participants blamed alcohol for making them commit a crime. Contrary to this myth, Jewkes et al. (2012) and Lippy and DeGue (2016) note that excessive alcohol intake does not necessarily cause one to commit a crime but rather affects one's abstract reasoning, planning, and judgement. It is believed that these impairments can result in disinhibition, reduced empathy, and a limited capacity to consider the long-term consequences of rape or alternative behaviour, other than rape. Based on these findings, it is concluded that these participants blamed alcohol for their actions and were not keen to take full responsibility for their actions. Instead, they have positioned themselves as helpless individuals who are under the influence of alcohol:

I think it is alcohol. Alcohol makes you to be fearless and one ends up doing things that one would regret later. (Participant 2)

Men are victims of culture. Some participants raised the point that they were arrested for what they believed were culturally correct actions. These participants indicated that in an African culture, women were not allowed to ask for sexual favours from men. If a woman needed sex from a man, she was expected to indicate this by her actions. Men on the other hand were taught to 'read' women's sexual advances and respond accordingly. For instance, this participant justified his offence as responding to the sexual needs of his victim:

. . . When she came back, she was wearing a transparent short silk night dress. In my culture, they say if a woman likes a man, it is difficult to tell him, instead, her actions will tell that 'I am into you'. (Participant 16)

In his argument, the participant claimed that his actions were culturally acceptable. Since he was convicted for doing what in his opinion was culturally appropriate, he positioned himself as a victim of the Western definition of rape as opposed to that of his own culture. These findings demonstrate that cultural perceptions have a strong influence on the understanding and interpretation of sexual situations and cause some men to take, what they believe to be, culturally appropriate actions. From the narratives of some of these participants, it seems there is a contrast between what they perceive as culturally appropriate and the legal definition of rape. Hence, some of them felt that they are being oppressed and silenced by Western laws. Although this study was conducted in Africa, similar concerns were also highlighted in the study by Kalra and Bhugra (2013) where the role of cultural beliefs in certain context was seen as encouraging the objectification of women that perpetuates sexual violence. It is believed that these patriarchal contexts often legitimize sexual violence and silence the voice of women by encouraging them to be submissive and tolerant of violence, especially if it is perpetuated by their husbands, as is the case with sexual coercion within marriage. It is in these contexts that sexual coercion by the husband is normalized. In certain contexts where the voice of the woman matters, such action may be condemned and criminalized. These two contrary worlds demonstrate the disparity in cultural beliefs and serve as a constant reminder that the behaviour of individuals should also be understood in relation to cultural beliefs and context (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013).

Men as victims of external stimuli. Findings also revealed that the accessibility of pornographic movies and television programmes that contained sexually specific material were blamed. These materials were considered to be sexually provocative;

. . . they (pornographic movies) stimulate young boys prematurely. These movies arouse men, and when they see a girl, they would like to practice what they saw. (Participant 6)

Apart from television, much of these materials were accessed from peers who had stolen them from adults. It is on that basis that adults were blamed as reckless, since they did not keep erotic materials away from young men. Parents were also blamed as poor role models for exposing their children to sexual practices and their own undesirable conduct:

The other problem is that single mothers have a tendency of bringing several different men in the house. The problem is that they have sex in our presence because we would be staying in a one roomed shack. When I grew up seeing these things, what must I do? I must try to practice them. Once I touch a woman, I will think about sex, hence I will rape. (Participant 17)

Although socioeconomic status could be blamed for a lack of adult privacy, participants cited careless parents who did not protect their children sufficiently from undesirable sexual exposure. From their narratives, it is noted that even though they were convicted of rape, most participants denied any personal accountability for their crime or crimes. Their attitude is worrying. They consider themselves victims of various circumstances, and they were unlikely to change their behaviour.

Re-asserting power through vengeance

Sex as a tool of vengeance. The findings revealed that in some instances, rape was used as a mechanism to hurt women who had inflicted pain on men. It is in this regard that some of the participants saw themselves as victims of ruthless women who had hurt them emotionally or physically. Rape was used as a tool to avenge the pain caused by women. From their narratives, it is clear that they perceived women as having taken advantage of men and robbed them of their money. This took place when women accepted alcoholic drinks from men and then were not willing to repay them with sex. When this form of ‘transaction’ was not honoured, men felt duped. As a result, they use rape as a form of revenge:

In taverns we buy alcohol for these ladies so that we could sleep with them. When we buy alcohol for them, they should also agree to sleep with us. Most girls are raped because they do not fulfil their promises; for instance, after drinking our alcohol, they do not want to sleep with us. That is why they are raped. (Participant 4)

As they recounted their rape of women in taverns, participants stated that women who refused to honour this form of ‘transaction’ were perceived as *dikleva* (clever women). Hence they were raped to end their ‘cleverness’: *Re a ba reipa go ba ntšha bo clever* (Participant 4). Another form of vengeance was directed to women who cheated on their boyfriends. In this regard, rape is used to re-assert power. Similar results were found by Jewkes and Skweyiya (2013), who found that females were gang raped (*streamlined*) for undermining, betraying, and embarrassing their boyfriends. The majority of the participants cited this form of rape as a demonstration of brotherhood. Unlike other gang members, Participant 6 indicated that he participated in *streamlining* because he did not want his fellow gang members to see him as weak and unmanly:

. . . it was a gang-rape . . . my friend wanted to punish the lady. In my case, I was influenced by others. If I did not do it, I might have been laughed at . . . (Participant 6)

His account of his participation in the rape shows how men are policed by other men in enacting toxic masculine discourses. It is in this regard that 'real men' are expected to dominate women, even in the form of violence. Failure to conform renders men as non-masculine, 'soft', and results in them being excluded or 'othered'. It is this kind of attitude that seems to pressurize some men to participate in violent activities so that they too can be regarded as real men. However, it was interesting to note that Participant 6 stated that he did not want to engage in gang rape. He felt pressured to do so to maintain his masculine status. There are probably other men who are trapped in the same situation. They are afraid to challenge toxic masculine discourses for fear of being 'othered'. This finding suggests that the dominant toxic masculine discourses in a patriarchal society like South Africa are likely to play a considerable role in predisposing men to violence.

Apart from punishing promiscuous girlfriends, rape was also used by sex offenders to avenge the pain that was caused by women in their childhoods. Due to traumatic childhood experiences, some of the offenders viewed every woman as a potential rape victim. They displayed no sympathy towards women because they saw them as responsible for causing anger and hatred in men:

. . . they are planting hatred in children . . . I hated women and I started hurting them. . . . My anger was directed to women. (Participant 13)

The above narrative suggests that women are seen as cruel and so deserving of punishment. It is in this regard that women are blamed for being uncaring and irresponsible. For instance, Participant 13 blamed his mother for abandoning him when he was a child. Although his anger subsided as a teenager, it was again triggered by other women who betrayed and abandoned him later in life. Miller (2014) describes this form of sex offender as an *anger-retaliatory rapist*. Rape, in this regard, is used as an expression and demonstration of anger and bitterness towards women. From some of these narratives, it appears that a painful childhood and lack of love and empathy has played a role in causing some of the participants to display disordered attachment which led to their difficulty in forming empathetic relationships with women (Jewkes et al., 2012). These findings are consistent with the previous study by Smallbone and Dadds (2000) which also demonstrated how insecure childhood attachment is associated with coercive sexual behaviour. Based on these findings, it is noted that parents play a significant role in the development of their children. Therefore, to combat sexual violence, it is recommended that parents create a secure base for their children, which will enable them to be healthy adults who can have healthy relationships.

Male entitlement

The findings revealed that most of the participants believed that they were entitled to have sexual intercourse with women, especially if they were in a relationship with them. These participants rejected the explanation of marital rape because, for them, a wife had to always be sexually available to her husband. According to the participants, the husband is entitled to have sex with his wife, even without her consent:

Rape is when they *force themselves on you on the street*. In my house? I don't know what can that be? *Rape only happens in the veld*. (Participant 2)

How can I rape a woman that I have children and grandchildren with? That is not rape. (Participant 8)

Offenders in this regard positioned themselves as victims of wrongful arrest for practicing what they considered to be 'normal'. They felt that they were entitled to have sex with their wives

because they had 'bought' them with *lobola* (bride price). Similar views were shared by participants in Adinkrah's (2011) study, wherein the majority of participants also perceived their wives as 'their sexual properties'. This finding suggests that by virtue of being legally married, the man 'owns' his wife's body. This discourse positions women as sexual objects and further legitimizes male dominance over women. Since they felt entitled to have sex with their wives, most participants raised concern about the criminalization of marital rape in South Africa. They expressed their discontent and condemned the South African government for criminalizing marital rape. They believed that the idea of marital rape was unfair and suggested that South Africa emulate other African countries who refuse to criminalize marital rape:

I use to talk to other inmates from other countries about rape and my case, for instance. . . . They said that when you forcefully sleep with your wife, it is not rape in their countries. I think that we still need to be taught about those fine lines about the definition of rape. (Participant 6)

Most participants opposed marital rape because its definition does not take their cultural beliefs into account. As Africans, they believe that the criminalization of marital rape is 'unAfrican'. Similar concerns were raised in Everitt-Penhale's (2013) study where the criminalization of marital rape was believed to cause men to be punished for what is 'culturally acceptable'. Findings on sexual entitlement demonstrate how dominant traditional prescripts are used by men to silence the voice of women.

The use of rape to demonstrate power

The findings revealed that most sex offenders did not appreciate women who undermined their masculinity. As they accounted for their sexual offences, participants reported that they raped women who undermined their masculinity. They blamed women who challenged their authority as men. For instance, most participants in this study positioned themselves as sexually active and capable of meeting the sexual needs of women. They took pride in their sexual performance and were angered by those women who undermined their sexual ability or called it into question. They raped these women to prove their sexual capability and masculine power. Rape was used to re-assert their power:

*In my case, I raped my victim because I proposed to her several times and she refused. **She told me that I wouldn't satisfy her.** I told her that the day would come, when I would show her that I am not a boy. . . . I raped her because I wanted to prove that I was not a child. (Participant 1)*

*. . . At night she told me that I was a coward and I don't know how to have sex. **I had sex with her just to prove that I know about these things.** (Participant 15)*

The participants used rape to reposition their threatened masculinity. As they positioned themselves, Participants 1 and 15 found themselves in a compromised position. They seemed unsure about whether they should be violent or non-violent towards women to prove their masculinity. Inasmuch as they wanted to be non-violent, they felt shame when their non-violent behaviour was associated with weakness. Hence, most of them resorted to violence to prove that they were 'real men'. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that in some instances, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is perpetrated by the fear of being perceived as weak and consequently being 'othered'. SGBV is used as another means to re-assert power and masculinity.

Conclusions and recommendations

SGBV is a crime against humanity. Although the criminal justice system tends to focus on the physical symptoms, the psychological symptoms of sexual violence are just as severe as the physical (Allroggen et al., 2016). This study explored how sex offenders accounted for their sex offences. The findings reveal that the participants justified their offences on the basis of several deeply ingrained misogynistic discourses. According to Andersson (2008), discourses create a framework that guides behaviour. The study found that the participants had been exposed to, and cultured in, masculine discourses where men were expected to control and dominate women. Aggression can result when a man experiences stress as a result of the self-perceived failure to live up to masculine expectations (discrepancy) or when he maintains these normative masculine expectations (Berke & Zeichner, 2016).

The male culture of silence around issues of sexual violence is reinforced by overwhelming accounts of blame discourses (towards women) and a palpable absence of insight regarding their own culpability in acts of sexual violence. These toxic discourses are entrenched and reinforced through their interactions with other men throughout their lives.

The rape statistics of South Africa are alarming. If we are to win the battle against sexual violence against women, we need multi-sectoral intervention strategies that challenge men to revisit these blame discourses and discourage misogynistic and violence discourses (Cerdas et al., 2014). Such strategies should target the underlying discourses that lay the foundation for all identified rape myths (Everitt-Penhale, 2013). However, these types of interventions offer no quick fix solution. Interventions that are more likely to make a dent on the psyche of the sexual offender are long-term process-level strategies that build individual and group capabilities for self-analysis and critiques of violent masculinities. More work needs to be done to replace these violent discourses with more humanistic discourses that instead promote empathy, love, respect, and tolerance (Fleming et al., 2015). In addition, social institutions such as families, schools, and churches or other religious organizations have a major role to play in reflecting on how they contribute to, maintain, or resist dominant gender discourses that enable the abuse of women.

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