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The roots and implications of rape myth acceptance in public discourse : the Steubenville, Ohio rape case

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THE ROOTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE IN PUBLIC

DISCOURSE: THE STEUBENVILLE, OHIO RAPE CASE

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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The Roots and Implications of
Rape Myth Acceptance in Public
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Ohio Rape Case

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is an endemic problem in the United States. Despite the ubiquity of rape and our legally affirmed agreement that it is a crime, research and observation indicates that people who would not perpetrate sex crimes nonetheless frequently endorse sexual violence through both passive and proactive behaviors. Evidence of such cultural norms can be found in public discourse when we observe how people talk about sexual violence, a concept that has been operationalized in the field of psychology as the rhetoric of *rape myths*. Using the 2011 Steubenville, Ohio high school rape case, this theoretical project explores psychological and cultural roots of both individual and collective rape myth acceptance as it becomes manifest in public discourse. System Justification Theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis frame this discussion. System justification provides a theoretical framework for examining reasons why people often act in ways that support existing systems even if the needs of the system are at odds with their individual needs. Foucault's method of discourse analysis exposes how power and knowledge interact to create the repressive – and yet generally agreed upon – boundaries of public discourse. The intersection of these theories in the context of Steubenville provides a useful framework for understanding rape myth acceptance in public discourse by examining the utility of rape myths within the context our discursive traditions. This project demonstrates that rape myths serve two separate but important purposes: 1) to alleviate individual anxiety about sexual violence and 2) to regulate sexual behavior through the creation and perpetuation of social norms.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Methodology

Sexual violence is an endemic social problem in the United States. One in every six women and one in every thirty-three men are raped over the course of their lives (BARCC, 2014). It is also likely that most people who have not experienced sexual violence know several individuals who have been raped or sexually assaulted. Despite the ubiquity of rape and our legally affirmed agreement that it is a crime, research and observation indicates that people who would not perpetrate sex crimes nonetheless frequently endorse sexual violence through both passive and proactive behaviors. Colluding with sexual violence takes many forms, from misogynist jokes to victim blaming to purposefully ignoring the behavior of known perpetrators. While we may deem some of these behaviors to be worse than others, they are all rooted in cultural norms that excuse rape, sexual harassment, and sexual assault – or, what feminist theory has named "rape culture."

Evidence of such cultural norms can be found in public discourse when we observe how people talk about sexual violence. Rape excusing discourse has been operationalized in the field of psychology as the rhetoric of rape myth acceptance. *Rape myths* are narratives based on false beliefs about sexual violence, which generally blame victims and excuse perpetrators (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Research indicates that many people across demographics and identities hold and propagate rape myths. For those who notice, it is likely that lived experiences and daily conversations provide abundant examples of rape myths. High-profile rape cases, which are becoming more commonly featured in mainstream media, also offer opportunities to examine the rhetoric of rape myth acceptance.

This project analyzes rape myth acceptance in the public discourse about the August 12, 2011 Steubenville, OH rape, in which a female high school student was publicly raped by two

male peers. For the purposes of this project, public discourse involves public statements –

including private conversations made public – from people directly involved with the event, as

well as mainstream news media. While the Steubenville rape case is unique to its time and place,

we can learn a great deal about how rape myths are employed and deconstructed in public

discourse by examining the case of Steubenville. The field of psychology has produced copious

literature analyzing and measuring rape myth acceptance dating back to when the concept was

first conceived in the early 1980's. Various measures have been created and tested to study rape

myth acceptance and the concept has been applied to myriad scenarios. However, the current

study seeks to understand rape myth acceptance in new ways.

Existing rape myth research is firmly rooted in feminist theory. This project does not in

seek to disavow feminist theory. Indeed its framework assumes certain tenets of feminist theory to

be true, including the existence of rape culture and systems of male dominance rooted in

patriarchy. However, this project seeks to explore rape myth acceptance more broadly by

drawing from social psychology and philosophy. Integrating new theories will allow us to expand

our understanding of the phenomenon in order to continue exploring ways to eradicate rape

myths from private beliefs and public discourse.

To that end, this project examines rape myth acceptance using system justification theory

and discourse analysis – defined as the analysis of language in its various forms (spoken, written,

and signed) – rooted in Foucauldian theories about power and knowledge. System justification

theory has been applied to empirical studies of rape myth acceptance; research indicates that

system-justifying attitudes are positively correlated with rape myth acceptance (Chapleau &

Oswald 2013). This project draws on such research for deeper exploration of how system

justification theory can help to explain the existence of rape myths. Foucauldian analysis has

been applied to research on rape and discourses of sexual violence. However, this project will

also expand on that existing research by using discourse analysis in combination with social psychological theory.

The methodology of this project also varies significantly from most work on rape myth acceptance. Rape myth research has generally been empirical, examining the causes and consequences of rape myth acceptance or individual factors contributing to endorsement of rape myths. This theoretical approach relies on past empirical data, but employs a wider lens to gain insight into both the utility and pervasiveness of rape myths in cultural, political, and individual contexts.

Finally, this project seeks to understand subjective experiences of rape myth acceptance in a sociopolitical context. The present research is motivated by the desire to understand not simply how, but also why, rape myths are firmly embedded in our culture. The ubiquity of those beliefs suggests that they have some important utility. We know that in varying ways everyone suffers from the existence of rape myths, but how do individuals benefit from rape myths? How does the sociopolitical system benefit? Theories rooted in systems and cultural practices can help to shed light on these questions.

The phenomenon of rape myth acceptance in public discourse is integral to the field of social work in both theory and practice. Social work is committed to serving oppressed and vulnerable populations. While there are many ways in which contemporary women have achieved greater social status and equality than in previous generations, the pervasiveness of sexual violence – as well as the misogyny that propels it – indicates that women continue to occupy important sites of oppression. Indeed rape myths are tools of oppression used to maintain existing systems of inequality and male dominance by invalidating and colluding with common experiences of interpersonal violence often perpetrated by men against women. Women will

remain physically and psychologically vulnerable to both the threat and reality of sexual violence as long as sociocultural and political systems continue to support gender inequality.

Understanding the roots and impact of rape myth acceptance is also important for clinical practice. One in four women experiences some form of sexual violence over the course of her life (BARCC, 2014), therefore most clinicians will inevitably work with this population. Commonplace rape myths may invalidate the experiences of women who have been sexually assaulted or increase self-blame, and research indicates that women who endorse rape myths are more likely to present with lower self-esteem (Burt, 1980). Moreover, perceptions of peer endorsement of rape myths decreases women's likelihood of seeking support after a sexual assault (Paul, Gray, Elhai, & Davis, 2009). Rape myth acceptance also mitigates perceptions of acquaintance rape, contributing to self-blame and decreased likelihood of reporting acquaintance rape (Jimenez & Abreu, 2003). Understanding rape myths and their impact is therefore important for any clinician working with women. Clinicians would also benefit from awareness of rape myth acceptance when working any person who holds such views, regardless of their gender or experiences. Helping clients to recognize and transform unconscious misogynist and victim-blaming thoughts will likely lead to positive individual and social outcomes.

Focusing on the Steubenville rape case illuminates the extent to which rape myths are ingrained in everyday discourse. As with any cultural phenomenon, it is easy to ignore what we commonly see and hear; we become desensitized to some of the harshest aspects of our shared discursive practices. This project seeks to continue the work of exposing rape myths and rape myth acceptance in order to diminish the power of such beliefs.

Conceptualization

Though system justification theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis are different theories in both discipline and methodology, the two theories share a common question that lies at the

root of this project: What are the mechanisms that influence widespread complicity with oppressive systems and ideas? Both theories seek to understand why people collude in these ways even when it doesn't benefit them as individuals. System justification provides a theoretical framework for examining reasons why people often support existing systems even if the needs of the system are at odds with their individual needs. Foucault's method of discourse analysis exposes how power and knowledge interact to create the repressive – and yet generally agreed upon – boundaries of public discourse. The intersection of these theories provides a useful framework for understanding rape myth acceptance in public discourse about the Steubenville rape case by examining the utility of rape myths within the context our discursive traditions.

This project posits that the ubiquity of rape myths indicates that they serve some purpose both for individuals and society. According to system justification theory, people are oriented toward defending existing systems – such as systems of misogyny and patriarchy – even at great cost to personal preferences and freedoms. Analyzing rape myths with a system justification framework will demonstrate that rape myths support the status quo and, therefore, assuage the anxiety that people feel when existing systems are threatened. Specifically, the following analysis relies on a system justification theory concept that there is a palliative function for supporting the status quo. Assessing directional support for the status quo can also help to identify who benefits from existing systems.

Foucault's method of discourse analysis focuses on examining the production of knowledge and the use of language through the lens of power relationships. Foucault believed that public discourse reflects sociocultural rules and norms created through agreement across populations and institutions, but which frequently supports existing power structures. Public discourse is thus imbued with the reigning beliefs of the day and supported by a system of knowledge that was developed to support needs of the state. For Foucault, identifying sites of power and means of

creating knowledge were keys to understanding both the roots and purpose of our discursive practices. Engaging Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine rape myths and public discourse about Steubenville will reveal the underlying beliefs (knowledge) that support rape myths and the ways in which those beliefs are perpetuated through public discourse (power).

Methodology

The case examined in these pages began on the night of August 12, 2011, and its impact reverberates to the present. Most recently, in January 2015 Steubenville's superintendent of schools was suspended after it was proved that he interfered with the police investigation in 2012 (Kutner, 2015). The Steubenville rape case has thus occupied a place in our public consciousness for over four years; therefore it is also an ideal case for examining discourse. What does the public discourse about Steubenville reveal to us about ourselves and our culture? More importantly, how can the lessons from Steubenville help us to collectively shift public discourse away from rhetoric that excuses perpetrators and blames victims? The following analysis will examine the root beliefs and systems that support rape myth acceptance and perpetuate a sense of collective complicity with rape culture.

Chapter Two introduces and examines the phenomenon of rape myth acceptance in public discourse about the Steubenville, Ohio rape case. The chapter defines rape myths and rape myth acceptance and offers a review of literature on rape myth acceptance from its origins in the 1980's through present research. The literature review is followed by a description of the events that occurred on the night and in the aftermath of the Steubenville rape, including what unfolded in Steubenville as well as public discourse about the events in the days and weeks following. For the purposes of this project, public discourse includes what was said and written about the rape, the perpetrators, and the rape survivor, including semi-private conversations on social media. I

have chosen to include voices of the perpetrators, citizens of Steubenville, parents of the survivor, mainstream media, and feminist media in the analysis.

Chapters Three and Four are devoted to describing the two theoretical lenses – system justification theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis, respectively – that will be used to analyze the phenomenon in Chapter Five. Chapter Three describes system justification theory, including its theoretical origins and the individual factors that contribute to a system justifying orientation as well as the functions and consequences of system justification. The chapter introduces the argument that rape myths are inherently system justifying, which is a crucial concept for the later analysis. Chapter Four examines Foucauldian discourse analysis, first addressing Foucault's theories about power, then knowledge. The chapter then considers Foucault's discursive analysis of power and knowledge in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* in order to provide context for the sociocultural construction of rape myths.

This project culminates in Chapter Five with an exploration of public discourse in the Steubenville rape case through a synthesis of system justification theory and power/knowledge in Foucauldian discourse analysis. The discussion will illuminate ways in which rape myths are both entrenched in our discursive practices and used to defend the status quo. To that end, the chapter will assess the system itself: what is the system that is being defended? This research posits that gender, social status, local mythology, and knowledge are aspects of the system threatened most by the Steubenville rape case and that rape myths were employed to defend the system. System justification theory and discursive analysis will help to reveal both the motivations influencing public discourse about Steubenville as well as Steubenville's place in a discursive tradition that is rooted in state power. The chapter will also specifically address feminist media coverage of Steubenville using discursive analysis to explore the limits of language, or how the creation of knowledge places boundaries around public discourse.

As with any research, it is necessary to address methodological biases inherent to the project. In this case, researcher biases are salient. While the two theories are well-established with both support and criticism from their respective fields, they are in no way the only two theories that could have been chosen for this project. The theories used here were chosen both for appropriateness and because they are attuned with this writer's sociopolitical orientation. I am inclined to find the tenets of those theories convincing. I have also worked with system justification theory in previous research and my own perspectives about the theory are rooted in that work. The choices that I made about which examples I used from public discourse also reveal methodological biases. While I attempted to choose text and excerpts that give a full picture of the discourse about Steubenville, it is possible that my desire to engage a certain kind of analysis influenced my choices along the way.

Other than methodological biases, this project contains three significant limitations. First, as mentioned above, any number of theories could have been applied to the phenomenon. This project is limited by the theoretical boundaries of the chosen frameworks; other theories may illuminate different aspects of the phenomenon. Second, because I have chosen theories that have different methodological approaches, it will be necessary to reconcile those approaches in order to create a coherent synthesis of ideas. Finally, this project is limited by the decision to examine public discourse only. Other documents, such as court transcripts and police records, may also shed light on the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, this project seeks to achieve a deep analysis of rape myth acceptance as it is revealed in the public discourse about Steubenville. To date, there has been no scholarly discussion of the Steubenville case; indeed there are few case studies about high-profile rape cases in general. It is my hope that the following analysis will be useful both in understanding this case as well as the numerous other cases just like it that unfortunately occur with relative frequency.

Rape culture is not only reflected in interpersonal violence, but also in rhetoric about sexuality, gender, power, and privilege. Recognizing rape myths and understanding their roots will help to change the language of public discourse, thus shifting patterns of collective collusion with rape culture.

CHAPTER II

PHENOMENON

The following chapter describes the ways in which public discourse about the Steubenville High School rape case exemplifies the use of rape myth acceptance. First introduced are the concepts of rape myths and rape myth acceptance in order to provide a framework for understanding the roots of commonly held beliefs about sexual violence. Next is an overview of the 2012 Steubenville High School rape case and the reasons for focusing on this particular case. The chapter concludes with a brief analysis of rape myth acceptance in public discourse about the Steubenville case.

Rape Myths and Rape Myth Acceptance

Burt (1980) operationalized rape myths for psychological research, defining *rape myths* as "prejudicial, stereoptyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" that create "a climate hostile to rape victims" (p. 217). This definition has since evolved to reflect a more nuanced understanding of our cultural reliance on rape myths: "…attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). Essentially, rape myths are the false stories commonly told and believed about how and why sexual violence occurs. These narratives are culturally constructed for the purpose of excusing and normalizing sexual violence by justifying the actions of perpetrators and shaming victims or minimizing their experiences (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

Research on rape myths emerged in the late 1970's from a feminist framework asserting that sexual violence must be understood in the context of *rape culture*, which is partly defined as widespread acceptance of rape-excusing or rape-promoting beliefs (Hockett, Saucier, Hoffman,

Smith, & Craig, 2009). People excuse and promote rape through the acceptance and use of rape myths. *Rape myth acceptance* is, simply, the belief in rape myths. The extent to which individuals engage in rape myth acceptance varies according to a multitude of factors, but the shared source of rape myth acceptance is sexism (Suarez & Gallada, 2010). Rape culture is promoted by the broad acceptance of and reliance on rape myths employed by individuals and mirrored in cultural tropes, media representations, legislation, religious teachings, public education, and even rape prevention education. The widespread presence of rape myth acceptance supports gender inequality and undermines rape prevention efforts.

Some common rape myths are persistent throughout our culture[1] and across a variety of social, economic, and racial factors (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Kahlor & Morrison, 2007). These include, but are not limited to: women "lead on" men with their behavior or appearance; women manipulate men by withholding sex; women who have had multiple sexual partners are promiscuous and, therefore, always want sex; men cannot control their own sexual urges; and married people have a right to demand sex from their spouses (Burt, 1980). As evident in several of these examples, rape myths are often based on assumptions that women lie about rape or trick men into sexually misleading scenarios (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Such rape myths reinforce cultural stereotypes about women as temptresses and men as hapless victims of male sexuality.

Much of the research on rape myths has focused on myths about sexual violence perpetrated against women by men. This skew is proportionate to the reality of sexual violence, wherein nine of every ten survivors of rape are women (BARCC, 2014). However, rape myths can apply to male or female victims (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne et al., 1999). In recent

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[1] Since rape myths are culturally constructed, they are also to some extend culturally bound.

years, research has broadened to explore myths about male rape. A 2011 literature review by

Turchik and Edwards examined new findings, concluding: "the invisibility and marginalization

of male sexual assault is largely because of the perpetuation of rape myths" (Turchik & Edwards,

2011, p. 211). Myths about male rape tend to rely on stereotypes about masculinity – "real"

men do not allow themselves to be raped, male to male rape causes homosexuality/is perpetrated

by homosexuals, and men cannot be raped by women – and serve the same purpose of

minimizing or erasing victims' experiences (Turcik & Edwards, 2011). Masculinity is socially

constructed along a gender binary that places maleness in opposition to femaleness and relies on

a heteronormative framework. Turchik and Edwards (2011) succinctly write:

> It is our assertion that male rape emanates from the same patriarchal
> structure as female rape and is related to various systems of oppression,
> including sexism and heterosexism. Specifically, under a social system of
> patriarchy, masculine hegemony and heterosexism are valued ideals and
> these are incongruent with men's experiences of sexual victimization (p.
> 213).

Regardless of gender, rape myths emerge from and rely on a system of oppression that

encourages conformity to sexist and heterosexist perspectives. Since the rape case presented in

this chapter has a female victim, the remaining discussion will focus mainly on rape myths about

women. This is not intended to diminish the realities of male rape, but to highlight the narratives

most prevalent in the Steubenville case.

History of the Concept

As stated, research on rape myths developed from a feminist framework in response to the

problem of pervasive sexual violence and victim blaming. Sociological (Schwendinger &

Schwendinger, 1974) and feminist (Brownmiller, 1975) research first grappled with false

narratives about rape with critical examinations of common ideas about rape. Schwendinger

and Schwendinger (1974) were particularly interested in exposing the fallacies of "the

impossibility of rape," "asking for it," and "uncontrollable passion" (p.18-21) as employed in legal contexts. Brownmiller's (1975) research took the perspective of feminist theory and examined rape myths as manifestations of patriarchy. Brownmiller (1975) asserted that rape myths are employed to justify men's sexual violence against women.

Rape myths became operationalized in the field of psychology with Burt's important article written in 1980, *Cultural Myths and Support for Rape*. Burt (1980) attempted to explain the reasons why rape myths are supported and perpetuated. In doing so, she developed a measurable concept of rape myth acceptance. Burt's (1980) publication identified correlates of rape myth acceptance and, importantly, provided a scale for measuring the phenomenon. The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (1980) consisted of statements about rape and asked participants to indicate their levels of agreement. A few example items are: "In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation," "Any female can get raped," and "Women who get raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve" (Burt, 1980, p. 223). Results of Burt's study identified strong attitudinal predictors of rape myth acceptance, including sex role stereotyping and the tolerance of interpersonal violence (Burt,1980).

Burt (1980) also measured the prevalence of rape myth acceptance at that time. Of the 598 adult participants chosen randomly within Minnesota, over 50% agreed with statements such as "A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on the first date implies she is willing to have sex" (Burt, 1980, p. 229). In a later study of young adults using Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale , Gilmartin-Zena (1987) found that 35% of participants believed over half of rape myth scenarios presented. The findings of both studies indicate strong cultural support for rape myths.

For about fifteen years, Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale was the primary measure of rape myth acceptance. As the breadth of knowledge about rape myth acceptance

grew, researchers began to identify possible gaps in Burt's measure. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et al., 1999) was created to capture some of the subtleties of rape myth acceptance that had become apparent in the years after Burt published the original scale. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale was developed to be gender neutral and to look more broadly at the underlying beliefs that might support rape myth acceptance (Payne et al., 1999). The scale measures "true or false" responses to statements such as: "Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them;" "A woman who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex;" and "Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control." (Payne et al.,1999, p. 49-50)

Research on rape myth acceptance over the past thirty years has not significantly shifted its theoretical framework. The feminist perspective from which rape myth acceptance research was born remains central to understanding the concept. Rape myth acceptance is indisputably rooted in sexism and employed in support of gender inequality and male dominance. Nevertheless, another related perspective – structural violence – has been added to rape myth literature over time. A *structural violence perspective* posits that rape myth acceptance is dependent on oppressive and violent attitudes. Indeed, rape myth acceptance has been shown to correlate with oppressive beliefs, including racism, classism, and religious intolerance and the acceptance of interpersonal violence (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Research on Rape Myth Acceptance: Correlates and Predictors

Rape myths are easy to believe because they often support culturally ingrained stereotypes about gender, violence, race, and class. In fact, rape myth acceptance is strongly correlated with other common hostile beliefs, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980). It makes intuitive sense that people who are prone to aggressive thinking and hostile beliefs would present with high rates of rape myth

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acceptance. Nevertheless, rape myth acceptance is not confined to any one set of attitudes or particular group of people. Research over the years has expanded Burt's (1980) finding that rape myth acceptance is solely correlated with the attitudinal factors. A 2010 meta-analysis (158 peer-reviewed articles published between 1997 and 2007) on rape myths among adult males and females showed that these beliefs exist across a range of demographics and personality traits (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

The most common predictors of rape myth acceptance are gender and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980; Hockett et al., 2009). Men are far more likely than women to exhibit strong beliefs in false rape narratives (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). A feminist perspective on these gender differences would suggest that, because they benefit directly from systemic gender inequality, men are more likely than women to engage with beliefs that support the existing system. However, the relationship between gender and rape myth acceptance is more complicated than a strict gender binary view might suggest. Hostile sexism is an important mediating factor in the correlation between gender and rape myth acceptance. Chapleau, Oswald, and Russell (2007) found that there was no difference along gender lines in the prevalence of rape myth acceptance in men and women who exhibited hostile or aggressive sexist attitudes. These confounding factors suggest that attitudes may play a greater role in rape myth acceptance than gender.

A closer look at the correlation between gender and rape myth acceptance reveals the important utility of such beliefs. While it might seem incompatible for women to engage in rape myth acceptance, there is significant evidence to suggesting that it is a protective perspective. Research on rape myth acceptance concludes that women adopt rape myths to feel insulated from the threat of sexual violence (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007; Nurius et al., 1996). Bohner and Lampridis (2004) describe:

> Women who endorse rape myths are likely to perceive rape as an act directed against a particular subtype of women (to which they do not belong) by a particular subtype of men ('crazy rapists') or as an interaction between specific individuals brought about by the woman's behavior in a particular situation.(p. 79)

Blaming the victim and absolving the perpetrator creates the illusion that the victim had control in the situation – she could have chosen to avoid rape. The power of internalizing this myth lies in a misguided sense of safety (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007). If a woman believes that dressing provocatively can be the cause of rape, she will feel safer simply by dressing conservatively. The same woman will likely exhibit victim-blaming attitudes, thus perpetuating sexism and contributing to cultural ambivalence about female sexuality. This attitude is reminiscent of the palliative effect of system justification, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

In related research, Bohner and Lampridis (2004) found a strong positive correlation between rape myth acceptance and self-esteem with the addition of the factor "meeting a survivor of rape." In a sample of 82 female college students, expecting to meet a rape victim correlated positively with an increase in the self-esteem of women with high rape myth acceptance and with a decrease in the self-esteem of women with low rape myth acceptance (Bohner & Lampridis, 2004). The proposed reason for this outcome is that women with high rape myth acceptance experience feelings of superiority over women who have been raped, while women with low rape myth acceptance are more likely to relate empathetically to the survivors.

As cited above, rape myth acceptance is also strongly associated with other aggressive beliefs such as acceptance of interpersonal violence and racism. Suarez & Gallada (2010) identified the acceptance of interpersonal violence as the strongest correlate of rape myth acceptance after gender. Various other correlates were identified in the 2010 literature review, among them: race, age, and education (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Suarez and Gadalla (2010) also found that in six studies analyzing the correlation between race and rape myth acceptance, there

was a strong negative correlation between whiteness and rape myth acceptance, meaning that non-white people are more likely to believe rape myths. A critical analysis of these findings might suggest that non-dominant racial and ethnic groups may have different language for discussing rape, therefore standard measures might not be appropriate for all groups (Anderson et al., 1997). Suarez and Gadalla (2010) found an even stronger negative correlation with education level – the higher the level of education, the lower the level of rape myth acceptance.

Consequences of Rape Myth Acceptance

The prevalence of rape myth acceptance has damaging effects on individuals and reinforces gender inequality. Rape myth acceptance exacerbated victims' trauma (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), contributes to the mismanagement of criminal cases (Payne et al., 1999), and increases the likelihood of an individual perpetrating sexual violence (Hockett et al., 2009). For the purposes of this discussion, it is perhaps most important to understand the role of rape myth acceptance in victim blaming.

Rape myths are insidious because, by shifting responsibility for rape from the rapist to the victim, rape myths support victim blaming and minimize or justify the role of the perpetrator (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999; Kahlor and Morrison, 2007). Victim blaming occurs in a variety of contexts and it is problematic for many reasons. For one, because rape myths are institutionalized in politics, the courts, and law enforcement (Burt, 1980; Krahé, Temkin, & Bieneck, 2007) legal proceedings of sexual assault cases from investigation to trial to sentencing may often be biased in favor of the perpetrator.

Victim blaming is also harmful when responding to people who have experienced sexual assault. Unsupportive reactions by medical professionals, significant others, peers, and counselors to news of an assault negatively influence psychological outcomes of trauma survivors (Hockett et al., 2009). Rape myth acceptance can also lead survivors of sexual assault to

internalize victim-blaming attitudes, thereby minimizing their own experiences (Burt, 1980). Internalizing rape myths might affect women's perceptions of their experiences of sexual violence in other ways, as well. As shown by Weiss (2009), who surveyed 944 accounts of sexual assault victims collected by the National Crime Victimization Survey, women use victim-blaming language and rape myth beliefs when relaying accounts of their own experiences. This happens for a variety of reasons, ranging from excusing the perpetrator to denying the severity of the assault (Weiss, 2009). Victim accounts support the idea that internalizing rape myths encourages self-blame and reduces the likelihood of reporting a crime to the police (Weiss, 2009). In addition, rape myth acceptance among victims of sexual assault affects behavior in the courtroom and beyond. Women who want to be believed by judges and juries go so far as to dress more conservatively and wear less make-up in court in an effort to avoid looking like they "asked for it" (Weiss, 2009). All of these things impede healthier methods of coping with experiences of sexual violence.

The public discourse that surrounded the Steubenville, Ohio rape case provides a clear example of the ways in which rape myth acceptance and victim blaming are activated when people grapple with sexual violence. In the case of Steubenville, public opinion was divided between people who staunchly supported the rights of the rape survivor and those who were invested in blaming her and excusing her aggressors. Although the details of the case were expressed in social media, leaving little question about what occurred that night, people who believed and espoused views that relied on rape myths effectively denied the experience of the survivor.

Steubenville High School Rape Case

On August 11, 2012, a sixteen year-old girl from West Virginia met up with friends to attend a party in Steubenville, OH. The girl[2] bought a slushy on the way to the party and spiked it with vodka that she had brought from home. When she got to the party, the girl found Joe[3], the sixteen year-old quarterback of Steubenville High School's football team – affectionately known as "Big Red" to locals. (The girl and Joe had been corresponding by text and tweet prior to the night of the party.) Witnesses later testified in court that the girl was obviously intoxicated at the party, and that partygoers were well aware of her state. In fact, some people publically mocked her and one attendee dared people to urinate on the girl in exchange for three dollars (Macur & Schweber, 2012). There were about fifty high school students at the party, which was broken up around midnight. At that time, Dan, a senior at Steubenville High School, offered to drive Joe and Ben, Big Red's star wide receiver, to another party. The girl wanted to join them and told her friends that she was going to leave. The girl's friends reported that they tried to stop her from leaving, but the she insisted on staying with Joe.

At the second party, which was much smaller (about a dozen people were in attendance), the girl was visibly intoxicated to the point of becoming sick in the bathroom. The mother of the student hosting that party asked everyone to leave, at which point, Chris reported that Joe and Ben carried the incapacitated girl out to the street (Levy 2013). A photo posted on Instagram showing the two boys carrying a seemingly unconscious girl by her ankles and wrists corroborated Chris' observation (Macur & Schweber, 2012).   The girl reported that once outside the house she sat down in the street and threw up once again; she also reports that to be her final

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[2] In the article "Trial by Twitter," which appeared in *The New Yorker* on August 5, 2013, Ariel Levy referred to the Steubenville Rape Case survivor as "the girl" or "the girl from West Virginia." I have chosen to adopt that language for this account, as it appropriately conceals the girl's name while also using language more humanizing than "the victim" or "the survivor."
[3] Joe is a pseudonym, as are the names of all the individuals implicated in this case.

memory of the evening (Levy, 2013). Witnesses to the scene testified that Joe and Ben were

holding her hair as she threw up and that she was topless (Macur & Schweber, 2012).

For the remainder of the night, the semi-conscious girl was repeatedly physically violated

in public. On the way to a third party, Joe exposed her breasts to his friend in the car and

penetrated her with his fingers as the friend took a video with his phone (Macur & Schweber,

2012). At the party, Joe attempted to force the now naked girl to perform oral sex on him in

front of a crowd of onlookers, however she was only bordering on consciousness and unable to

respond. He then removed his own clothes and proceeded to penetrate her again with his fingers

(Macur & Schweber, 2012). Onlookers took photos and video of the entire scene.

The girl awoke the following morning at the site of the third party, lying next to a

sleeping Joe on the couch. She was naked and unable to locate her cell phone. The girl called

her friends, who picked her up from Joe's house. As the day unfolded, the girl, and anyone else

who was paying attention, saw numerous photos and videos of her rape posted on Twitter and

Instagram, as well as a number of disparaging tweets by witnesses (Macur & Schweber, 2012).

Joe and Ben were arrested on August 22, 2012 with charges of rape and kidnapping

(Macur & Schweber, 2012). In March 2013, Joe and Ben were found guilty of these charges and

sentenced to two and one-year terms in juvenile detention, respectively (Oppel, 2013; Dissell,

2013). Joe's longer sentence reflects his additional charge of taking and distributing nude

photographs of the girl (Dissell, 2013).

The details of the Steubenville rape are horrifying. Yet it is imperative to bear witness to

the full story for three reasons related to this project. First, while this study does not seek to

examine the role of bystanders in the girl's experiences of sexual violence, bystander participation

is intrinsically linked to rape myth acceptance. Research has shown that there is a correlation

between rape myth acceptance and acceptance of sexual violence (Baynard & Moynihan, 2011).

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Some partygoers testified that they asked Joe to stop assaulting the girl – one friend even asked him to wait until she woke up (Macur & Schweber, 2012). However, no one stopped the rapes from happening. Although bystander participation will not be explored here, the context in which the sexual violence occurred indicates rape myth acceptance as much as the public discourse.

Second, the details of this case make clear the extent to which the girl was repeatedly victimized by people who did not see her full humanity. As discussed above, a consequence of rape myth acceptance is depersonalization of the survivor; by making survivors other than us, we cease to recognize them as whole people. Those who witnessed the Steubenville rape allowed the girl to become an object of mockery and derision and, in doing so, failed to understand the consequences of inaction.

Finally, and importantly, it is likely that the onlookers and possibly even the perpetrators did not fully understand what was happening at those parties. Joe wrote to a friend, "I'm pissed all I got was a handjob. I shoulda raped her since everyone thinks I did" (Levy, 2013). While Joe's statement is indisputably grotesque, it also illuminates another problem with rape myths. In skewing the realities of rape, rape myths offer misinformation about the crime itself. Ignorance does not excuse Joe's behavior, but recognizing the ways in which rape myths directly contribute to perpetration offers insight into avenues for rape prevention efforts.

Before proceeding with the analysis, I would like to further define the scope of this discussion by acknowledging two other aspects of the case that will not be explored. The court case, as well as public opinion condemning Joe and Ben, was largely based on incriminating exchanges between those boys and their friends via twitter in the days following the rape. While those tweets are important for understanding the perspectives of the perpetrators and those who colluded with their crimes, they are not relevant to the present discussion. Those tweets are

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certainly laden with rape myth acceptance, not to mention violence and misogyny, but they exemplify the most extreme uses of rape myth acceptance. This project seeks to explore rape myth acceptance among people who are not necessarily perpetrators of sexual violence; it frames the phenomenon as being widely and culturally endorsed. For that reason, the following discussion will refer to social media messages that were meant to be public as well as mainstream media coverage.

Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that public discourse about the rape was not solely negative or victim blaming. To the contrary, the girl and her family received messages of support from community members, feminist media sources, and the mainstream media. Rape myth acceptance is pervasive, but not omnipresent. The breadth of this analysis will not include the words of those who spoke loudly and wrote strongly in support of the girl and against the insidiousness of rape culture, but it is important to remember that those narratives also exist.

The following discussion will evaluate rape myth acceptance in public discourse in the Steubenville rape case through two specific perspectives: responses of witnesses and members of the community to the crime and media reports. Rape myth acceptance is a victim-blaming stance that inverts the responsibility of sexual assault so that survivors become complicit and perpetrators become victims. Many responses to and reports about the Steubenville case attributed the violence to irresponsible behavior on the part of the girl, while sympathizing with the boys as they faced the legal and social consequences of their actions. Analyses such as the present discussion are important for understanding the reasons why survivors of sexual assault are often hesitant to report these crimes. Suarez and Gadalla (2010) assert that a critical reason for sexual assault survivors underreporting is the reactions that people often face after disclosing an assault. Rape myths that blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator help to explain

unsupportive reactions to disclosures of sexual violence. The Steubenville rape case is a model

for exploring the insidiousness of such narratives.

Public Discourse: Rape Myth Acceptance and the Steubenville Rape Case

As the events of April 11 unfolded, students who witnessed the sexual degradation and

violence perpetrated against the girl used Twitter and Instagram to comment about what they

saw. The person who posted the above-mentioned photo of the unconscious girl also

commented, "Never seen anything this sloppy lol," while another Steubenville student tweeted,

"Whores are hilarious" (Levy, 2013). The young man who dared anyone at the party to urinate

on the girl tweeted, "If they're getting 'raped' and don't resist then to me it's not rape. I feel bad

for her but still" (Levy, 2013) as the girl was topless and vomiting in the street. In response to

that same bet, another student tweeted, "Some people deserve to be peed on" and Joe retweeted

that message to his followers (Levy, 2013). Observing the scene, yet another witness tweeted,

"The song of the night is definitely Rape Me by Nirvana" (Macur & Schweber, 2012).

In the aftermath of the rape, the town of Steubenville was divided as its citizens occupied

polarized positions in response to accounts of the night. Steubenville's local paper, the *Herald-*

Star, ran a letter to the editor defending Joe and Ben and proclaiming that they were victims of

"character assassination" (Macur & Schweber, 2012). Nate Hubbard, one of the Big Red

football coaches, asserted that the girl fabricated rape allegations in order to get out of trouble

with her parents (Macur & Schweber, 2012). He stated, "The rape was just an excuse, I

think…What else are you going to tell your parents when you come home drunk like that and

after a night like that?" (Macur & Schweber, 2012).

The girl and her family received threats following Joe and Ben's arrests that were serious

enough to warrant police protection in their neighborhood (Macur & Schweber, 2012). Later,

after Joe and Ben were sentenced to juvenile detention, two female friends of the perpetrators

(ages fifteen and sixteen) sent messages to the girl threatening physical violence (Reese, 2013).

The girls were later charged with the misdemeanor aggravated menacing.

The news media also propagated narratives that were both victim blaming and

perpetrator excusing. Perhaps the most infamous example is CNN correspondent Poppy

Harlow, who characterized Joe and Ben as "young men that had such promising futures, star

football players, very good students" when she announced the court's verdict (Ortberg, 2013).

CNN anchor Candy Crowley concurred with Harlow and lamented the detrimental effects of Joe

and Ben being on sex offender registry lists (Strasser & Culp-Ressler, 2013). Ron Allen of NBC

similarly bemoaned the loss of the boys' promised futures (Strasser & Culp-Ressler, 2013). In the

days leading up to the trial verdict, ABC ran a sympathetic profile on Ben, portraying him as a

talented and bright young man who had overcome a great deal of adversity to be a successful

student and football player, stressing his lack of parental support (Lombardi et al., 2013). The

ABC profile also noted that Ben was in a "celebratory mood" on the night of the rape (Lombardi

et al., 2013). Both the Associates Press and *USA Today* referred to the girl as "drunken" in the

first sentences of their articles announcing the verdict (Welsh-Huggins, 2013; Cauchon et al.,

2013).

The above are particular, but not exhaustive, examples from public discourse in the

Steubenville rape case, in which victim blaming is undeniably present. The examples also

represent some common rape myths: women who drink are asking for it; women who put

themselves in a position of being raped were careless and deserve sexual violence; women lie

about rape; boys will be boys; and men are victims of temptation by women. The overall

narrative created by this public discourse is that the girl carelessly placed herself in a vulnerable

position by being drunk and flirting with the boys, while the boys are left to suffer the

consequences of getting carried away. The use of this narrative exemplifies rape myth

acceptance in that it is both victim blaming and perpetrator excusing. Rape myth acceptance allows people observing the horrors of the Steubenville case to deny the realities of what actually happened on August 11, 2012, thereby supporting their beliefs about safety, justice, or equality.

Rape myth acceptance is a construct that helps to explain why people choose to believe false and damaging narratives about rape. As shown above, extensive research has provided information about correlates and indicators of rape myth acceptance in the population and individuals. This is extremely helpful in predicting who might present with high levels of rape myth acceptance and how we can combat rape myth acceptance with education and prevention programs. Nevertheless, there is room for further analysis to understand the cultural roots of rape myth acceptance and why it is so widely utilized and overlooked. In the following chapters, I will present two theories that will serve as frameworks for understanding rape myth acceptance: system justification and Michel Foucault's theories about power and discourse. Using those paradigms, I will revisit rape myth acceptance in the Steubenville case in an attempt to provide further cultural context for the phenomenon.

CHAPTER III

System Justification

The sensational nature of the discourse from Steubenville might tempt us to dismiss it as extreme; yet doing so would overlook the very utility of that discourse. Rather than extreme, the narratives and rhetoric used to characterize the girl, her assailants, and the crime itself were ordinary. The previous chapter asserted that the discourse from Steubenville employs common rape myths and exemplifies rape myth acceptance. These beliefs are so deeply entrenched in our culture that people often espouse rape myth narratives, despite the fact that most people would never support or perpetrate an act of sexual violence. Rape myth research seeks to explain the ubiquity of rape myths by linking demographic and characterological factors to rape myth acceptance. While those correlates provide important information about the people who believe false narratives about sexual violence, this study seeks to understand why rape myth acceptance is widely supported and maintained. System justification theory provides a compelling model for exploring the function of rape myths and rape myth acceptance in the Steubenville case and broadly throughout society.

System Justification Theory

John T. Jost (New York University) and Mahzarin Banaji (Harvard University) introduced system justification theory in 1994 in an effort to explain why people tolerate living in a world that is patently unequal and unjust. At that time, Jost and Banaji (1994) suggested that there are three related but distinct motives that drive behavior and decision making, particularly related to social and political issues: ego justification, group justification, and system justification. The *ego justification* motive stems from the desire to "maintain a favorable self-image and to feel

valid, justified, and legitimate as an individual actor" (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004, p. 887). *Group justification* seeks to explain why individuals are motivated to look favorably upon their own groups and to validate actions of other ingroup members (Jost et al., 2004). *System justification* identifies the "social and psychological needs to imbue the status quo with legitimacy and to see it as good, fair, natural, desirable, and even inevitable" (Jost et al., 2004, p. 887). Unlike the first two motives, which describe behavior driven by best interests, system justification explains why individuals will endorse ideas that do not directly benefit – and indeed may be detrimental to – either themselves or their ingroup. In other words, individuals often justify and promote existing social and political systems even when those systems are at odds with individuals' needs.

The seemingly counterintuitive behavior of acting in a way that opposes one's own best interest is explained by system justification theory as privileging the *status quo*, or the system of existing social, cultural, and political structures. System justification theory asserts a specific definition of the status quo with several important features. First, the status quo has no particular value; it is neither good nor bad (Jost et al., 2009). Second, the status quo is subjective (Jost et al., 2009). There is no singular, determined status quo, as the existing state of things is interpreted through individual experiences and ideological filters. Finally, since it is easier to imagine what already exists, the status quo is typically perceived to be a fixed state that always has been and always will be. According to Jost et al. (2009), "Even with the awareness of alternatives, existing states are more available, and more cognitively accessible. (p. 86)" Moreover, not only is it easier to imagine that the existence of one thing moderates the ability to conceive of its alternative, but research has also shown that existence creates the perception of goodness (Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009). This belief, referred to as *status quo bias*, leads people to replicate the same choices over and over again, because it is perceived to be less risky to choose something that is known. The effect of status quo bias is that the existing state of

things is granted preferred status over competing ideas, regardless of the merits of those alternatives (Eidelman et al., 2009).

The degree to which a person endorses the way things are depends on individual and contextual factors, but most people are motivated to support the status quo to some extent (Jost, Liviatan, van der Toorn, Legerwood, & Mandisodza, 2009). People strive to uphold the status quo regardless of whether or not they benefit from the system, because system justification has a palliative function; it reduces dissonance, fear, anxiety, and guilt (Jost & Orsolya, 2002). Thus, motivation to maintain the status quo is strongly connected with the basic desire to eliminate discomfort. These processes occur at the levels of both conscious and unconscious. While support for the status quo is generally unconscious, resulting behaviors are purposeful. For example, an individual choosing to vote for a conservative political candidate votes intentionally, but may not be aware of underlying system-justifying motives.

An example relevant to the current study is Poppy Harlow's description of the Steubenville perpetrators as "young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students" immediately following the announcement of their guilt (Ortberg, 2013). By choosing to emphasize the boys' best qualities Harlow implicitly supports the status quo (football players are cultural heroes) to relieve the dissonance caused by a guilty verdict (cultural heroes don't rape). This is simply one of many examples of system justification at work in the Steubenville rape case. The following discussion of system justification theory is particularly concerned with the ways in which it helps to explain the inherent beliefs exposed by the Steubenville discourse.

Theoretical Origins of System Justification Theory

System justification theory is deeply connected with several theories that preceded Jost and Banaji's (1994) work, including social identity theory, just world theory, cognitive dissonance

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theory, social dominance theory, and the Marxist perspective (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). While system justification theory differs substantially from each of those antecedent theories, the roots of system justification are evident in each. Despite their myriad differences, the common link between all of these theories lies in a paradigm of *false reality*; the sense that individuals believe they are objectively making decisions in their best interests, but in fact those interests are obscured by sociopolitical conditions and individual cognitive processes. People will generally and often unconsciously behave in ways that minimize the discomfort of living in an unjust world.

The concept of "false consciousness" is perhaps the most significant theoretical influence of Marxism on system justification theory. *False consciousness* is a state of being created in capitalist societies through the discourses and consumptive practices that reinforce the dominant ideology; skews the realities of class division and benefits those in power. Like system justification, the concept of false consciousness provides insight into why underprivileged people tend to behave in ways that benefit those with privilege (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). *Just world theory*, which will be further elaborated in the discussion of ideology below, makes another attempt to understand why people tolerate the way things are. Belief in a just world is the result of a desire to live in a world where people "get what they deserve" (Lerner and Miller, 1978, p. 1030). This paradigm leads people to mistakenly see fairness where none exists in order to minimize the anxiety that stems from witnessing inequality and injustice. The Marxist perspective and just world theory both assert that individuals make decisions and form opinions not through the lens of what is, but through a blurred view of reality. Similarly, system justification theory places unconscious support for the status quo at the center of decision-making.

Cognitive dissonance theory is "the most prominent social psychological theory of justification and rationalization processes" (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, p. 116) and a significant

influence on system justification theory. *Cognitive dissonance* occurs when an individual experiences cognitive contradictions (APA, 2007). A simple example of cognitive dissonance is the experience of making a choice between two things and in the end desiring what was not chosen. In such a situation, people tend to highlight the good qualities of what was chosen and the negative qualities of what was denied, returning the cognitive system to equilibrium by reinforcing the choice and eliminating cognitive contradictions. Cognitive dissonance theory and system justification theory share the view that people are motivated to reduce the anxiety experienced when reality does not match expectations. However, cognitive dissonance theory focuses on the ego justification of individuals who strive to protect the self, whereas system justification theory asserts that people protect the system above the self when dissonance occurs (Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of social identity theory to the way social psychologists and sociologists understand behavior. *Social identity theory* suggests that individual identity is formed in relationship with others, particularly within group membership. Accordingly, people favor *ingroup* members over people with *outgroup* status because those who comprise the ingroup play an ongoing and crucial role in validating personal identity (APA, 2007). Social identity theory played a formative role in system justification theory because the former first explored the ways that group-related behavior, such as stereotyping and prejudice, supports oppressive social and political systems (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). However, the significant difference between the two theories reflects one of the most important contributions of system justification theory: *outgroup favoritism*. Jost and Banaji (1994) asserted that system justification and support for the status quo explain what social identity theory does not: why people often behave in ways that bolster those in power at the expense of their own ingroup. Finally, *social dominance theory* is more closely attuned with system justification theory regarding individual support for the

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status quo (unlike social identity theory, in which group members support their own even in opposition to the status quo). However, system justification theory further asserts that a group's position in society determines how outgroup favoritism will affect individuals by measures of self-esteem and ego conflict (Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

Individual Factors in System Justification

Individual differences in support for the status quo are linked with dispositional and environmental factors. Research on personality correlates with system justification reveals certain traits that have strong positive correlations with a system justifying orientation, including "uncertainty avoidance; intolerance of ambiguity; need for order, structure, and closure; perception of a dangerous world; and fear of death" (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, p. 261). Further research identified self-deception as a correlate with system justifying beliefs (Jost, Liviatan, van der Toom, Ledgerwood, & Mandisodza, 2010). A 2003 study showed a correlation between perceiving the free market system to be fair and enhanced self-deception, indicating that people who endorse the economic status quo present with higher levels of self-deception (Jost et al., 2010). Traits that negatively correlate with system justification include the ability to think complexly and being open to new experiences (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In both positive and negative correlate categories the traits are congruent with support for the status quo, particularly in the positive correlates prioritizing order and clarity. Again, many people hold system justifying views to some extent, but correlational analyses can help in understanding why the strength of these beliefs varies among individuals.

Ideology. It is also impossible to understand system justification without considering the role of ideology in behavior and decision-making. It generally follows that the more status quo supporting a person is, the more conservative they will likely be (Jost, Hawkins, Nosek, Hennes, Stern, Gosling, & Graham, 1024). However, individuals across political and social spectra

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endorse the status quo to varying degrees. People with system justifying orientations adopt

ideologies that bolster the status quo in order to justify their beliefs. *Ideology* can be defined as "a

set of consensually shared beliefs and doctrines that provide the moral and intellectual basis for a

political, economic, or social system" (Jost, Fitzsimmons, & Kay, 2004, p. 265). People adopt

ideologies that are congruent with their worldview and those beliefs, in turn, strengthen and give

credence to their sociopolitical orientation. System justification is dependent on ideologies that

rationalize the existence of the status quo. Jost and Hunyady (2005) identify ten system-justifying

ideologies that correlate with support for the status quo: Protestant work ethic, meritocratic

ideology, fair market ideology, economic system justification, belief in a just world, power

distance, social dominance orientation, opposition to equality, right-wing authoritarianism, and

political conservatism. Each of these ideologies is worthy of analysis, but for the purposes of this

project it is most useful to focus on belief in a just world, opposition to equality, and political

conservatism.

  Belief in a just world is the conviction that people get what they deserve in both punishment

and reward. This orientation is particularly salient in beliefs about sexual violence, as rape myths

endorse the victim blaming perspective that victims behave in ways that invite rape – or that

victims get what they deserve. This is not necessarily a perspective mediated by being a victim,

rather belief in a just world has been shown to influence the way victims understand their own

experiences and lead to self-blame (Libow & Doty, 1979). Much of the public discourse in

Steubenville exposed a just world orientation, implying that the girl deserved to be raped because

of drinking and provocative behavior.

  An ideological *opposition to equality* is based on the belief that inequality is desirable and

that striving for equality is damaging to society (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Gender inequality, for

example, is omnipresent in our society. Thus, a system justifying perspective on gender would

view equality as destabilizing. Opposition to gender equality among men has been shown to correlate with sexist views and increased sexual violence (Whaley, 2001). The likely reason for these correlations is that men, accustomed to being in power, perceive women as threats to their supremacy and seek to maintain the status quo through violence and oppression. Opposition to equality is, therefore, not unique to Steubenville, but arguably relevant to any circumstance in which men collude to perpetrate sexual violence against women.

Finally, *political conservatism* is based on the notion that social change is a threat to traditional social and political structures, which must be preserved (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). People who hold a political conservative perspective will prioritize the stability of the status quo and reject progressive ideas that threaten existing systems. This concept is intrinsically related to the Steubenville rape case, as support for the boys exposed a conservative perspective. Prosecuting the boys for a crime was an anti-conservative act, as it challenged the status quo both in terms of gender equality and social norms elevating football players in Steubenville.

The examples of belief in a just world, opposition to equality, and political conservatism illustrate how ideology reinforces system justification by providing reasons for support for the status quo. Individual traits and environmental factors – political climate, location, family traditions, etc. – exist in combination and contribute to the extent to which a person holds system-justifying beliefs. Yet understanding why an individual might tend toward system justification does not fully explain the pervasiveness of status quo support. System justification theory also emphasizes the function of support for the status quo for individuals and within society.

Function of System Justification

As briefly discussed above, system justification is found to decrease uncomfortable feelings, such as anxiety and guilt, by reaffirming the status quo and promising stability. In other words, "People are motivated to justify the system in which they live because it serves a palliative function." (Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009, p. 8). System justification makes people feel good because it decreases dissonance by allowing people to believe that things are just as they should be. People who hold power and privilege are likely to support the system because it benefits them directly and a system justifying orientation decreases guilt about personal power by legitimizing that privilege. Conversely, people who do not hold power support the status quo because, among other reasons, system justification provides a reason for powerlessness; if the system is legitimate, social structures must be fair (Jost et al., 2004). This mitigates the anxiety of feeling oppressed.

The palliative function of system justification is also understood to be meeting psychological needs. Jost et al. (2010) assert that there are three basic needs met through system justification:

> Epistemic needs to reduce uncertainty and create a stable,
> predictable worldview; existential needs to manage threat and to
> perceive a safe, reassuring environment; and relational needs to
> achieve shared reality with important others, including friends and
> family members who have system justification needs of their own.
> (p. 11)

These epistemic, existential, and relational needs, which are easily threatened in daily life, reflect fundamental wishes to feel comfortable and insulated from stress or dissonance. System justification is reassuring because feelings of instability, danger, and disconnectedness are decreased when individuals believe that the status quo is fair and existing structures are protective.

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Sexual violence provides a good example for understanding the palliative function of system justification. The discussion of rape myth acceptance in Chapter 3 asserted that women believe false narratives about sexual violence in part because it helps them to feel safer in the world. Sexual violence presents a threat to both the existential need to feel safe and the epistemic need for stability and reassurance. A woman who finds these threats overwhelming might employ the system justifying ideology of belief in a just world, which would lead her to believe that rape happens to (other) people who deserve it. This belief will dampen the perception of threat to the individual; it also supports the status quo in which sexual violence is justified by rape myths. In this example, the system justification motive is to soothe the anxiety experienced as a result of the threat of sexual violence and it is enacted through ideology.

The palliative functions of system justification rely on support for the status quo and outgroup favoritism (Jost and Hunyady, 2002; Jost et al., 2004). These concepts are foundational to system justification because they provide the scaffolding for system justifying motives. Support for the status quo captures the need to rationalize and diminish threats within existing systems, while outgroup favoritism explains why people behave in ways at odds with their best interests.

Support for the status quo is motivated by various situational factors, including threats to the system. People tend to identify closely with the system in which they live. Therefore, when the system is vulnerable the threat is perceived as personal (Chapleau & Oswald, 2013). Research has shown that perceived threats to the status quo provoke greater system justification. An experiment designed in John Jost's laboratory at New York University provides a good example of the effects of threats to the system. Participants were asked to read one of two vignettes describing the condition of the current system (in this case, the sociopolitical climate in Israel). Half of the participants read a vignette that was system-threatening, describing a state in decline; the other half read a vignette that characterized the state as robust. Both groups were

then given information about powerful people and asked to rate those people on scales of intelligence and independence. The group exposed to the system-threatening vignette rated powerful people higher on measures of intelligence and independence than did the group who read the system-affirming passage. These results indicate that perceived threats to the system bolster support for people in power because system-justifying beliefs mitigate the anxiety aroused by system threats (Jost et al., 2010).

Outgroup favoritism – the preference for a group to which one does not belong – is a complex and somewhat controversial concept that is also one of the most innovative aspects of system justification theory (Jost et al., 2004). Outgroup favoritism seeks to explain why individuals behave in ways that support and sustain the existing system even when it is at odds with their own best interests. No one is surprised when privileged people are motivated by system justification. After all, it is the system that doles out privilege and allows those in power to maintain their positions. However, disadvantaged people often support unjust systems that actively oppress them and others members of their ingroup.

The explanation for this behavior is found in system justification theory, which states that people are motivated to protect interests of the system over self-interests (Jost, 2001). Outgroup favoritism is "one manifestation of the tendency to internalize and thus perpetuate the system of inequality" (Jost et al., 2004). Research on outgroup favoritism indicates that disadvantaged individuals are more likely to elevate outgroups on implicit, rather than explicit, measures (Jost et al., 2004), suggesting that outgroup favoritism is probably an unconscious process. While disadvantaged people may overtly recognize oppression and express solidarity for group membership, implicit tests show that they are simultaneously motivated to support existing structures of power and privilege. The palliative function of system justification motivates

outgroup favoritism, as the knowable comforts of the status quo relieve dissonance felt by people disadvantaged by the system.

Gender Inequality, Rape Myths, and System Justification

For the purposes of this research, it is useful to understand how system justification is directly related to gender inequality and sexism, and ultimately to rape myth acceptance. Jost and Kay (2005) suggest that there are essentially two layers of the status quo in gender-based system justification. Status quo gender inequality supports existing systems of male dominance and the system is threatened by efforts to achieve equal rights or challenges to normative gender roles. Gender inequality also benefits the general status quo because gender roles are embedded in our expectations about how the world works – i.e., the characteristics assigned to men (assertiveness, independence, achievement) and women (nurturing, socially competent, community-oriented) are complimentary and maintain harmony in society (Jost & Kay, 2005). Therefore, women people who do not directly benefit from male dominance are likely to endorse gender inequality due to its perceived function of cohesion in our social fabric.

Indeed, research supports these assertions. Jost and Kay (2005) show that both men and women support gender inequality, but in different ways. Their 2005 research used a method of stereotype activation wherein participants were reminded of positive stereotypes, such as the above, about men and women to understand the roots of support for the status quo. The research concluded that men support gender inequality regardless of stereotype activation, suggesting that male dominance alone is motivation for men to endorse gender inequality. Women, on the other hand, supported gender inequality when positive stereotypes were activated, which corroborates support for the status quo in general based on cultural beliefs about the importance of gender roles. (Jost & Kay, 2005) This research is important because it provides

evidence that people are motivated to endorse gender inequality and to uphold systems of male dominance in order to diminish anxiety about instability in a sociopolitical and cultural context.

Consequences of System Justification

There are both systemic and individual consequences for supporting the status quo. Perhaps the most significant consequence of system justification is that support for the status quo assists in maintaining dominant ideologies and systems that are harmful, repressive, and unjust (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Existing structures upheld by inequality, injustice, violence, and oppression thrive on system justification, as it reduces social action. System justification also affects individuals by either bolstering self-esteem (when individuals benefit from the system they are supporting) or weakening self-esteem (as in outgroup favoritism, when individuals internalize support for a system that disadvantages them) (Jost, 2001).

Consequences of system justification are salient in relation to sexual violence. Gender inequality is deeply culturally entrenched, thus solidifying sexist systems within the status quo. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research has found a positive correlation between support for gender inequality and rape myth acceptance (Chapleau & Oswald, 2014). Chapleau and Oswald (2013) assert that "rape myth acceptance justifies and perpetuates a system of male domination as well as spuriously reassures women that they should "continue to support this system" for its palliative function (p. 22). Since power remains located in male domination, fighting against sexual violence becomes a threat to the system, particularly when women report crimes or speak publically about their experiences. Such actions throw the status quo into crisis and the system justification motive encourages people to diminish dissonance through modes of victim blame or perpetrator forgiveness.

System justification is a useful framework for understanding how and why people accept – and sometimes prefer – structures that support injustice. One of the many ways that the status

quo is reinforced and perpetuated is through discourse and rhetoric. This study explores the use

of rape myths as a means of justifying the system of oppression against women. In order to

understand the means by which people share existing systems, this discussion will next turn to the

power of public discourse. Collusion with existing systems relies in part on shared discursive

methods, such as rape myths. To further this argument, the following chapter will use

Foucaultian analysis to examine the relationship between power and discourse.

CHAPTER IV

Foucault/Discourse Analysis

In many ways, the Steubenville rape case is a simple scenario – a common story of sexual violence in which, despite there being a clear victim and known guilty perpetrators, the event was fraught with victim blaming and perpetrator excusing, as well as feminist outrage. Yet a reductionist view of actors in their roles overlooks the complexities of such cases, which exist in various realms of experience – including systemic, interpersonal/individual, and discursive experiences. This project examines the case from those three perspectives, using two separate, but related theories. In the previous chapter, system justification theory was introduced to explore the case from both systemic and individual perspectives. System justification theory provides an important explanation for why individuals are motivated to support and perpetuate existing systems, thereby bolstering the power of those systems. Yet system justification theory does not examine those processes for creating the status quo. For the latter, this chapter will turn to Michel Foucault, whose work on power, knowledge, and discourse illuminates the ways in which systems of knowledge are created and how those systems interact with power. Foucaultian discourse analysis provides a framework for understanding power in society by exposing its agents and means.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault was born in Pointiers, France in 1926. He was educated at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, receiving his doctoral degree in 1961. Foucault taught at several French universities during graduate school and after until he was elected to the Collège de France in 1969, where he taught until he died in 1984. During the course of his career, Foucault

was a prolific writer, frequent lecturer, and an activist. Foucault participated in prison reform movements in France and the United States, as well as protest movements against oppressive governments in various countries, such as Brazil, Communist Poland, and Franco's Spain. (Gutting, 1994; Gutting, 2013)

Foucault is considered part of the philosophical movement called poststructuralism, which arose in mid-twentieth-century France as a response to structuralist theory. Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze can be counted among poststructuralist thinkers, as well as the American writer and gender theorist, Judith Butler. While *structuralism* understood human behavior to be driven by underlying social, political, and linguistic systems, *poststructuralism* argued that there was no objective reality in those systems. Rather, human experience is influenced by discursive practices that shape our beliefs; there is no reality, only our perceptions of reality manifested in specific sociopolitical contexts. Foucault's important contribution to poststructuralism was his work on discursive practices, in which he posited that discourse - defined here as language in all its modes of expression - shapes reality and that we must understand the historical roots of knowledge in order to grapple with what we believe to be true. (Perry, 1992)

Foucault is most famously known as a philosopher even though much of his work exists within the social sciences. His theories draw deeply from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and history, with historical analysis at the root of his major works. Foucault did not write histories as such, but history provided both grounding and context for his theories. Foucault used historical events as context for his philosophical explorations of power and knowledge, taking an archeological approach to discourse by examining the roots and development of discursive

practices in relation to specific historical phenomena (Flynn, 1994). Three of his major works[4],

Folie et Déraison: Historie de la Folie à L'âge Classique (1961)*, Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*

(1975)*,* and *Historie de la Sexualité. I: La Volonté de Savior* (1976), examine, respectively, madness in

society, prisons, and the construct of sexuality by examining related discourse through history – a

technique described in *L'archéologie du Savoir* (1969)[5]. For Foucault, discourse is historical because

it changes with conventions of the times, but language is governed by a set of unchanging rules.

Gutting (1994) writes, "To ask Foucault which theory of language is really right is like asking the

quantum physicist whether light is really a wave or a system of particles. The only sensible

answer is that there are particular contexts in which each view has distinctive advantages." (p. 18)

This project relies most heavily on Faucoult's *The History of Sexuality, Vol I.,* however the

discussion will draw on all of the above-mentioned works with two goals: 1) describing discourse

analysis and its utility for this chapter and 2) understanding Foucault's theories about knowledge

and power. The purpose of using Foucault to understand the Steubenville rape case lies at the

intersection of those goals. Foucaultian discourse analysis plunges into the murky pool of

language to make meaning of what is said by focusing on who spoke and in what context. In

doing so, discourse analysis exposes the construction and legitimization of knowledge through the

power of both speaking and silence. In Foucault's view, power and knowledge are diffused

throughout society through discursive practices. Using this framework, the following discussion

will demonstrate the utility of discourse analysis for understanding the Steubenville rape case,

exposing the ways in which the creation of knowledge and forms of power perpetuate the

rhetoric of rape myth acceptance.

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[4] English translations, respectively: *Madness and Civilization*, abridged translation (1965), *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and *History of Sexuality, Vol I: An Introduction* (1978)
[5] English translation: *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972)

Knowledge

While Foucault's view of knowledge formation became over time intrinsically linked with his theories about power, his earlier works focused the history of knowledge (Rouse, 1994). Foucault argues that knowledge is constructed through discursive practices, which determine the extent to which new ideas are accepted and legitimized. He posits that knowledge becomes both articulate and authoritative through *discursive formations*, which are not only comprised of words that are spoken but also how, in what order, and by whom ideas are expressed (Foucault, 1972). Measures of credibility are also discursive formations, giving credence to ideas through widely accepted procedures that purportedly assess validity (Foucault, 1972; Rouse, 1994). Examples of such measures are numerous, including the scientific method, categorization, diagnosis, and the law, to name a few. The practice of psychological diagnosis, for example, is already validated by discourse that favors a binary of sanity/insanity that is widely culturally accepted. Importantly, while Foucault studied the institutions and systems that helped give rise to knowledge, he prioritized discourse in knowledge construction. Psychological diagnoses are validated not solely by doctors or agencies, but through the dominant ideas of the day (Foucault, 1965). It is through discursive formations that we determine which ideas will be elevated to truth and which will be delegitimized.

Discursive formation is "made possible by a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification" (Foucault, 1972, p. 44). In other words, the success of a new idea depends on its salience across social and institutional groups, as well as the interplay of these groups at points of commonality. It is not sufficient for an idea to be popular within one particular group of people; it must transcend those boundaries and weave resiliently through a web of humans in relation to one another (Foucault, 1972). Thus,

knowledge is not implemented or mandated by specific institutions or groups of people; it is created as a collective process of sharing and accepting ideas.

      Creation of knowledge. This view of knowledge creation reacts against the traditional structural view that knowledge is handed down from its powerful beholders and imparted onto the less powerful masses. Nevertheless, powerful institutions have the ability to create massive shifts in the ways in which we collect and understand information to create knowledge. Rouse (1994) observes that in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault emphasizes that "the eighteenth-nineteenth century transformation of the human sciences was explicitly set in the context of practices of discipline, surveillance, and constraint, which made possible new kinds of knowledge of human beings even as they created new forms of social control." (p. 94). The proliferation of prisons at that time created circumstances for categorizing (good/bad; rehabilitated/not rehabilitated; criminal/not criminal) people, locations for studying human behavior, and shifts in cultural norms regarding punishment (Foucault, 1977). The information gathered led to new constructions of knowledge about the body, mind, and soul, as discursive formations legitimized new ideas about incarceration, rehabilitation, and torture (Foucault, 1977). New information also created new categories of knowledge and new things to be examined or controlled. For example, Foucault (1977) asserts that the creation of the concept "delinquency" caused people to be labeled delinquents, thus forming a new category for study and spawning new discursive formations. Through discursive formations delinquency then became a valid concept that is widely accepted, thereby reinforcing knowledge about punishment and the power of the state. While groups and institutions that hold social or political power influence knowledge creation, discursive formations remain central to validating ideas and creating knowledge.

Power

Foucault's view of power was inextricably linked to knowledge because knowledge

facilitates control over people's lives. Methods of surveillance – enabled by institutions such as

prisons, schools, hospitals, and factories – generate knowledge about people and, in turn, make it

possible to constrain behavior (Rouse, 1994). For example, the idea of delinquency was created

through observation and the desire for categorization. Once there was knowledge of

delinquency, the behavior had to be controlled. When delinquency is managed through

institutional means, it is easily observed and measured (people can be more or less delinquent).

Measuring delinquency creates further opportunities for controlling it, as evidenced by a prison

system that is based on levels of security or different punishments for distinct crimes. This

example illustrates the perpetual interdependence of knowledge and power; knowledge enables

power and power generates knowledge.

Power is diffuse. Hidden in this example are the multiple levels at which power exists.

State institutions and their agents (doctors, social workers, lawyers, prison workers, etc.) are not

the only possessors of power. Those institutions are supported by citizens from all realms who

validate the power of the state through complicity and engagement with dominant discourse;

this, too, is a form of power. Thus, the key to understanding Foucault's concept of power lies in

abandoning the idea that power is vertically distributed. Foucault (1978) rejects the views that

power is solely held by the state, dispensed by state institutions, and enacted upon its citizens or

that power is wielded by elite groups of citizens who subjugate other groups. These forms of

power exist, of course, but state and elite power belongs to the specific category *juridico-discursive*

power, which simply describes "the terminal forms power takes" (Foucault, 1978, p. 92).

Juridico-discursive power is perhaps the easiest form of power to identify because its institutions,

rules, and actors are evident in daily life. However, Foucault strongly resists the inclination to

identify specific sites of power: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1978, p. 93).

Conditions of power. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol I.* (1978) Foucault identifies several conditions of power. He asserts that power cannot be possessed. Instead, power operates in any situation in which inequality exists and the ability to exercise power is always shifting as circumstances change. A person capable of exercising power in one situation may not enjoy the same privilege in another. Thus that person does not hold power; she simply engages in *mobile relations* of power that are both persistent and manifest in everyday experience (Foucault, 1978). These power relations are "not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships," (Foucault, 1978, p. 94) meaning that power is not a product of the relational construct as much as it is a result of the conditions of the relationship. Police do not dominate citizens because of the construction of policing; dominance stems from inherent inequalities between police and citizens. This example further illustrates the shifting nature of power, as there are also circumstances in which citizens exercise power over police. Power is constantly realigned and rearranged with the subjectivity of human relations. Foucault (1978) also clearly states that power is intentional: "…there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (p. 95). In any relationship, power is wielded with specific goals that are known to the exerciser and often evident to the subjugated. In a sociopolitical system of white dominance, white people intentionally exercise power over people of color in order to maintain white supremacy, which is a condition known to both groups.

This mobility and diffusion of power creates a circumstance in which it is easiest to recognize power at its sites of transition (Foucault, 1978). Transitions of power often occur in tandem with redistribution of knowledge in any set of relations. Foucault (1978) writes, "Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (p. 100). The remainder of this

discussion will focus on power and knowledge in discourse about sexuality in order to create a

framework for understanding discursive practices in rape myths and the Steubenville rape case.

Power/Knowledge and Discourses of Sexuality

In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Foucault traced the discursive formations of sexuality

throughout history. He asserts that prior to the Victorian Era people were so open about sex and

sexuality that its acts were a part of daily life: "A censorship of sex? There was installed rather an

apparatus for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning

and taking effects in its very economy" (Foucault, 1978, p. 23). Shifts in discourse about sexuality

occurred in the eighteenth century, when governments began to consider sexuality a matter of

the state. Foucault (1978) points to the state's concerns about population growth as well as

developments in medicine related to pregnancy and fertility as reasons for the development of

new discursive formations regarding sexuality.   New discursive formations of administration,

management, and procedures required new language, creating a shift in public discourse about

sex. Foucault (1978) writes, "If sexuality was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only

because relations of power had established it as a possible object; and conversely, if power was

able to take it as a target, this was because techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse

were capable of investing it (p.??). It is not a given that sexuality would become a subject of state

concern or that citizens would change their sexual beliefs and behaviors. The shift occurred at,

and because of, the intersection of power and knowledge. What was once free from state rhetoric

was now infused with discourse that directly served the needs of the state. Sexual comportment

became a site of investigation rather than a topic of gossip and revelry (Foucault, 1978).

Foucault (1978) emphasizes that the sexual repression that began in the eighteenth

century was not rooted in silence. People continued talking about sex, but the nature of the

conversations shifted. I n Foucault's (1978) view, new rhetoric about sexual repression created a

kind of hypocrisy in sexual discourse. After the discursive shift, people perceived themselves to

be more sexually repressed than they had been in the past and we now discuss the ways in which

we are repressed in order to feel free. The hypocrisy of this practice lies in its discursive

formations: we have adopted the language of sexual repression and use it to claim our sexual

freedom (Foucault, 1978). In doing so, we monitor one another by engaging with socially

acceptable discursive formations that privilege a certain kind of morality based on behaviors

which serve the needs of the state. This process illustrates Foucault's power/knowledge dyad, as

the power to maintain social norms about sex is distributed throughout society and its legitimacy

relies on constructed knowledge about sexuality.

Power/knowledge and rape myths. Rape myths provide a relevant example of the

interplay of power and knowledge in sexual discourse. Although rape is not an act of sex, rape

myths belong to discourse about sex because they are based on social constructions about gender,

sexuality, and morality. Rape myths rely on discursive formations that assist in controlling sexual

behavior. Recall the aforementioned example regarding the creation of delinquency. Like

delinquency (and countless other constructions), rape myths are not objective truths. Rape myths

arose from the tools of analysis that were developed to understand human sexuality. Those tools

prioritize certain aspects of sexuality and ignore others, creating a discursive tradition in which

the themes common in rape myths are normalized and legitimized. Simply, we have developed

and widely accepted sexual discourse rooted in the discursive formation of binaries, leading to a

strict binary view of gender. Rape myths are one result of this tradition; different discursive

formations would likely have produced different language about sexuality.

Identifying the discursive formations that lead to the creation of rape myths is only part of

the key to understanding their existence. It is also necessary to understand the discursive

function of rape myths. Foucault (1978) distinguishes between "the rigor of a taboo" (p. 25) and

"the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses" (p.25). This distinction is reminiscent of the utility of rape myths, which are anything but taboo; they are ubiquitous and imbued with sexual connotations about desire and temptation. The utility of rape myths lies in the power of discourse to regulate and judge sexual behavior. Rape myths are warnings to women that they must behave in certain ways to avoid the punishment of sexual violence. Any person who employs rape myths when talking about sexual violence exercises the power of an authoritative discursive tradition that privileges male desire over female agency.

The following chapter will use both discourse analysis and system justification theory to look closely at the discourse in the Steubenville case with the goal identifying both the tools and agents of power in sexual violence. While system justification does not claim a place in Foucault's poststructuralist tradition, this theory corroborates a poststructuralist view that people within a system make individual choices that support existing structures and that those subjective choices are influenced by factors that may be unknown to individuals. In other words, system justification and discourse analysis share the view that overt behavior cannot be read as truth, but rather a subjective representation of an individual in relation to social, political, and cultural forces of power. Examining these theories together in the context of Steubenville will provide a broad view of how people form and express beliefs about sexual violence.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e.
> the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same
> time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of
> material production at its disposal, has control at the same time
> over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally
> speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental
> production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more
> than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships,
> the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.
>   - Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*

System justification theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis both explore sociopolitical systems, but they importantly differ methodologically. The former seeks to understand how individual psychology interacts with dominant cultural forces, while the latter considers how those dominant cultural forces were formed and became entrenched. Taken together, the two theoretical lenses provide a framework for understanding the roots and perpetuation of rape myths in public discourse. This project is meant to exposed particular ways in which misogyny and male dominance are entrenched in our cultural landscape and how it remains alive through our active participation the discursive formations of gender inequality. Recognizing the underlying systems of power that covertly shape the ethos of gender and sexuality will help us to understand the roots of widely accepted beliefs and examine our own conscious or unconscious participation in those systems.

At the same time, this project self-consciously seeks to demystify the complex rhetoric of rape myths. Discursive practices – even those on which this writing relies heavily – are evasive and muddled in service of maintaining power and the status quo. If discourse existed without subtext or embedded meanings, injustice and inequality would lie nakedly exposed before us.

Indeed the stability of the status quo depends upon the cloaking power of language in order to maintain control. Karl Marx (1932) wrote, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (p. 94). While Marx's view of power – driven by economic forces – differs from the kind of systemic power – driven by the desire to maintain male dominance – discussed in this project, his point is salient. Those of us who purport to hold and generate knowledge (the ruling class) shape the dominant ideas of any age in favor of existing systems of power. When we engage in public discourse without understanding that the discursive tools available to us are rigged for power, we perpetuate the system such as it is. Demystifying discursive formations of gender and sexuality can help us to see clearly the implicit meaning of our words in order to conceive of empowering language and to reject the disempowering rhetoric of rape myths.

The following pages will provide an analysis of rape myths used in public discourse about the Steubenville, OH rape case using a synthesis of system justification theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Previous chapters examined the phenomenon of rape myth acceptance and Steubenville, as well as separate analyses of the two theories. This chapter will focus specifically on discourse about Steubenville in order to bring theory into practice. The goal of this research is to expose the roots of rape myths – What purpose do they serve? Who do they serve? - in order to diminish their power. We must engage theory to do so, but simultaneously remain aware that theory itself reflects the dominant ideas of this age, of this ruling class. In other words, it is important to not lose sight of the point amid the discursive formations: rape myths are rooted in misogyny and used to maintain male dominance.

Analysis: System Justification

Rape myth acceptance is an unconscious process in many ways largely because rape myths are embedded in our cultural consciousness due to their ubiquity. Thus, rejecting rape

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myths requires knowledge about sexual violence and critical thought; and according to the principles of system justification theory, it also requires the psychological work of opposing both the general status quo and entrenched systems of male dominance. Chapter 3 provided an overview of system justification related to gender inequality and male dominance, suggesting that rape myths are an integral tool for perpetuating the status quo. The following discussion will further explore the system justifying utility of rape myths using public discourse from the Steubenville High School rape case.

Public discourse about the Steubenville case is embedded with messages about male dominance and warnings to women who choose to challenge gender inequality. These messages were primarily delivered in the form of rape myths, which were meant to excuse the behavior of the perpetrators and blame the victim for sexual assault. Generally, the discourse about Steubenville relied on common rape myths: women tempt men with provocative behavior and men cannot control their sexual desires once they are provoked. Of course, another rape myth implicit to both of these messages is the notion that sexual violence is an act of sexual desire, rather what it actually is: physical violence based on domination. For example, the media suggestion that a Steubenville perpetrator was "in a celebratory mood" (Lombardi et al., 2013), insinuates that the events of that night were lighthearted fun rather than a serious crime.

Local discourse. However, before examining media coverage, it will be useful to dissect the local discourse about the Steubenville rape. The rhetoric of Steubenville is informed by rape myths, which obscure the reality of sexual violence perpetrated and witnessed in a public display of male dominance. Texts, tweets, witness statements, and statements from townspeople reveal a strong desire to collude with the events of that night by excusing the perpetrators and blaming the survivor. When a witness tweeted "some people deserve to be peed on" (Macur & Schweber, 2012), he employed the language of misogyny and domination, and unintentionally

highlighted one of the most basic concepts of rape mythology: women who are raped must have done something to deserve their fates. Further the Steubenville coach's statement insinuating that the girl lied about rape because she was ashamed about being drunk (Macur & Schweber, 2012) relies in part on the rape myth that survivors are responsible for sexual violence if they are intoxicated. The statement also endorses the rape myth that women lie about rape.

One of the many witnesses who did not intervene to save the girl from being publically raped stated, "If they're getting 'raped' and don't resist then to me it's not rape" (Levy, 2013). This quote once again relies on false narratives about rape as a sexual act – in other words, "she wanted it." It also exemplifies Chapleau and Oswald (2014) assertion that "the failure to recognize the pervasiveness and severity of rape is due to widespread misinformation about rape victims, perpetrator, and the act of rape" (Chapleau & Oswald, 2014, p. 205). While individual factors, such as those discussed in Chapter Two, contribute to the likelihood that people will endorse rape myths, rape myths acceptance is largely unconscious and common due to the prevalence of those narratives. The perspective that rape myths are based on misinformation is helpful for rape prevention efforts. The boy who falsely believed that not resisting rape is equivalent to consent would likely benefit from improved education about sexual violence.

Nevertheless, system justification theory demonstrates that lack of education is not the only factor contributing to rape myth acceptance. Rape myths serve the purpose of legitimizing gender inequality and systems of male dominance, thereby promoting the belief that existing systems are valid and stable. People are likely to endorse rape myths because they are psychologically comforting. In the case of Steubenville, it was far easier for the perpetrators, witnesses, townspeople, and the coach to blame the girl and excuse the boys because admitting that local football heroes are criminals threatens to destabilize local systems of power as well as the status quo of male dominance and gender inequality.

Yet another important aspect of the Steubenville case is the role of the two girls (both juveniles and, therefore, unnamed in the press) who harassed the survivor and were subsequently arrested for their bullying tweets. The tweets blamed the girl for both the rape and strife in Steubenville in the aftermath of that night. One tweet stated, "You ripped my family apart," (Associated Press, 2013) suggesting that reporting the rape caused problems, rather than the rape itself. The messages are clearly examples of rape myths in that they are victim-blaming and perpetrator-excusing. The actions of the girls are also good examples of outgroup favoritism, in that the girls were motivated to defend male perpetrators despite sharing gender traits with the victim. In addition, their actions also illuminate the palliative function of rape myth acceptance. If the repercussions of the Steubenville rape can be blamed on the survivor, the girls, who know and likely socialize with the perpetrators, can continue to feel safe from potential harm. If the girls feel safe from harm, they perceive the status quo to be stable and reassuring.

Mainstream media coverage. Mainstream media coverage also reflected false narratives about rape. Stories about Steubenville often portrayed the perpetrators as local heroes and young men with promising futures, while the survivor was described as "drunken" (Welsh-Huggins, 2013; Cauchon et al., 2013; Ortberg, 2013). The resulting story that emerged insinuated that the girl behaved irresponsibly and the result would be ruination for the boys involved. Mainstream media accounts such as these ignore the lasting effects of trauma on the girl and engage in rape myths in which women are responsible for avoiding rape. Such narratives support male domination, as women are expected to restrict their behavior and men are free to act as they please. The mainstream media contributes to and reflected widespread rape myth acceptance in its coverage of Steubenville.

Analysis: Power/Knowledge

The rape myths discussed above are found in public discourse and articulate examples of discursive formations about gender and sexuality. System justification theory explains the utility of rape myths for individuals in a sociopolitical context, but the theory does not describe how or why these false narratives were conceived. Foucauldian discourse analysis, with its focus on power and knowledge, can provide insight into the origins of contemporary discourse about gender and sexuality by identifying the roots of its discursive formations. Notably, this is not meant to be an historical analysis in which the development of a specific idea is traced throughout time. Rather, the following discussion seeks to illuminate the process by which knowledge about gender and sexuality is produced and legitimized.

Discursive power. It has been shown that discourse in the Steubenville rape case relied heavily on rape myths, therefore Steubenville can provide a valuable framework for understanding the discursive formations that shape sexual violence. The perpetrators and their defenders employed rape myths to devalue and discredit the victim. Media coverage was polarized; mainstream media largely excused the perpetrators, feminist media harshly critiqued the discourse. Feminist critiques seeking to defend the girl generally relied on the same discursive formations (binaries) used by the mainstream media. The girl and her family were generally silent, with only a single statement from her family asking that people respect their privacy. Silence is, in itself, a valuable and often powerful discursive strategy (Foucault, 1978).

When analyzing the Steubenville discourse, it is tempting to assert that the perpetrators as well as their personal and media allies possessed power, while the girl and her supporters were denied power. From a non-Foulcaultian perspective that binary is resonant (even important to recognize) in many ways. However, engaging with discourse analysis requires that we consider the ways in which discursive power was diffused throughout the case. In order to accomplish

that task, it is first necessary to revisit Foucault's concept of power, which differs from standard definitions. Henderson (2013) writes, "Foucault argues that power is not something that is possessed but rather something that is exercised" (p. 235). Indeed, as discussed earlier, Foucault does not conceptualize power in a top-down hierarchal structure. Foucauldian power is embedded in discourse and knowledge, and employed whenever discursive formations are practiced. Foucault urges us to understand that power is dispersed and attainable to anyone through discursive formations. This is a significant point for understanding rape myths and Steubenville, because, if power is diffused throughout society and exercised with the simple use of everyday discursive tools, even the smallest interactions have political significance (Henderson, 2013). People who chose to speak about the Steubenville case exercised power by using language, which is agreed upon and legitimized.

Rape myths are products of culturally accepted constructs about sexuality, which are largely based on the equally constructed concept of gender. Steubenville engages the constructed language of sexuality not simply because that is the tool available to us, but because that language has been validated over time through discursive formation and those who speak seek authority in conversations about sexual violence. Foucault's (1978) *rules of continual variation* posit that power and knowledge continually shift with relational context. He writes, "We must not look for who has the power in the order of sexuality and who is deprived of it; nor for who has the right to know and who is forced to remain ignorant. We must seek rather the modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process." (Foucault, 1978, p. 99). It is important to understand both the context and content of the public discourse about Steubenville. For example, when the Big Red coach chooses to speak out against the girl, he is not simply exercising power as a leader or a man, he is also employing the language of a discursive tradition in which knowledge is created in the context of male dominance.

Feminist media. It is important to remember that discursive formations are the tools available to everyone who participates in a conversation; we all have the same tools, even if we use them differently. Feminist media outlets, such as *Jezebel, Feministing, The Nation,* and many others, responded to mainstream coverage of the case with appropriate outrage about themes of victim blame, excusing the perpetrators, and simultaneously exaggerating and downplaying details about the rape (Valenti, 2013; Baker 2013). Nevertheless, although the feminist media sought to dismantle the misogyny of mainstream discourse about Steubenville, it was limited by the agreed upon language of gender and sexuality. In other words, even feminist discourse is based in discursive formations of power and knowledge (authority), and we adopt the language of male dominance in order to speak against it. This is not to discount the important work of the feminist media – or indeed anyone who engages in discursive practices to challenge oppression – but rather to acknowledge the limits of language in general. We agree on a certain set of rules in order to communicate, however we must always be conscious of the origins of those rules and the context of knowledge production. To use Marx's quote loosely, the people who create knowledge are the people who directly benefit from it.

Synthesis

System justification and Foucauldian discourse analysis are complementary theories because they both seek to expose the mechanisms of self-perpetuating systems of power and the ways that individuals and groups interact to support those systems. The theories can be used to understand implicit meanings in everyday behaviors, such as rape myth acceptance. System justification helps to explain why people would adopt the language and beliefs of rape myths, while Foucauldian discourse analysis reveals how those ideas were formed. Both theories also help to explain why rape myths are perpetuated. System justification shows that rape myths support the status quo, and that people are oriented toward that goal for psychological reasons.

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According to Foucault's theories about power/knowledge, rape myths are perpetuated because they belong to a discursive tradition comprised of knowledge that has been legitimized through its own use. In other words, rape myths are easy to believe because they are rooted in agreed upon knowledge about gender and sexuality. The intersection of these theories sheds light on rape myth discourses in Steubenville by illuminating how those myths were created and why people choose to propagate them.

Unlike system justification, Foucauldian discourse analysis does not help to identify any particular site of power, as Foucauldian power is scattered and mutable. A system justification analysis locates power within the system itself; in the case of Steubenville, power lies with those who have the most influence within the system, and participants in that system adopt system justifying orientations in order to support powerful people. However, discursive practices reveal how people involved with Steubenville reacted when the status quo was threatened. This project is rooted in the notion that political and social power is hierarchical and that support for the status quo reflects endorsements of powerful people and institutions. Discourse analysis provides an avenue for understanding embedded meanings in the language used to support the status quo. Those embedded meanings are imbued with the values of cultural forces and legitimized by our collective use. This framework allows us to find meaning in the public discourse about Steubenville that is deeper than the explicit details of the case and what was said by whom. Public discourse about the Steubenville rape case reflected the collective anxiety about system instability in various forms: challenging gender norms, shifting social status, and Big Red mythology.

Gender inequality and male dominance are deeply entrenched systems that were staunchly defended in Steubenville. Rape myths were employed to describe the Steubenville rape during the events of that night, in the immediate aftermath, and when the boys appeared in

court. A system justification perspective reveals that rape myths alleviated dissonance about a system in which widely admired people would perpetuate violence with the help of their peers. Such a system would be unjust and, therefore, unstable. Stability was regained by reasserting support for the admirable boys and placing blame for the violence elsewhere – on the survivor. "For women, rape myths blame them for men's sexually aggressive behavior and prescribe that all women should be more submissive to avoid rape" (Chapleau & Oswald, 2014, p. 214). Rape myths assist in stabilizing the status quo of gender inequality and male dominance.

As discussed in Chapter Four, discursive formations about sex and gender were intentionally molded to benefit the needs of the state and reinforced through the production of knowledge about sexual behavior. They were also embedded with sexism because they were developed in the context of a society that promotes gender inequality and male dominance. When people employed rape myths to discuss Steubenville, they exercised power through the dissemination of knowledge saturated with specific meanings about gender and sexuality. Knowledge and the exercise of power support the status quo by asserting validity and delegitimizing perspectives that do not collude with cultural norms.

This scenario ultimately benefits the state because it perpetuates the same discursive formations created to maintain state control over sex and gender. Rape myths reinforce the very gender roles on which state power relies, and because inequality is fundamentally unstable, the state requires the majority of its citizens to collude with unequal systems. Gender inequality is widely accepted because it is assumed to serve some purpose – an argument that is legitimized with discursive formations about gender. Rape myths endorse gender inequality and benefit state power using discourses of misogyny.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Although this research is utilizes complex theoretical concepts, the underlying purpose of the project is to highlight a simple concept: people talk about rape in ways that are detrimental to individuals and society in part because the rhetoric supports systems of inequality. This project is rooted in the belief that society as a whole would benefit if individuals achieve greater awareness of rape myths, because false narratives about sexual violence obstruct rape prevention efforts. Rape myths are so deeply ingrained in everyday conversation that the narratives are often misunderstood as truths. This project builds on previous research in order to continue delegitimizing these damaging beliefs by providing a deeper understanding of victim-blame and rape myth acceptance. While there is abundant research about rape myths, the current project is notable for its efforts to account for psychological as well as sociocultural and political roots of rape myth acceptance among individuals. Work such as this will hopefully assist rape prevention efforts by helping people to understand the origins of their deeply held beliefs.

The case of Steubenville allows us to witness both the subtle and overt forms that rape myths take in public discourse. It is extremely useful to frame research about rape myths in the context of a case because the case roots theory in everyday life. As stated above, the goal of this project is to use complex theory to understand an even more complex phenomenon, but to deliver the information in a way that demystifies the embedded meanings of mechanisms of power in our discursive practices. The attempt to achieve some level of parsimoniousness led to decisions about limiting the discourses examined here. It may be illuminating to examine court transcripts in particular in future research. Moreover, the survivor's voice is absent from this account, as it is also absent in the news media. While it was not possible, inclusion of the survivor's voice may have shed light on the impact of rape myths on survivors' experiences.

In addition, this research benefits from using theories from different methodological traditions, which was particularly beneficial in the differing views of power offered by the theories. Nevertheless, an inherent drawback to synthesizing those theories lies in discursive practices. Different disciplines use language in different ways and, while this project sought to reconcile those differences, it is likely that the methodological frames were bent in the process.

There are also significant researcher and methodological biases in this project. I chose to focus on rape myth acceptance because of a belief that they reveal something difficult to understand about cultural collusion with sexual violence and misogyny. Nevertheless, a different perspective may have accounted for important discursive practices not captured by rape myths. A different case would also have provided new perspectives. The current project also does not address issues of race or economic class; the intersection of rape myths with sites of identity other than gender would likely prove to be meaningful. Finally, the theories were chosen both because of researcher preference as well as perceived relevance for the topic. Any number of theories, including psychodynamic perspectives, would allow for a rich exploration of rape myths in public discourse.

Implications for Social Work and Further Research

This research on public discourse about Steubenville revealed underlying and often murky reasons for the existence and perpetuation of rape myths. This topic is relevant to social work in both theory and practice. Understanding rape myths is important for rape prevention education, as it can help people to see their own biases and assumptions. Likewise, it is crucial for clinicians to grapple with any of their own false narratives about rape before working with clients who have experienced sexual violence.

Future research in this area might shift from theoretical to empirical with qualitative research operationalizing these concepts and examining the theoretical framework using

Steubenville and other high profile cases. This project reasonably assumes that significant information can be extrapolated from the Steubenville case to help understand other scenarios. Qualitative research would provide a broader view of the phenomenon across time and space. I prose a qualitative research design in which the concepts of male domination and gender inequality are operationalized and evidence of those systems are coded alongside use of rape myths in high profile rape cases, accounting for intersections of other identities such as race, class, age, and education, where available. I hypothesize that there would be strong positive correlations between endorsement of male domination and gender inequality with rape myth acceptance.

Conclusion

The goal of this project is to provide a new framework for understanding the unfortunately common phenomenon of rape myth acceptance in public discourse. Rape myths are harmful and culturally pervasive beliefs that excuse sexual violence and blame victims. Nevertheless, rape myths exist because they serve important ideological and psychological purposes. This project, which is rooted in research that supports the idea that rape myths are expressions of misogyny, integral to the rhetoric of rape culture, and exist in support of male dominance, seeks to identify the functions of rape myths in order to understand why these damaging beliefs are perpetuated in public and private spheres.

To that end, system justification theory and Foucaultian discourse analysis were applied to examine discourse pertaining to the Steubenville, OH rape case. The theories were chosen because they support complementary but differing views of the phenomenon of rape myths in public discourse. System justification theory posits that people are psychologically oriented toward supporting the status quo, regardless of the real consequences of doing so. Support for the status quo has the palliative effect of helping people to feel comfortable with life as it is, even

if alterative circumstances might be more desirable. System justification theory helps us to understand why rape myths persist despite their endorsement of beliefs and behaviors ostensibly disavowed in our liberal democratic sociopolitical culture, including interpersonal violence, violations of civil and personal rights, and gender inequality. Similarly, Foucauldian discourse analysis examines discourse from the perspectives of power and knowledge production in order to expose the often-confusing embedded meanings in what is spoken explicitly. Discourse analysis is useful for this project because it reveals the very roots of our beliefs, which, according to Foucault, can be traced through the systems of power that generate and legitimize knowledge.

The synthesis of system justification and discourse analysis offers a unique and informative perspective about sexual violence. While we generally agree that sexual violence is wrong, our cultural norms and behaviors – particularly expressed through discourse – indicate that we do not wholly reject sexual violence. Rather, we collectively accept and endorse some degree of sexual violence because it reflects what we know (status quo) and what we have learned (knowledge). Rape prevention efforts will always be stunted until we can bring to the fore the systems of power that perpetuate misinformation about sexual violence. The present analysis provides one step toward that goal.

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