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Abstract

Rape symbolizes lost innocence. Many young females increasingly endure sexual violence at the hands of multiple male assailants. Despite the common coupling of group dynamics and rapes, little evidence proposes Irving Janis's theory of groupthink as one plausible explanation. This paper argues that the two concepts are related; groupthink needs to hold a more prominent position within the sexual violence literature. A case in the small town of Steubenville, Ohio provides the backdrop for investigating how groupthink impacts instances of gang rapes. Integration of the scholarly literature available on groupthink and sexual violence establishes the basis of this research. Janis's groupthink model implements symptoms and features as criteria for distinguishing what constitutes an unhealthy group interaction. Steubenville reveals the presence of several such components, therefore reinforcing the assertion that groupthink does influence the interaction among members of a gang rape. New knowledge in this area of study encourages the development of preventative programs that help prevent this type of group activity from forming. Such improvements may aid in decreasing the prevalence of these gang rapes.

Keywords

rape, sexual violence, groupthink, Steubenville

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Introduction

A fine line exists between dreams and reality, between the conscious and the unconscious. When people dream that they are standing naked in front of a crowd, that situation is not real, but the element of nudity contained within that context poses a very real threat to the psyche. The naked body represents something frightening; with the removal of clothes, one instantly becomes vulnerable: the mind, body, and spirit lay bare and unprotected. In some cases, the image does not remain restricted to dreamland and the body's vulnerability becomes preyed upon. For Jane Doe, such circumstances will remain an indelible mark upon her life story. Everyone involved thought it was just a party, a way to bid farewell to those last fleeting remnants of summer freedom before students became slaves to their books once again. Those teenagers never imagined that their alcohol-fueled antics on the night of August 11th, 2012 would serve as a catalyst for widespread media attention — the kind of media attention that would propel rape to the forefront of national discussion and forever stigmatize the small town of Steubenville, Ohio (Macur & Schweber, 2012).

Although the media storm focused around Steubenville, Ohio, rape occurs across the country. Similar situations plague California in particular. A nearly identical incident occurred in San Jose, where members of the De Anza College baseball team engaged in the alleged gang rape of a 17-year-old (Kaplan, 2011). Newcomb (2013) reported that Audrie Potts, a Saratoga teenager sexually assaulted during a party, eventually found solace in suicide. Another victim was 15 years of age at the time of her violent gang rape, which occurred after she had left a homecoming dance held at Richmond High School (Astor, 2009). Statistics provided by the Rape, Abuse & Incest National

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Network (2009) website corroborated the prevalence of sexual violence, stating that one American falls victim to some type of sexual assault every two minutes. The numbers alone indicate that rape deserves broad attention within society — attention that spans both geography and gender.

Various media outlets initially promulgate issues of sexual violence within their news broadcasts. The public discussion ends when the shock and horror of the incident eventually wears off, and it is here where change must take place. Sexual violence against women is an important issue that can no longer be ignored. Attempting to uncover the perpetrators' motives becomes a necessary first step towards prevention. Sexual offenses of this nature combine two elements: multiple offenders and the absence of a dissident voice. These characteristics of Irving Janis's popularized notion of groupthink can likewise be made applicable to sexual crimes involving a group dynamic. This paper expands upon the preceding inference by arguing that certain elements of groupthink are present within gang rapes. The existence of such a relationship proposes groupthink as a possible explanation for these acts.

Instances of sexual violence, similar to the one in Steubenville, are progressively eliminating young women's innocence at younger ages. There is no return policy for such a commodity; once it is gone, it becomes irretrievable. The creation of a culture marked by impunity emboldens minors to carelessly steal those valuables from one another. Such a culture cannot subsist in a right and just world. Previous work regarding the integration of groupthink and gang rape only provides a cursory glance on the topic. Groupthink serves as another avenue of research that can explain how a group identity exerts influence over the initiation of deviant events (Boswell & Spade, 1996;

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Harkins & Dixon, 2010; Jackson, Gilliland, & Veneziano, 2006; Woodhams, Cooke, Harkins, & da Silva, 2012; O'Sullivan, 1993). Nothing in the literature seems to exist that fits an actual incidence of gang rape within the groupthink model, to illustrate how groupthink symptoms can practically apply to this area. This paper strives to draw connections between the literature on sexual violence and groupthink literature, in an effort to analyze if those theories are applicable to the Steubenville example. With such work, it may then be possible to prevent this nightmare of stolen innocence from becoming a reality in the lives of other teenage girls.

The Sexual Violence Literature

A majority of the literature regarding sexual violence consistently grants explanatory power to the same body of theories. One such theory gains its hold within the roots of feminism, which posits that the social construction of relationships typically places men in the dominant role and relegates women to inferior positions, comparable to that of property. Sexual relations between women and men internalize this type of behavior. The works of Baron and Straus (1989), Bourque (1989), Brownmiller (1975), Ellis (1989), Thornhill and Palmer (2000), and Ullman (2010) discuss feminist theory more in depth.

Another theory of rape purports that the social fabric of a culture, specifically the mass media, plays a large role in defining what types of behavior are acceptable to a group of people. Countless images of sexual violence riddle the United States' mass media and provide one plausible factor for the underlying motivations behind rape. After all, many young people learn through imitation, and most households rely on

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television to act as a surrogate parent. Ellis (1989) and Thornhill and Palmer (2000) categorized this as a learning theory, while Baron and Straus (1989) refer to it as “cultural spillover theory.”

There are also evolutionists who explain that rape might possibly have a biological basis. In the process of natural selection, only the strongest and most adaptable will survive. Therefore, the argument follows that it is in men’s best interest to acquire as many sexual partners as possible. The more sexual partners one has, the better the opportunity to pass on one’s genes. This theory has been described by Ellis (1989) and Thornhill and Palmer (2000). Baron and Straus (1989) and Ullman (2010) included social disorganization within their research to propose that rape and other crimes become increasingly dominant in communities submerged in a state of low socio-economic status. In turn, such inequality produces a situation in which that particular society lacks adequate resources to curb the problem.

The Groupthink Literature

Most research regarding the topic of groupthink ranges from critiques to applications of Irving L. Janis’s groundbreaking work *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Flippen (1999) describes Janis’s work by reiterating that groupthink does not refer to the actual decision reached by the collective; instead, it refers to the process through which those individuals meet a consensus. Since groupthink links to the process and not the product, decisions made in this manner do not necessitate the development of problematic outcomes (Flippen, 1999). Ahlfinger and Esser (2001), Flippen (1999), and Hällgren (2010) listed the eight symptoms and seven features that Janis

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associated with the groupthink process, but Hällgren (2010) specifically noted that the infamous group decision-making scheme still occurs even when some of the characteristics may be lacking. The eight symptoms describe the tools that individuals collectively employ in order to safeguard the group's final decision (Ahlfinger and Esser, 2001), and the seven features represent conditions that Janis identifies as prerequisites for groupthink's formation (Flippen, 1999). The research incorporates three of these symptoms and features into an examination of the Steubenville case.

While Ahlfinger and Esser (2001), Flippen (1999), and Hällgren (2010) all concisely summarize Janis's eight symptoms, only Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) divide them amongst three manageable categories. The first describes characteristics that charge the group with holding unrealistic perceptions of its identity. Such illusions protect the group by enforcing two intertwined ideals: group members see themselves as beyond the reach of punishment, and they see their "shared" vision as the correct path to follow. The next category of symptoms relates to the way in which the group processes information. Group members ensure that their decision remains immutable by effectively ignoring any opposition. Stereotypes aimed at ostracizing targeted individuals provide an easily acceptable justification for the group's unsavory behavior. The last collection of symptoms encapsulates the ways in which the group maintains the uniformity of its members. Methods included here require that individuals suppress their own concerns about the group's decision, which simultaneously leads outsiders to believe that the group holds a unanimous outlook when that may not be the case. This false sense of unanimity exists through fear: members who wish to express conflicting

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opinions are silenced by the majority. One last characteristic establishes a position known as a “mindguard.” The person beholden to this position discourages alternative views by neglecting to inform the group about them. Ignorance of such information encourages group members to falsely identify their solution as the only conceivable path of action (Ahlfinger & Esser, 2001; Flippen, 1999; Hällgren, 2010).

Ahlfinger and Esser (2001), Flippen (1999), and Hällgren (2010) likewise accounted for the seven features Janis assigns to his groupthink model, many of which rely on, and coincide with, the symptoms of the preceding paragraph. These sources reiterated the importance Janis places upon the cohesiveness necessary to draw the group’s members together as one. The previously mentioned symptom of suppressing one’s doubt within the group helps build a cohesive bond, strengthening the collective identity from within. Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) and Hällgren (2010) specifically indicate that four of the remaining features relate to group structure. Eliminating any opposition does not singularly produce strong group unity; members are often similar in terms of their respective backgrounds and values as well (Ahlfinger and Esser, 2001; Flippen, 1999; Hällgren, 2010). This poses a conundrum however, for how can one determine if the group members’ individual personalities are originally homogenous when the guise of groupthink often tricks them into appearing so? Ahlfinger and Esser (2001), Flippen (1999), and Hällgren (2010) use Janis’s work to explain that isolating a group, allowing a group leader to carry out a personal agenda, and lacking a set of rules for decision-making in the group can encourage the development of groupthink. The last two features illustrate that groupthink tends to occur in situations where either an external

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circumstance poses a direct threat to the group's existence, or where the group already experienced a failure (Flippen, 1999; Hällgren, 2010).

The Integration of Sexual Violence and Groupthink in Steubenville, Ohio

With all usable pieces of the groupthink model laid out for adequate analysis, it is possible to incorporate the selected features and symptoms within the highly publicized example of the Steubenville gang rape. This incident involved two well-known high school football players who were “charged with ‘digitally penetrating’ [a 16-year-old] girl” (Goh, 2013, para. 3). The prestigious status given to those few individuals capable of earning the title bestowed upon a Steubenville high school football player exemplifies the illusion of invulnerability, which serves as the first chosen symptom. The status comes with its benefits. Abad-Santos (2013) reported that the head coach of the Big Red football team relied on the alleged suspects’ pleas of innocence when faced with the decision of benching the two boys. This provides evidence that the boys’ association with the group identity of Big Red football provided them with the means to feel invincible and incapable of facing punishment. Such grants of freedom can lead group members to participate in riskier behavior, if they believe that there will not be repercussions. This instance intersects with the social learning theory of sexual violence. The socialization of traditional gender roles instills the notion that male athletes must display aggressiveness and dominance over fellow male players, as well as their female counterparts.

The next symptom relates to the belief that the group performed a moral action through Jane Doe’s rape. A quote from

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Malik Richmond, one of the perpetrators, given in a 20/20 interview reveals that the victim “had her arm wrapped around [Malik]” leading him to conclude that “she was coming on to [him]” (Abad-Santos & Sullivan, 2013, *The Accused: Trent Mays and Malik Richmond* section, para. 1). The underlying message insinuates that Richmond felt justified since righteous intentions guided his actions: he was just trying to please the girl’s desires. Many people within Steubenville found this train of thought to be valid. This is evidenced through a statement provided by one of the Big Red team’s coaches, in which he theorizes that “[t]he rape was just an excuse...what else [was she] going to tell [her] parents when [she came] home drunk like that and after a night like that?” (Abad-Santos, 2013, *Is anyone questioning the two boys’ guilt?* section, para. 2). Such a notion consequently condones the behavior since it implies the same suggestion provided by Malik: the girl received what she asked for. This also serves as evidence that the in-group of football players stereotyped the out-group victim as a girl who cried wolf. Both of these symptoms tie into the feminist theory of sexual violence. In a male-dominated world, women “want” sex from their assailants, but such stereotypical depictions are not accurate representations.

Some of the prescribed features of groupthink must also be included here if a well-rounded picture of the integration between groupthink and gang rape is to be produced through the context of Steubenville. Situations of groupthink often involve members with the same backgrounds, similar personality traits, and usually a high degree of group cohesiveness (Ahlfinger and Esser, 2001; Flippen, 1999; Hällgren, 2010). These two features interlink with one another since the cohesiveness is most likely strengthened by the fact that members are alike in many ways.

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Examples within the Steubenville context are apparent in both the team itself as well as the surrounding town.

Abad-Santos (2013) noted that the relatively small town only unites itself as a close-knit community once they enter the football arena. The stadium ignites a passion that all individuals collectively share: people feel as if they actually contribute something to the game unfolding on the field before them. That euphoric emotion results in an overwhelming sense of intimacy, drawing Steubenville closer together in times of need (Abad-Santos, 2013). The cohesiveness demonstrated here implies that the love of football, combined with the shared residence of Steubenville, forms a homogenous group. These two characteristics are much more difficult to match with a theory of sexual violence, although they could relate to social learning theory. The prominence placed upon Steubenville's Big Red football team leads the town's residents to diminish the seriousness of the players' crimes.

The last feature involves the presence of an external threat that causes the group to become defensive against its own identity. Before this rape garnered so much attention for the small town of Steubenville, Ohio, Macur and Schweber (2012) revealed that Steubenville was famous for other reasons. A member of the Rat Pack, Dean Martin, and Traci Lords, an adult film star, both hail from the small town once characterized by its prevalence of "gambling, prostitution and organized crime" (Macur & Schweber, 2013, A Bright Spot in Steubenville section, para. 1). The once vibrant town came to a screeching halt when the industrial heart of the locale shut its doors and caused a countless number of people to lose their jobs. Now that Steubenville no longer holds that former life, the only hope radiates from Big Red, a football team that brings joy and a

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sense of purpose to Steubenville residents (Macur & Schweber, 2013). Two external events, embodied in the rape incident and coupled with Steubenville's depressed socio-economic status, could have initially instigated groupthink, causing the town's identity to further unite. This context also draws upon social disorganization theory, where a town experiencing high levels of poverty finds it hard to prevent the crimes that its residents perpetrate.

Conclusion

Rape is a complex matter that deserves an intricate, nuanced view in order to ascertain all of the hidden components leading up to its outbreak. The matter becomes even more crucial to investigate when a collective commits the offense. Both aspects of sexual violence and group dynamics are then necessary to expose the truth that lies behind a party's closed doors. The sexual violence literature proposes explanatory theories that tackle evolutionary, gender, social, and cultural aspects in an effort to devise a viable approach useful for uncovering a rapist's motivations. Groupthink seems to reign supreme in defining how groups relate to one another and make decisions in such a setting. When these two elements combine and are made applicable to real-world situations, like Steubenville, the root causes of the matter can be investigated. There, Jane Doe can find a name and a voice — a voice that is not ashamed to share her story.

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