

Gay and bisexual men raped by men – an invisible group in social work

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The phenomenon of male rape

Gay and bisexual men who have been raped by men are an invisible group in social work worldwide. Abdullah-Khan (2008:3) claims that through a ‘combination of cultural, social, legal, and psychological issues, male rape remains one of the most unaddressed issues in our society’. The untreated experience of rape renders these men silent and prevents them from their rightful access to health and social services, social inclusion and justice. For many men, it triggers a destructive trajectory, especially in the area of sexual behaviour. This chapter explores the phenomenon of male rape and considers the implications for sensitive interventions with this group of survivors in social work practice. The chapter argues that violence and lack of choice in sex or sexual relationships should be recognised as a health inequality. There is supporting evidence for this view; The World Health Organisation acknowledges that

Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (WHO, 2006:5)

Internationally, there are a growing number of English language research studies about men who are raped by men. Pioneering works include *Men behind bars, Sexual Exploitation in Prison* (Wooden and Parker, 1982). International research includes fields ranging from rape in the criminal justice system (Lehrer, 2001; Gear, 2007), in wartime (Stener Carlson, 1997; DelZotto and Jones, 2002), among male college students (Scarce, 1997), sexual abuse and rape in various religious denominations (e.g. John Jay Report, 2004) and sex abuses and rape of gay men (Robertson, 2006). Few research studies about this phenomenon were published in Sweden until 2013, with Knutagård (2009) as the first paper published in Swedish. What characterizes all these studies is (a) that the abuse takes place in more or less closed groups, where men should expect to be protected. (b), that it is framed as a kind of a ritual, like a rite of passage, and (c) it involves the lack of access to health and social services for men, a health inequality. Knowing about the circumstances and events surrounding male rape helps us to comprehend the phenomenon.

In my 30 year career as a professional social worker I have met men (straight, gay and bisexual) who have been raped by men. This study focuses on gay and bisexual men. These men have also appeared, but only in the margins, in other studies that I have conducted in recent years about sexuality in social work. For instance, I have studied gay victims of hate crimes (Knutagård, 2003), honour-related violence against young people because of their

sexual orientation (Knutagård and Nidsjö, 2004), and men who sell sex to other men via the Internet (Eriksson and Knutagård, 2005). The different studies, as well as the various individual life histories, are linked to each other in numerous ways. I then decided to focus on this vulnerable group in a separate study (Knutagård, 2009), which serves as the basis for this chapter. This study involved 18 qualitative semi-structured interviews with victims of non-consensual sex (I contacted 28 men, but 10 of them decided not to proceed with an interview after an initial conversation). The oldest was 70 years and the youngest 20. In addition, I interviewed another five men and the written data are also reported here. But let us first look into what rape means.

Introducing the concept of rape

Male rape challenges common understandings of rape. Until 1984 in Sweden, rape was considered to be the forcible carnal knowledge of a woman by a man. A man could therefore not be raped. This is still the case, for example, in the State of Israel. In current Swedish law, it is possible to rape a man. Rape is regulated by the Penal Code, Chapter 6, which provides that a person shall be sentenced for rape ‘who by violence or threat which involves, or appears to the threatened person to involve an imminent danger, forces another person to have sexual intercourse or to engage in a comparable sexual act’ (SFS, 2013:365). England and Wales use the concept of ‘rape’ and include male victims within the purview of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. While the Canadian Criminal Code does not use the term ‘rape’, the law uses the concept of ‘sexual assault’ to include a variety of acts from unwanted sexual touching to forced penetration. By contrast, the US has no national rape or sexual assault law, as these crimes are defined at the state level. The new Russian anti-gay laws of 2013, in Russia make it nearly impossible for the citizens to report male rape.

In Sweden, there are currently discussions of how to define rape as ‘without that person's consent’ and of what constitutes penetration (for example, does it include a male perpetrator performing oral sex on a male victim). The absence of a universal agreement on these and other terms renders the use of the term ‘rape’ as problematic, nationally and internationally. This is particularly the case when same-sex male rape is being discussed. Feminist researcher, Liz Kelly (1988), has been influential in empowering women to name their own experiences and in framing broad questions about sexual violence. In a similar vein, I pose the question, ‘have you been a victim of non-consensual sex or sexual violence’ and thus take the participant’s meanings of rape as the starting point of my research. In the study I found that rape is embedded in western society’s social construction in three areas: masculinities, sexualities and homosexuality, which I will explain below.

Masculinities

I have found Randall Collins’ (2005) concept of *Interaction Ritual Chains* helpful in acquiring an understanding of the phenomenon of male rape. Using a theoretical approach, he describes a process whereby a person develops culturally, as well as sexually, first on a social level and then on an individual level. I argue that the person experiences the event as a link in a ritual chain, with the raped man becoming a product of previous interactions of masculinities.

During the interviews, each of the respondents was unable to find words for the experiences they had gone through, as Hampus’s story reveals: Hampus (a pseudonym), one of the respondents, told me about something that happened to him when he was 15 years old and living in a small town in Sweden. He had been bullied as a young boy because he was

overweight. He lost weight by playing soccer, and became like all his classmates, except that he was sexually attracted to other boys. When his classmates in high school each described how they lost their virginity and how fabulous this experience was, Hampus felt an increasing urge to have his first experience of sexual intercourse. Due to the stigma of being a young gay man in a small town, he could not share his feelings for boys with his friends, nor seek a boyfriend among them. He felt trapped. Instead he started to use different gay communities on the Internet for dating, and soon he found a man who claimed to be about his age. They chatted for a couple of months before they decided to meet in a grove near Hampus's home.

Once there, Hampus discovered that the man was twenty years older than he had claimed to be, but Hampus was determined to "lose his virginity", as he said in the interview. The man took off their clothes and they fondled and kissed. Suddenly the man changed his behaviour and threw Hampus to the ground and started to penetrate him harshly, while shouting humiliations in his ear. "It was very painful", Hampus said, and he cut off his emotions as he had trained himself to do all the years when he had been bullied. Hampus was ambivalent about his feelings after the incident, as it should have been, but was not, the fabulous experience of sexual intercourse his friends had talked about. He described, to me, that he went home, had no appetite, could not sleep and felt depressed. The next day his sister phoned him. Hampus, who had a close friendship with her, told her that he had had his first sexual experience. "You don't sound happy about that", she said. Hampus told her what had happened and she said with tearfully: "...but you've been raped".

Since the concept "men who have been raped by men" is not included in mainstream discourse in Sweden, the phenomenon does not exist in men's world. Social constructions of masculinities posit that men can penetrate but not be penetrated, and consequently, cannot be raped. The language at their disposal did not help them to describe, or to come to terms with their experiences: 'What is not named is invisible and, in a social sense, non-existent' (Kelly, 1988:114). The men in the study, as Hampus, were unable to protect themselves or seek help, as they could not explain what had happened and found themselves in a vulnerable position. Some will argue that Hampus had not been raped as he wanted to have sex. No stranger attacked him or threatened to kill him. However, the "date rape" Hampus experienced is actually the most common form of rape (Scarce 1997).

A common reaction expressed on the topic of male rape is why the victim did not fight back, as 'violence is often the most evident marker of manhood' (Kimmel, 2005:278). Instead, the men I interviewed experienced, what Rentoul and Appelboom have described as 'frozen helplessness and submission' (1997:270). Gabriel says in the interview:

Gabriel: I was very aware. When I lay there, it's like I'm asleep or dead. Inside, a process is going on. It feels like there's just a big room from your toes up to your head and where it bounces off things. It's not like there are any bones, guts or such things. Then there are just feelings, thoughts, emotions, things like that just flying around everywhere in the body. Then you have your eyes. I closed my eyes, but it feels like they were seeing anyway. I wanted to tear him to pieces. Be angry, and react by hitting him in the face, whatever, but I didn't. Actually, *I couldn't*.

Gabriel describes the feeling of being both totally powerless and dominated and also being unable to communicate. This experience challenged the men's idea about their own masculinity.

Let me interpose an interesting perspective that Collins (2008:83) adds by introducing the notion of 'forward panic'. The concept derives from the panic that makes soldiers run away during war, but also makes them run forward towards the enemy. The soldiers go into an emotional tunnel of violent attack, which occurs in an atmosphere of superiority. As a result of the perpetrator's sudden attack, known as an asymmetric synchronization, the victim is paralyzed, as Gabriel's story shows. Collins uses an historical example to illustrate the concept. At the Battle of the Granicus in 334 BC, the Macedonians trapped the Persians' mercenary infantry. The latter were 'rooted to the spot by the unexpected catastrophe rather than from being out-manoeuvred' and this 'is a phenomenon reported time and again from battlefields: the rabbit-like paralysis of soldiers in the face of a predator's unanticipated onslaught. They were soon surrounded and hacked down on the spot' (Collins, 2008:103). This passivity, by the men in the study, contradicts the core of their masculinities, since this puts the men in what might be described as, an effeminate position.

Applying the same concept to male rape, the perpetrator's dominance ruptures the victims' manhood. Research shows that 'male rape is used by the perpetrator to enhance his own masculinity, which is done by exerting power and control over another man' (Abdullah Khan, 2008:221). This is a social interaction with a dominant and a subordinate: the relationship is composed of two elements, as 'it occurs through emotional processes that pump some individuals up while depressing others' (Collins, 2005:xiii). Because hegemonic masculinity has been associated with power and dominance, when a man is unable to defend himself or is overpowered, his self-concept as a man is questioned and he may believe that he is less of a man and therefore effeminate. Such beliefs may lead a man to question his sexuality or sexual orientation.

Gender and power are therefore important elements in the social construction of masculinities, a dynamic process that is constantly shifting and in motion. I found that paramount to understanding male rape are the ways these perceptions of masculinities are developed and how men perceive themselves. These perceptions include male invulnerability, male superiority, male violent and aggressive behaviour and homophobia. Consequently 'the construction of masculinity is central to understanding male rape because the problem of rape is a problem of masculinity' (Abdullah-Khan, 2008:71). In these cases, 'the gendering of men only exists in the intersections with other social divisions and social differences' (Connell et al, 2005:3), like age, class, ethnicity, sexuality and ability.

Research shows that the dominant masculinity sees homosexuality as a threat and as a double defining action, the homophobic performance of men 'consolidates the heterosexual masculinity of Self and the homosexual femininity of Other' (Kehily and Nayak, 1997:82) Therefore we have to understand that 'homophobia is a foundational factor in the formation of masculine identities' (Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2012a:76). Gay survivors I interviewed experience the antithesis of masculinities, since 'if men are expected to be masculine and thereby powerful, dominant, and in control, they cannot be discursively produced as victims (Sundaram et al, 2004:66).

Sexuality

The concept 'sexuality' is a complex notion, often understood as the experience of our body, desires and pleasures, as well as our sexual identity. It is closely intertwined with sex and gender. Most of us have an image of how to engage in sexual behaviour by proceeding step by step, like a ritual guided by scripts, to hugging, kissing, caressing, and so on. Sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 2005) can be described as internalized social conventions that make us

think and act in a certain way when it comes to sexual practice. They consist of intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural scripts that intertwine like a cord of three strands.

Most of the men in the study believed they knew about sexual activity through previous conventional sexual scripts. Instead, they now faced an unexpected break in that script. Isaac, 70, describes his experience as a 24 year old man first time in a European big city:

Isaac: I was really romantic and stupid, naive and innocent, when I was younger. I saw a guy on a street who made contact with me. I jumped on the bandwagon. I thought it was all about love. We had a beer and then we went up to my little room at the hotel and undressed. He raped me straight away. It really hurt. I was totally shocked that he could do so. I had no thoughts that it could happen. What I experienced then was the degradation and humiliation inherent in his lack of respect for me when I said, “NO. This experience hurts. This is not fun. This is not what I want. This is being subjected to violence. It is not love. I believe that sex and love between two people means hugging and kissing and caressing and having sex. Rape is just the opposite. In addition to this, you lower the guard, and open to the other, in all ways, physically as well as mentally. So the other bastard used this to injure me, to get something I didn’t want to give him.

Isaac’s response is typical: his expectation of love was violated. There was no clue about what was going to happen. The break of sexual scripts is so powerful and seems to hit the respondents at their core of identity, in their trust towards other people. Daniel states: “I don’t trust anyone. I didn’t trust my family and so I left them long ago. I don’t trust my boyfriend”. Their life trajectories became self-destructive. In addition, their perception of time and place was affected. They experienced blackouts, difficulties in relating to people, the need to be in control, a sense of detachment from people and emotional and physical withdrawal.

It becomes particularly shameful to ejaculate during rape. Adam tells:

Adam: I’ve always felt tremendous guilt just because he made me come. If you have sex with someone, then a part of it is that the person probably gets satisfaction. We know that those who get satisfied provide some kind of confirmation. If you do so in such a situation, it becomes cruel. It’s not what you want. It felt like a pain, because he made me come. I felt like it shouldn’t be that way. Afterwards, I learned that it’s actually just a chemical reaction, that whether you’re tied or nailed, you can probably get an erection. So that does not imply that you feel something for the other person. It’s just a physical response, not an emotional response. That’s how you have to think. That’s how I have to think. I can’t think of any other way.

At the end of Adam's response, he had to remind himself a few times that it was just a physical response. Because male ejaculation is linked to sexual gratification, Adam felt that his desires and emotions were involved in the rape. Rentoul and Appleboom (1997:270) state, ‘research demonstrates that getting the victim to ejaculate is a major strategy, which symbolizes the extent of the offender's sexual control over the victim’. Rape, as we know, is not about sex – it is about power. Sam put it this way: “For some reason he thought I was excited that he hit me, he hit even more and even harder and even started to bite me while he ripped and tore my clothes”. The same feeling was experienced by Neo who got raped in a same-sex relation during five years, but felt he “had to take it in order to be loved”. The violence victims experience is later turned inward.

Homosexuality

One consequence of the rape that most men in the study experience was that their homosexuality or more Western culture's perception of homosexuality becomes apparent, a sexual orientation filled by society with stigmatisation, discrimination, taboo and shame. Gayle Rubin (2007) claims there is a sex hierarchy, where homosexuals are in the outer part of the circle with 'damned sexuality', like the respondents, instead of being in the inner part with 'blessed sexuality', where heterosexuals are located. Connected to 'damned sexuality' is the use of rape myths, where the men in the study describe a stigmatising 'myth' that if a man gets raped it is because he likes it, which makes him a *de facto* homosexual. Although the perpetrator's sexual identity may be questioned, because he retains the power and dominance, his identity is not threatened to the same degree. However research from the United States and England shows that, on the contrary, most perpetrators are heterosexuals and that the survivors are fragile heterosexuals or homosexuals (Mezey and King, 2004).

In the interviews, the gay and bisexual men feel society's condemnation and stigmatization of homosexuality and some of them do not want to "come out of the closet". For example, Eddie, after having been raped, was so afraid of being discovered as a homosexual that he married, had children, separated and started to live more and more isolated for 30 years until I interviewed him. "I did not talk to anybody about it. None of my friends knew anything about it. As a matter of fact, my whole life was changed that moment." Eddie mentions the stigmatization of homosexuals in society as a reason why he could not say he was raped, because in doing so he would have also come out as gay to his parents.

Eddie: I didn't dare say anything then either. Thirty years ago, it was a shame. Because I know, mom has a cousin who was [gay], and there was never anyone who talked about him and no one hung out with him or anything. It's the reason why I don't want to talk about me being gay. Because I knew that I would be excluded. Then, my whole family would exclude me and my siblings and all. Because I knew what they thought about it.

The respondent reports feeling intense guilt about being a gay or bisexual man. One who contacted me over the Internet wrote:

Tom wrote: I was raped by a guy on my thirteenth birthday

Hans wrote: *Is this something you are able to talk about? Have you reported and searched for help?*

Tom wrote: No way, didn't dare to report to the Police because then my dad would know that I am gay, so I kept quiet about it.

This young boy feels more fear of his father finding out he is gay, then the knowledge of the rape itself. Time and again the fear of someone else knowing one is a homosexual is revealed in the interviews. Because of this, the respondents could not process their experiences of rape by seeking professional help. The social oppression that the men are embedded in makes them therefore invisible in the public sphere.

Still invisible and without words

To conclude, the shame of rape due to the stigma of homosexuality drives some of the respondents to practice unsafe sex, to cut themselves, and to develop eating disorders. Many of these symptoms could be related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but are not disclosed since the trauma of rape is never mentioned (Ruchkin et al, 1998). In addition, the internalized shame prevents the men from talking about the rape, reporting it or to seeking help and

support. There seems to be a reciprocal connection between the society's lack of words and the respondents' vulnerability. Only two of the twenty-three respondents have reported the incident to the police. Five of the men sought and received help after a number of failed attempts along the way. The other eighteen have never sought help.

The impact on men's lives of not seeking help is exemplified by Timmy's experience. He is 27 years old, was raped, sold sex to other men, served time in a juvenile detention centre, been the target of hate crimes due to his being gay, and is now HIV-positive. During the interview, he stated that the worst aspect for him is the untreated anxiety from being raped. He struggles with the shame of it and all the questions. What did I do? Am I worth anything? Am I so sexually violated that there is no reason to live? By addressing the trauma of male rape, the social worker is then able to provide support for other social and health problems.

What can we do as social workers? We have to start making male rape visible and put it on the national and international agenda. This will facilitate a discourse for the men and enable them to articulate their experiences. We have also to provide a good health service, social inclusion and social justice for male survivors. Doing so requires us to challenge the stigmatisation and discrimination that are associated with male rape and homosexuality. For example, Mac an Ghail and Haywood (2012b:581) argue that a shift to a 'broader cultural perceptions of homosexuality is leading to a recalibration of masculinities that is based upon inclusivity'. Therefore we have to develop non-oppressive social work practices that are inclusive of LGBT people. In order to accomplish this, many social workers need training in developing *attitudes* (e.g., reflecting on one's own sexual orientation), greater *knowledge*, in relation to LGBT and enhanced *skills*, such as in creating an LGBT-friendly environment (Fish, 2012). In the longer term, we must take part in the work of reconstructing masculinities.

In Sweden, the national resource for men who have been raped by men is located at the National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence against Women, Uppsala University. This institution highlights the contradictions and barriers faced in Sweden in recognising men as victims. There are, as yet, no Non-Government Organisations targeting this group of men, as there are in England or the United States, and local social work and health services have not developed any relevant resources. Men, especially gay and bisexual men, who are raped by men are indeed an invisible group in Sweden and unfortunately, in many other countries, as well.

1. *What we know about this already*

Gay and bisexual men raped by men are an invisible group, they rarely seek or receive help, and this is still an unaddressed issue in social work.

2. *What this chapter adds*

Social work and health practices with this group of survivors could use the concepts of interaction ritual chains and sexual scripts in order to address issues relating to masculinities, sexuality and homosexuality.

3. *How this is relevant for social work and LGBT health inequalities*

Due to stigmatisation and discrimination, LGBT people need non-oppressive social work practices that provide support and help.

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