

The term rape culture: empowering or redundant?

To what extent do young women in the Netherlands find rape culture a helpful term to understand and possibly resist harassment of and violence against women?

Hedwich van der Velde

Master thesis Gender Studies
Supervisor: Vasiliki Belia
Second Reader: Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken
Utrecht University
3848795

ABSTRACT

This research aims to answer the question: To what extent do young women in the Netherlands find rape culture is a helpful term to understand and possible resist harassment of and violence against women? An overview of the existing debate will be given; it will be shown how the history of the term, together with its most used definition can be problematic. One of the critiques on this definition are the gender roles implied: the man as a sexual aggressor, and the woman as a passive victim. To answer the main question, three focus groups were conducted with female participants, all living in Utrecht city. From the focus groups three topics are analyzed: the '#metoo', upbringing and culture, and their reception to the definition of rape culture. It will be shown how the term rape culture can be helpful to understand, but not always to resist harassment of and violence against women. However, talking is a form of resisting, this creating opportunity to critically analyze the situation the participants live in.

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Introduction

Sexual assault and intimidation has already been quite visible in the beginnings of 2020, not only in the court, but also in the media and in the streets. A flash mob, written by feminist art collective Las Tesis, was first performed in December 2019 in Santiago Chile, against ‘femicide’: (sexual) violence against women. The performance soon spread around the globe, as it is not a problem just in Chile, but worldwide. In the Netherlands, it was performed in March, at the women’s march in Amsterdam, with the lyrics translated to English: “We know the rapist is you” (Soldati, 2019). The lyrics describe how the state, the judges, and the police are all the rapists, the ones to blame; “the oppressive state is the rapist man”.

Harvey Weinstein was convicted of sex crimes in March 2020. The Hollywood movie producer was the figurehead of the online twitter topic ‘#metoo’. This topic became trending in 2017, when women shared their sexual assaults, expressing that they too experienced it. Some shared their full stories, while others just tweeted the words “me too”. What the trending topic of ‘#metoo’ did was to enable people to share their personal experiences of sexual abuse and violence, as well as standing up against the culture of shame surrounding sexual violence. It showed the magnitude of the problem, and how many people it affected. In this research I want to investigate this structure of sexual violence.

Another term that defines a structure of sexual violence is rape culture. Rape culture describes how sexual violence against women is seen as the norm, as something inevitable. Furthermore, it shows how women live in a continuum of threatened violence (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). I will use the topic ‘#metoo’ as an entry point to investigate how this structure is visible and ultimately if the term rape culture is a useful and/or helpful term to describe this structure, as both terms expose the structure of sexual violence.

After researching rape culture in the Netherlands in Dutch media for my bachelor thesis, I now want to focus on my peers, young women who live in Utrecht. To do so, I have conducted three focus groups, to initiate conversation among these women. Rather than analyzing if there is a rape culture, I analyze if the term rape culture itself is a useful and/or helpful term to describe their experiences and possible resist harassment of and violence against women.

Research questions

This research aims to answer the question: To what extent do young women in the Netherlands find rape culture a helpful term to understand and possibly resist harassment of and violence against women?

To answer this question the research has been divided in two parts. First I will first discuss the theoretical background of the term rape culture; it's history and debate surrounding the term. What has been written already about rape culture? The following sub-questions will be answered in an overview of the field:

1. How is rape culture defined? I address the concept of rape culture and examine concepts such slut shaming, victim blaming and rape myths.
2. What are the critiques on this term?
3. Where does rape culture come from? Here the historical context of the term rape culture is examined.
4. What did the Me Too movement entail? What was the '#metoo'? I expand on what the Me Too movement and '#metoo were', summarizing the affect it had on social media. The '#metoo' is used as an entry point to investigate rape culture, since it was an online trending topic on sexual intimidation and harassment, it is an easy introduction to start the conversation within the focus groups.

The second part of this research consists of analyzing data, obtained from focus groups that have been conducted. For this research three focus groups, with three participants each, have been taken place. In this groups the topics of '#metoo', sexual violence and the definition of rape culture have been discussed. What do they think of the definition, or do they come up with another definition to better define their experiences with sexual harassment? I analyze the data obtained from focus groups. This data has been divided into themes, to analyze the similarities and difference between the conversations and/or participants. The themes are the following:

- '#metoo' and the Me Too Movement
- Upbringing and culture
- Reception rape culture

The result of these analyzed themes, combined with the questions answered in the overview of the already existing debate surrounding rape culture enable me to answer my main question.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical framework

Situated knowledges

This research works from Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges. In her text "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988) Haraway states that knowledge is embodied. In this text she uses the metaphor of vision to explain her point: objectivity is not a neutral given, one cannot search for one universal truth, and instead she states that knowledge is situated. Through the experience, thoughts and vision of one person, the truth is always embodied; it is located in space and time, mind and perspective. One cannot look at something from a neutral perspective, as we cannot do, what Haraway names, the 'god trick' (Haraway, p. 581). The god trick entails there is an all seeing eye, floating through space, without a body attached to it, the eye takes a neutral stance, without being influenced by mind or body. However, seeing is not a neutral act, as one *learns* seeing "technically, socially, and psychically" (Haraway, 583). Eyes are not passive instruments of seeing, they are actively organizing the world: "ways of seeing" are "ways of life" (Haraway, 583). Vision does not produce a sense of self-presence, or self-knowledge: subjectivity and vision are both multidimensional, partial, split, heterogeneous, incomplete, "complex, contradictory" (Haraway, 589), and able to enact only "partial connections" (Haraway, 586).

Baukje Prins researched Haraway's situated knowledges in her dissertation (1997). She divides the concept into three layers of meaning. Firstly, a descriptive claim: all knowledge is situated: it is always connected to the local and historical moment in which it arises (Prins, 1997). Secondly, a normative claim: Prins expands on how Haraway claims that knowledge from the margin is more reliable than from the dominant position. As Haraway states: "they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge" (Haraway, p. 584). In this way, knowledge is partial: it is taking a side, against the western, white, heteronormative male norm. This knowledge contains more information than the dominant perspective. The last layer of meaning is a visionary claim: it entails that there is an engagement outside of the human species, creatures that live outside the natural boundaries, such as robotics. The knowledge develops in a new, 'artificial' perspective.

So, in conclusion, Haraway's situated knowledges entails that there is not one universal truth. There are rather multiple perspectives, which in connection can create *a* truth. By sharing conversations, this truth can be found. The links created in the conversation are the truths, rather than the conversation as a whole. No partial truths create together a wholesome truth, but rather truth can be contradicting, it creates friction.

By using focus groups as method for this research, the situated knowledges of the participants can be investigated. By creating the opportunity to engage in conversation, with others they have never met before, it creates a map in which their knowledges can be shared. Furthermore, it creates the opportunity to investigate their position in this specific moment and location, namely Utrecht in 2020. Furthermore, by inviting women only, the concept of rape culture will be discussed from the margin, rather than from the dominant perspective. As stated, these women are not the "dominant" group when talking about rape culture, thus creating a critical and interpretative stance against the knowledge produced by this culture.

Approaching 'rape culture'

In this research I will approach rape culture as a term, based on the definition of culture by Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist. Hall describes culture in the following way: "culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' - between the members of a society or group" (Hall, 1997). By approaching it as a system of meaning one can analyze how this system is created, what creates meaning, and which power constructions are created within this system of meaning. Using focus groups in this research can create an environment in which it is possible to investigate patterns of rape culture and these conversations will show what is seen as the "norm" or what should be "natural". For example, what patterns and ideas are visible when the participants talk about sexual intimidation; is there a shift when they speak about rape culture, or does it overlap?

A focus group is interactive and collective, as the conversation takes place within a group. Patterns of rape culture can appear during these conversations, they specifically create the space needed to investigate the normalized ideas of the participants. Furthermore, by the interactive nature of the method, the interactions between participants can be analyzed to see certain opinions argued and how meaning is constructed. With this in mind, the context of the focus group is important (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p 237). It creates the opportunity to examine the interaction within the group. Do they enhance each other's opinion, or disagree? Through speech several processes can be examined within the group: How do they formulate

arguments, or phrases? Are opinions changed through the discussion? Or do they adapt to the ideas generated by the group?

Methodology

This research will be based on three focus groups. A Focus group is a method where the researcher facilitates a discussion on a certain topic with a small group of participants (Tonkiss, 2004). The focus is on that particular topic, which in my case will initiate with the Me Too Movement, ending in rape culture. Even though focus groups have not been used frequently in feminist research, the method will be helpful to investigate culture and can create empowerment among marginalized groups (Wilkinson, 1999). As stated before, in rape culture, women are from the margin, as they are threatened by male violence. Engaging in conversation and discussing structures of this culture can make them feel empowered. Furthermore, they can critically engage why this structure exist. It is useful for this research to see the interactive nature of the conversation among the participants: what appears as normal, or what is a pattern that can be considered part of the culture. Furthermore, within conversation you can see how people come together who have different understandings and experiences, how they produce knowledge: the situated knowledge, as explained by Haraway.

Participants and location

There are three different focus groups; each group consists of three persons. These participants all had the following characteristics:

- Female
- 21 – 27 years old
- Lives in Utrecht city

These criteria were chosen based on several reasons. First of all, rape culture focuses on *male* sexual aggression against *women*. In this structure, the oppressive group is women, and following Haraway, they will least likely deny the critical stance against the dominant position (Haraway, p.584). Furthermore, the age limit is based on the fact that the ‘#metoo’ happened three years ago. It is more likely for these young women to be active on social media and thus been in contact with the ‘#metoo’. Lastly, they had to live in Utrecht City, as it was easier to come together, location wise.

The participants will remain anonymous, and will be referred to as “participant 1”, as shown below.

	Group	Age	Education	Nationality
Participant 1	1	21	University student - History	Dutch/British
Participant 2	1	21	University student - Medicine	Dutch
Participant 3	1	21	Higher Professional Education student - Speech Therapy	Dutch
Participant 4	2	24	Higher Professional Education student - Communication and Multimedia Design	Dutch
Participant 5	2	26	University student - Health Economics Policy & Law	Dutch
Participant 6	2	25	Graduated physiotherapist	Dutch
Participant 7	3	24	University student - Public Governance and Management	Dutch
Participant 8	3	22	Graduated Product Design	Dutch
Participant 9	3	27	University student - Applied Psychology	Dutch

The focus groups took place at my house. Beforehand, all photos, books, religious and other personal objectives were removed. Thus creating a homely, yet neutral environment.

Questioning route

During the focus group a questioning route will be followed. These questions will guide the conversation. These questions will not always be asked directly, as the conversation should continue, rather than being disrupted by these questions.

The questioning route is divided into three topics: Me Too, social media, and rape culture. The topic “social media” is meant to be an opening to share personal experiences. However, it reserves space to keep the conversation going without the interviewee sharing their experiences, as the topic is intimate and the interviewee shall not be forced to share. Furthermore, not all questions have to be asked, some are repetitive, this is to create different moments during the group to ask these questions, allowing for a natural flow of the conversation. Some questions are to encourage them to exchange personal experiences, while others are to encourage discussion. The questioning route is the following:

Topic: Me Too

- What did the Me Too Movement mean to you?
- Do you notice aspects of the Me Too Movement in your daily life?
- Did the movement change your perspective on sexual violence?

Topic: Me Too [social media]

- Did you post something related to Me Too Movement on social media?
- What do you think of the posts about Me Too? Do you encourage or discourage these posts?
- Have you encountered events related to Me Too, such as sexual harassment?

Topic: Rape Culture

- Have you heard of the term rape culture?
- What definition would you give to rape culture?

After this question the following definition will be handed to them in print and be read collectively:

It is a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture *condones* physical and emotional terrorism against women as the *norm* [...] In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, *inevitable* [...] However [...] much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993)¹.

Afterwards the following text will be read aloud by me:

Rape culture includes jokes, TV, music, advertising, legal jargon, laws, words and imagery, that make violence against women and sexual coercion seem so normal that people believe that rape is inevitable. Rather than viewing the culture of rape as a problem to change, people in a rape culture think about the persistence of rape as “just the way things are (WAVAW, n.d.).

- How is this definition similar/different than the definition you came up with?

¹ This will be further explained on page 11 in the overview of the field

- Do you find the term useful, or can you come up with another term that describes the situation better?
- Is rape culture apparent in your daily life?
- Would you say that there is a rape culture in Utrecht?

Overview of the Field

What is rape culture?

The term rape culture came to be during second wave feminism. During this wave of feminism there were the sex wars, as will be discussed in the next chapter (see p. 16), during the sex wars there was a focus on sexual violence against women. While the sex wars happened at the end of the 70's and in the 80's, in 1993 the book "Transforming a Rape Culture" (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth) gives the definition that is mostly used to this day. Other authors cited in this research rely on this definition as well. In this book there are thirty-seven essays about the ways society has to change in order to end rape culture. The definition they use of rape culture is the following:

It is a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture *condones* physical and emotional terrorism against women as the *norm* [...] In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, *inevitable* [...]. However [...] much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993).

A rape culture supports violence against women and male sexual aggression. Furthermore, as a culture it is seen as the norm, something that cannot be changed.

Violence against women is seen in multiple forms and appearances in society, such as: victim blaming, rape myths and slut shaming. These concepts can be seen as the patterns that create the rape culture.

Victim blaming

The act of victim blaming entails holding the victim responsible for the event that happened to them. Thus the victim had agency to stop the rape/assault. Victim blaming happens in many ways, ranging from comments on intoxication, clothing, to the location of the victim. Even when they are the *victims* of the crime, they still are blamed for their role in the act (Grubb, & Turner, 2012).

Rape myths

Rape myths are beliefs around sexual assault that constructs false ideas surrounding rape, the victim and/ rapist, based on stereotypes and prejudices (Burt, 1980, p. 217). The myths are mostly based on stereotyping and can give reason to blame the victim, creating certain behavior towards victims and perpetrators (Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004). These rape myths can “deny or minimize victim injury or blame the victims for their own victimization” (Carmody & Washington, 2001 p. 424). Two common rape myths are: rape is penetration in a violent manner and secondly, when a woman is intoxicated with alcohol it is her own responsibility (Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016). Other rape myths are: “only bad girls get raped”; “any healthy woman can resist a rapist if she really wants to”; “women ask for it” (Burt, 1980).

Sex scripts: Traditional Sexual Script and Rape Script

A sex script is a script in which there is the notion of how “normal” sex should happen. This script is seen as ‘common knowledge’, something everyone can follow. For example, when in a movie two people go to a motel, and start to undress, the viewer knows what would follow, and it does not have shown on screen for the viewer to understand what happens. However, the sex script also creates a power construction, it creates a script of what kind of sex is the norm: heterosexual sex. The script is a myth, as there is not one way to have sex, a universal way for all.

In the traditional sexual script are certain gender roles and dating roles stated. Sandra Byers, a professor at the university of New Brunswick specialized in the psychology of human sexuality, summarizes in her article “How Well Does the Traditional Sexual Script Explain Sexual Coercion? Review of a Program of Research” (1996) the traditional sexual script (from now on called TSS) in 6 steps. The TSS describes only male-female relationships, as it describes all sex to be heterosexual.

1) Men are “oversexed” and women are “undersexed”. Meaning that men are always looking for ways to engage in sexual activity, searching for ways that woman will provide sex. Thus, women have few sexual needs, “being sexually reluctant, seeing sex as a means of procuring love or commitment, being slow to arouse, and being difficult to satisfy sexually” (Byers, p. 3).

2) A woman’s worth and status decreases when she has multiple sexual partners, where as a men’s worth and status increases. Having multiple partners is a result of masculinity, virility and attraction. Whereas for women, it is a result of promiscuity, lack of values, no selectivity.

3) Men are the initiators of sexual events, whereas women are receptors. Because men are “oversexed”, they initiate and pursue sexual interaction with women, where as women are protective of their worth. “Women are expected to adopt a passive, defensive stance in order to protect their perceived worth. They are expected to be prepared for and to respond cautiously to these initiations” (Byers, p. 3).

4) Women are expected to limit their sexual activity with their male partner, as the women’s worth lowers when engaging in this activity. As Byers states: “Even when they are interested in engaging in sexual activity, women are expected to offer at least initial token resistance to the man's advances” (Byers, p. 4). Furthermore, the women’s gender role is submissive, passive, while the men try to remove those restrictions in order to enhance their worth by engaging in more sexual activities. This combined with the male gender role to be aggressive and active, the male becomes a predator, using strategies to lure the women in their sexual engagement. Byers refers to two essays by Muehlenhard (1988) (Muehlenhard, Hollabaugh, 1988), stating that: “Use of these strategies is further justified by the widespread belief in women’s use of token refusal. As such, men who accept the woman’s refusal and stop their sexual advances may be perceived as not sufficiently masculine to gain sexual access” (Byers, p. 4).

The last two steps are not limited to only sexual cohesion:

5) A woman’s worth increases when she is in a romantic relationship. This is depicted by the gender and dating script. Within the TSS this means that a woman should refuse sexual activities without losing the romantic interest of the man. Thus, she must convey the man that possible satisfying sex will happen in the future, when they are in a relationship. This while she participates in low levels of sexual activity, to keep her worth. The woman must not refuse the man too aggressively, as it would scare him off.

6) The last step describes Byers as the following:

Women are expected to be emotional, sensitive, and nurturing in interpersonal relationships, whereas men are expected to be unemotional, relatively insensitive, and self-focused. The prescription for women to be nurturing and consider the other person's need before their own is in conflict with the aspect of the TSS that calls for women to restrict access to her sexuality. The latter would require that the woman place her needs and wants before those of her male partner. The prescription that men be unemotional and put their own needs first suggests that, in pursuing their sexual goals, men need not take into account the woman's feelings or reluctance to engage in the sexual activity (Byers, p. 4)

So, the TSS describes the male as an oversexed, unemotional, aggressive initiator, always on the hunt for sexual encounters, while the female is a passive, unassertive emotional being, trying to keep her worth by not engaging in sexual encounters. This script continues in the definition of rape culture by Buchwald et al. by stating that the male is aggressive, an initiator, the one looking for sex, and becomes the set of beliefs “that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald et al., 1993).

Another sex script is the rape script. This script is a myth as well, as rape is diverse, and not cohesive. The script consists of the perpetrator, the rapist, as a stranger waiting in the bushes, before violently raping their victim. In this script the victim is not intoxicated, and did not provoke (Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016). This rape script perpetrates the rape myth.

Slut shaming

Slut shaming is a form of victim blaming, it entails that women who are sexually active are being criticized for their sexuality, often being called a “slut”. This is a result of the Tradition Sexual Script, where the multitude of sexual partners is linked to someone’s worth: where women cannot be sexually active, or have multiple sex partners, while men can (Pickel, & Gentry, 2017).

What are critiques on rape culture?

There has been critique on the term rape culture and the use of it. Here I will discuss shortly two researchers who have critiqued this term, first Laura Kipnis, a professor in Media Studies at the Northwestern University, and second Linda Duits, a social scientist, who specializes in popular culture. Kipnis reacts on the campus culture in universities in America, where a lot of protests and new guidelines on campuses against rape culture take place. Duits reacts on the term and definition of rape culture, as the term became known in the Netherlands as well, and why she wants to distance herself from it. The main argument both researchers make is that rape culture limits women as helpless victims without agency.

Kipnis has written a column called “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe”(2015). Here she writes about the new rules among American campuses regarding sex. The Title IX is expanded, where it is stated that no person on the basis of sex will be discriminated. The expansion is updated regarding sexual misconduct, however, as Kipnis calls these new guidelines provided by this expansion “extremely vague” (Kipnis, p. 36). Furthermore, these

guidelines have not been reviewed and the universities officers can interpret them to their own beliefs.

Kipnis writes that in her time at college, sex was seen as a life experience, something that was part of the deal. Now, with the new guidelines, where teachers cannot have sex with their students anymore, a divide is made. Teachers become an “all powerful professor”(Kipnis, 2015, p. 3). She states: “The melodramatic imagination’s obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what’s shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those whose interests are supposedly being protected, namely students. The result? Students’ sense of vulnerability is skyrocketing”(2015, p.3). She addresses the helpless passive imaginary of victims that are implied by these new rules. Furthermore, she discusses the power divide that has been made, where the teacher is an all-powerful being, and the student has no power at all. Thus while she states how students can derail careers of teachers, certainly with the new guidelines, while teachers are checked and supervised on all “power” decisions, such as grading. A bad grade will not destroy the student’s life, while sex assault claims can destroy a career.

Kipnis finds this way of regulating disempowering and “intellectually embarrassing. Sexual paranoia reigns; students are trauma cases waiting to happen” (2015, p. 15). Women should express their boundaries, and not be treated as children, this is not victim blaming, but rather “grown-up feminism” (Kipnis, cited by Van Hattem, 2017). Furthermore, in her book “Unwanted advances” (Kipnis, 2017), she addresses that rape culture reinforces the classical divide between male and female. Where the male’s sexuality is seen as aggressive, always actively ‘hunting’ for sex, and female sexuality is passive. Rape culture is used as a framing of a narrative, where within that framework there is no room for the complex nuances of sex and sexuality according to Kipnis. Kipnis states that “bad sex” is now seen as a sign of rape culture, instead of being something you learned from, a gained experience. Additionally, rape culture perpetuates fear regarding sex, and lets fear be the guideline of sex. She addresses this hysteria surrounding sex as a timeframe, on which we will later look back on as melodramatic.

Duits writes in her column “My problem with the term ‘Rape Culture’”² (own translation) (2017) that she distances herself from the term for three reasons. Duits uses in the article the same definition as previously stated by Buchwald et al. (1993). The first reason of

² Original title in Dutch: “Mijn probleem met het begrip ‘verkrachtingscultuur’”

her rejection of the term is the gendered implications: the definition states it is *male* violence against women. She writes that in a survey it showed that men are victims of rape as well, opposing the idea of violence solely targeted at women (Duits, 2017). The definition of rape culture perpetuates the idea that men are sexual predators, and women always a victim, an agentless prey. Secondly, Duits wants to distance herself from radical feminist of the second wave feminism. Duits expresses how these radical feminists were called radical because they were feminists who were anti-pornography, anti sex work, trans exclusive, and some of these feminists stated all heterosexual sex is rape. Duits wants to distance herself from these beliefs, stating that it took away agency of women, and that this selection of feminism was an exclusive rather than inclusive movement. This will be discussed further in the next question: where does the term rape culture come from? Her third and last reason: Duits does not believe there is a rape culture in the Netherlands, as there is not an increase in rape rates, and sometimes even a decrease. Furthermore, Duits states that further research needs to be done about how we perceive rape myths and sexual behavior, and if, or how they result in actual rape.

Where does the term rape culture come from?

In the 1980's the sex wars emerged in feminism. These sex wars were on multiple topics concerning a woman's sexuality. On the one side there was an anti-pornography movement, with radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, or Catherine McKinnon. This was called 'dominance feminism', where women are primarily viewed as victims of gender subordination (Schneider, 1993). Women were oppressed, seen as an object, only for the men's sexual pleasure. On the other side were pro-sex feminists, such as Naomi Wolf, who attacks 'dominance feminism', and labels it as 'victim feminism' (1993). Opposed to victim feminism they talk about 'power feminism', in which women's agency is central. She argues that victim feminism reinforces sex-stereotypical views of women as fragile and passive.

From the dominance feminist theory the term rape culture came about: the woman subject to male aggression was defined almost exclusively by what was done *to* her. As McKinnon notes: "Women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water. Given the statistical realities, all women live all the time under the shadow of the threat of sexual abuse. The question is, what can life as a woman mean, what can sex mean, to targeted survivors in a rape culture?" (1989, p. 149). She furthermore states that women's sexuality is the construct of these oppressive forces: "defined by men forced on women, and constitutive of the meaning of gender" (1989, p. 128). This image of sexual male aggression is what Kipnis

ridicules in her book, where professors are seen as the sexual predator, and students as an agentless victim.

However, Elizabeth Schneider writes that there is a false dichotomy of victimization and agency within this feminist “war” (1993). She states that: “feminist work has too often been shaped by an incomplete and static view of women as *either* victims *or* agents” (Schneider, p. 387). Schneider addresses that although it necessary and important to understand the experiences of woman as victim, it is also incomplete to view their experiences solely as those of victims. It dismisses the efforts and resistance the women practice. When she researched women’s self defense in battering, her conclusion was that “Portrayal of women as *solely* victims or agents is neither accurate nor adequate to explain the complex realities of women’s lives” (Schneider, p. 289). She argues that victimization and agency are not opposites of each other, but rather “interrelated dimensions of women’s experience” (Schneider, p. 395). Neither victimization nor agency should be seen as static, but rather as systemic and collective problem. And, it should be seen in the social context in which the experience happened, rather than something that is isolated. Furthermore, Schneider states that the social context of women’s oppression shapes women’s choices, agency and constrictions, and vice versa (Schneider, p. 397). So instead of viewing women solely as victims in a rape culture, their agency and resistance should also be examined.

Rape culture thus should not be approached as a static given, where the woman is always a victim without agency, but rather as a system within society. Therefore it is not that the woman is without agency, but rather has agency, has resistance, but yet can be victimized and has therefore a specific experience. Because of this interrelated dimension, story sharing can be a form of resistance, in which the systematic and oppressive force of rape culture can be discussed, rather than stated as a static given.

Me Too Movement and ‘#metoo’

In February 2006 Tarana Burke founded The Me Too Movement (Me Too Movement, n.d.). She initiated the movement out of her own experience when in 1997 she could not counsel a girl at summer camp. The girl was telling her about the sexual abuse she was undergoing. Burke then could not share that she felt the same pain, or express the words “me too”. In 2006 she founded the movement, to help survivors of sexual violence. This was focused on young black women and women of color of low wealth communities. Initially it was created to “address both the dearth in resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a community of advocates, driven by survivors, who will be at the forefront of creating

solutions to interrupt sexual violence in their communities” (2019). It would create empowerment through empathy, expressing the words “me too”. The movement focuses on active empathy, creating a space where they can work together to “uplift and support each other to strengthen a global movement to interrupt sexual violence” (Me Too Movement, n.d.). The movement challenges the systems of power within the sexual violence, from “the ground up” (Rodino-Colocino, 2018).

In 2017 the hash tag “metoo” became popular when actress Alyssa Milano tweeted about the hash tag and calls for others to join her in expressing their experiences. She (@Alyssa_Milano, 15 October 2017) tweeted: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”, including a picture with the text “ Me too. Suggested by a friend: ‘if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too.’ as status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” The tweet is shared among users many times, today more than twenty-two thousand times, and the hash tag is translated to other countries as well. Later on, credit was given to the Me Too Movement, thus linking the movement and social media hype together.

However, a distinction should be made between the online hash tag, initiated on twitter, and the movement: the movement acts on active, transformative empathy, providing care and legal help, the twitter hype is based on passive empathy. Passive empathy gives the opportunity to create a commonality, a sense of being in one’s shoes, without actually doing so, or being self-reflexive of the position of oneself in the power system (Rodino-Colocino). When the ‘#metoo’ became popular, it became individualized, rather than a system of power, a system of oppression. Celebrities shared their stories, highlighting their personal experiences with certain individuals, it became about them, not about an oppressive system as a whole. This individualization means focus on Hollywood figures such as Harvey Weinstein, or Kevin Spacey. Weinstein has been found guilty of sexual assault, and Spacey has been accused of sexual assault. Burke states that focusing on individuals “defeats the purpose to not have those folks centered – I’m talking black and brown girls, queer folks” (Adetiba, 2017). So where the trending topic ‘#metoo’ on social media focused on individuals who are accused of sexual assault, the Me Too Movement focuses on system of oppression, where individuals are part of the system.

Analysis

Introduction

In this analysis I will research the themes as previously stated. First I will analyze the differences or similarities in their discussion about the Me Too Movement, what did it mean to them, and did it change their perspective on sexual intimidation?³ This to see if the response to the Me Too Movement is similar to that of rape culture, or do they approach it differently? Afterwards I will examine if they experience or have experienced harassment and/or sexual violence themselves. How did this show during their upbringing, do they link certain behavior to cultures? Do the participants link their experiences specifically to rape culture, or were they hesitant? Analyzing their answers will build up to the conclusion of this research: to what extent is rape culture a helpful term to understand and possibly resist harassment of and violence against women?

The three focus groups that were conducted resulted in a wide variety of conversations. Whereas group two focused mostly on other countries and different cultures than the Netherlands, group one shared more personal experiences and discussed the rural versus city life. The third group agreed upon the scale of the problem surrounding sexual aggression and intimidation, but could not point out where these problems occur, apart from the severe cases, such as battering and rape. All participants of group three felt that the situation in the Netherlands is far from ideal.

'#metoo' and the Me Too Movement

The focus groups were all initiated with the topic of '#metoo' and the Me Too Movement. This to see which one they think off first, as well as their shared knowledge on the topic of sexual intimidation. Furthermore, this topic allows to see their different reaction towards the '#metoo' and to the topic of rape culture. Did the '#metoo' change their perspective of sexual intimidation, or did they feel empowered by this sharing?

One of the participants heard of the Me Too Movement founded by Tarana Burke. This participant (participant 2) was one of the participants I found through an Instagram account (@fellowfeminists). This account discusses and organizes discussion sessions to elaborate on a feminist podcast "Damn Honey". In this podcast, and the book written by the hosts of the podcast, the Me Too Movement is mentioned, and explained how and why Burke

³ The term 'rape culture' was not yet introduced when the topic Me Too Movement was discussed with the focus groups, thus focussing on sexual intimidation.

founded the Me Too Movement. So it did not come as a surprise this particular participant knew this.

The online ‘#metoo’ was known by all participants, however, none participated with placing a message on social media. Furthermore, initially no one could give a precise definition on what counts as “Me too”, questioning if sexual remarks while running in the park, or being felt up at a festival already counts. In group one there was at first a consensus that solely rape or sexual assault counts as ‘severe enough’ to be part of the movement. But later on in the conversation they stated that if the magnitude of the problem of sexual intimidation in a woman’s life should be exposed, smaller and less severe incidents should be discussed as well. Yet, they did not feel like this was a space that they should claim. They discussed the issue as if there is an invisible line that should be crossed first, before posting ‘#metoo’ on social media. These incidents they redeem as small are catcalling, unwanted touching of the body, such as pulling hair or putting a hand on ones bottom. For them these accidents do not cross the invisible line, as they did not experience emotional distress from them, or as they state “restless nights”.

In focus group three the conversation about the movement started differently. Participant 8 and 9 stated immediately how they thought the posts were just a call for attention. Participant 9 says that even though it should be possible to have an open conversation about these topics, social media is, for her, not the right place to do it. Here she contradicts herself, it should be discussed and she encourages creating an open safe space, even online, as long as it is not in her personal circle. If it is in her personal circle, she judges them for seeking attention, because she herself would not post such messages. However, once the magnitude of the ‘#metoo’ had gotten bigger, she changed her mind and saw the need for these messages. Participant 8 states that their reaction is the exact reason that she would not post anything ‘me too’ related, because she fears this negative attention. Participant 7 agrees, as she would not want to be the topic of discussion in her parents’ village, where small talks quickly become gossip, creating an awkward position for her parents, or so she assumes. All participants of group three thus emphasize the culture of shame surrounding female sexuality. To participant 8 and 9 it is a way of seeking attention, which they indirectly agree on, is something a woman should not do. Instead of praising someone to share, they rather shame them for asking for attention and attention becomes something negative. Solely when the message they spread is part of something bigger than their own experience, this attention is approved. Participant 7 fears this shame in the village her parents live, when she would post something that is related to her sexual life. Even when she herself is not exposed to the

shame, she feels the shame for her parents. This shame can be deducted from the TSS, where a women's worth is related to the sexual interactions. If she does engage in sexual interaction with multiple partners her worth would be decreased (Byers, p. 3).

In group three the direct question was asked to give a definition to what one has experienced if they post a message on social media regarding '#metoo'. Participant 7 gave the first answer; she says that it is about unequal power dynamic. Where participant 8 adds, "from harassment to sexual abuse", stating that this can mean different things person to person. Where participant 7 adds to her answer that it is about *sexual* unequal power dynamic. This shows that when they define what the movement is about, they will do so broadly: any sexual unequal power dynamic is related to the movement. However, even when it became clear that they all had certain events happened to them concerning these dynamics, they still would not post them online. They rather not be part of this movement, as it draws negative attention to them, as they had negative reactions themselves on others who did post '#metoo'.

What seems to emerge from the conversations of every focus group is that all participants felt that posting something online would be a too big of a step. This could be for many reasons: where in group one they felt that something "emotionally damaging", like rape or aggressive assault, should happen, in group two participant 4 states that she would rather not post something personal online, and in group three the culture of shame is the main reason not to post anything '#metoo' related. All groups seem to create a line they are not willing to cross (online). Where groups two and three focus on not letting people in their personal life, where shame is a big influence, group one focused on not taking up space online. They state that something worse could happen to them, and thus they should not "complain" or participate in the discussion surrounding '#metoo'. It is interesting how '#metoo' is either seen as something too personal, something one should not share in public, or as something only preserved for those who experienced trauma, where "smaller" events should not take away attention of these traumatic events. This way, the shame surrounding sexual aggression and intimidation, as well as the deemphasizing of events, result in a rather complicated web in which '#metoo' entails. Either way, there is always a suspicion that someone does it for any reason others can look down on. The words 'me too' are rather simple, even though they signify a bigger, more sensitive topic. The term rape culture is a much more graphic term, as the word rape indicates an aggressive, sensitive and harsh topic. It could come off as a harder term than the words 'me too'. If '#metoo' already created an invisible line these participants weren't willing to cross, the term rape culture could invoke further distancing.

Upbringing and culture

In focus group one the topic of clothing was met with multiple contradictions. All three participants agreed several times that clothing, the way someone dressed, should never be an excuse of sexual aggression against that person. As an example, participant 2 tells how she and her roommate spoke about carnival. In the Netherlands this is mainly celebrated in the south, where many people take a week off, dress up and usually drink a lot of alcohol. The schools in the south are closed, all to celebrate carnival. Her roommate told her she is going to dress up as a sexy pirate, and thus expected to be commented on her look. Participant 2 expresses that she understands how so, but she does not think this is right: this way the person that is commented on has their own responsibility, namely the way they dress, instead of the person commenting, namely not commenting. Here participant 2 addresses victim blaming, and how this reversed thinking can create an illusion of responsibility of the victim. Furthermore, she addresses how she understands this thinking; it confirms that it is seen as the norm to think this way, as something rather logical.

This way of thinking also appears later on in the conversation, when the participants talk about going out on a regular night in Utrecht. Participant 1 starts to express how she feels when a woman passes by in a short dress and high heels, when participant 3 fills in “she wants attention then”⁴, participant 1 confirms, stating that she thinks “what are you doing?”⁵ Participant 2 reacts in shock, while participant 3 adds that it is indeed wrong to think so, but also that they have also been taught to think this way. Two layers can be unfolded here: firstly, how they assume that the way someone dresses, in high heels and/or short clothes, is always to attract sexual attention from males. Secondly, they feel that this is in fact wrong, that one should be able to wear whatever they like to, without the sexual attention. However, they do not seem to address that one could dress a certain way without taking into mind the possible sexual attention and/or aggression, as it should be well known that a short dress draws sexual attention, or that heels are for the male gaze. And participant 1 confirms “and then you will get it”⁶. By this argumentation it is the person who dresses in a certain ways should know what is coming to them, as they are asking for it. Here they become trapped in the vicious circle of victim blaming, where the action of not expressing sexual remarks or sexual aggression is not seen as part of the initial problem. Following this reasoning, it would mean that if someone does not dresses provocative (what is provocative?), sexual aggression

⁴ Original quote participant 3: “zij wil aandacht, dat denk je dan.”

⁵ Original quote participant 1: “maar dan denk je, wat doe jij?”

⁶ Original quote participant 1: “en dan krijg je het ook”

would not take place. Even though they do remark that this thinking is not right, and not what they would want to think, they rather see it as something they have been imprinted, something they have been taught to think. Furthermore, by stating their thoughts to each other, they contribute to the rape myth that the way one dresses, provokes rape or sexual assault. However, giving the definition of rape culture by Buchwald and others, rape culture is *male* violence against *females*. However, the behavior in this focus group is *female* aggression versus *female*.

Certain rape myths came forward in the conversation of group two. First of all, participant 6 states how sexual assault would not happen to her, as she claims, “If I want to say no, I say no”⁷. Even though she later states how she did certain things she would rather have not done, that was due to her being young, she could not have known better at that time (paraphrasing participant 6). This myth, that any healthy women could say no, can resist the rapist if they really wanted to, perpetuates victim blaming (Burt, 1980). Furthermore, participant 6 later on claims that women nowadays know better what they want, which “calms down men sometimes”⁸. Lastly, she states how she rather not cycles through the woods, as she does not know what kind of “weird people”⁹ walk around, but does not seem to mind cycling through Utrecht. This idea of insecurity in the woods, while safety in the city is based on the rape myth that the rapist is a stranger; waiting in the bushes for its victim (Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016), rather than the perpetrator being someone you know, or that it could happen anywhere. All these quotes by participant 6 seems to create a distance between herself and possible victims of rape: it would not happen to her, she knows where to go to keep herself safe, and she knows what she likes and wants. This way, she protects herself from the idea that she herself can also become the victim of rape, creating this idea that she is immune (Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016). However, this idea perpetuates victim blaming, because she can create immunity to rape, victims of rape could have done so as well.

The culture of shame comes forward in two examples of slut shaming in the conversation of focus group two. Participant 5 talks about how she became part of a “slut intervention” when she was 15 years old. This happened during a lunch break in high school when she and two other girls confronted another about her sexual interactions with boys from that school. They end the intervention stating that “think about yourself, because no boy

⁷ Original quote participant 6: “Als ik nee wil zeggen zeg ik nee”

⁸ Original quote participant 6: (vrouwen) “die nu wel durven en kunnen zeggen wat ze willen, waardoor mannen zich ook weer, beetje wat rustiger houden soms”

⁹ Original quote participant 6: “ja er kunnen gewoon rare mensen rondlopen”

would want you later on”¹⁰. Adding that the intervention was meant to be a caring act, an act of love, rather than judgmental. However, she now notes that this was not a right reason to do so, emphasizing on the desirability of the girl, rather than on the emotional state of the girl herself.

Participant 4 reacts to this story with her own intervention by her mom. When participant 4 went to high school, she had a few boyfriends, and her mom told her to stop, or people would think she was a slut. In this story participant 4 emphasizes that she had a voluptuous body, which matured faster than other girls her age. She connects her history of boyfriends to her body, rather than her personality. Participant 5 points this out, on which participant 4 states: “yes, well, boys always wanted me to be their girlfriend, and I liked that attention a lot”¹¹, ignoring the remark participant 5 makes about her reasoning. What these two stories have in common is the culture of shame surrounding female sexuality. Both girls (at that time) needed to minimize their sexual activities to stay desirable for other boys. This idea is based on the TSS, where sexual interactions by women are seen as a result of promiscuity, lack of values, no selectivity (Byers, p. 3).

In focus group one being bullied about female sexuality is also addressed. Here, participant 3 is bullied after she went to a teenage dance night and kissed with her female friend. Pictures were taken, and sent around the village she lived, resulting in her parents and aunt receiving the picture the following day. She is then bullied at school, called “bloempot”, which roughly translates to dyke. A friend of participant 3 is bullied for kissing two boys on one night, being called “goor kutje”, translated: ‘disgusting cunt’, at her village and school. When participant 3 tells this story, she emphasizes that this friend waited a long time before she started to sexually interact with boys, telling her age and background precisely. This way, it seems as if she was sexual active at an earlier age this bullying and slut shaming would have been justified in some way. By emphasizing on waiting before engaging in sexual encounters, she tries to debunk the thoughts of promiscuity, as stated in the TSS. Instead of stating that bullying one for their sexual behavior is under any circumstances is wrong, it is now stated that in this particular setting it is especially wrong, thus creating a hierarchy of ‘deservedness of bullying’.

¹⁰ Original quote participant 5: “denk aan jezelf, want straks wil geen jongen je meer hebben”

¹¹ Original quote participant 4: “ja, nouja, jongens wilden altijd wel dat ik hun vriendinnetje was, en ik vond die aandacht superleuk”

In conclusion, these conversations show how the participants contradict themselves sometimes, and show how certain thoughts can be brought back to rape culture. Where as some became trapped in the vicious circle of victim blaming, others showed their beliefs in rape myths, such as the wild stranger rapist in the bushes. Furthermore, these beliefs were expanded with the values of the TSS. Talking about rape *culture* is a way to resist these strains of thoughts, as it shows how all these thoughts are correlated, connection and part of a bigger system. Additionally, it would create an opening to see the system from a distance, connecting all smaller thoughts. The contradictions they notice by themselves, as by the topic of clothing, thus can be discussed and action can be taken to break through this system. Furthermore, when telling their stories about bullying and slut shaming, they focus on circumstances, such as body posture, age, and sexual interaction, rather than the bullying itself. Thus reinforcing the limited idea of female sexuality in the TSS. When this focus shifts, the oppressive systems of rape culture it self can be discussed, rather than reinforced.

Reception rape culture

In focus group three, their initial reaction to the definition of rape culture can be divided into three layers. Their initial reaction is reserved, stating that the term is quite “intense”; participant 9 exclaims a “wow”. The second layer is when participant 8 evaluates that the longer she thinks about it, it does state how she experiences life. Upon which participant 7 and 9 agree. Participant 7 states “ that is exactly what the definition states: it is not normal, but it does feel like normal [...] something that comes with life.” Lastly, they link the definition to ‘#metoo’, agreeing that this is a way to change the ways we see things, to change these sexist views. So even though their initial reaction is reserved and defensive, after a few minutes they agree on how it could be rather useful to resist this culture. They discuss how this, much like the ‘#metoo’, could be part of a bigger movement, where sexual intimidation and sexual violence can be discussed and be heard. When given the second definition of rape culture (see p. 9), they add catcalling as a part of rape culture, and how it can help to see smaller events as part of a culture, instead of incidental events. However, when asked if they think it is a useful term, they change their standpoint, stating that the term would create too much backlash. They all agree that the definition is rather useful and a correct representation of their experiences, but that the term ‘rape culture’ itself comes off as too harsh, too intense and too extreme. Participant 7 states that men would react indifferently: “rape culture? I did

not rape someone, I would never’, like, ‘I would distance myself from it’ you know?”¹².

Participant 9 continues stating that perhaps men would not take the term seriously, as they would not identify with the term. However, the second definition that was given would be an easier way to approach the term. Within this definition it is shown that rape culture manifests itself in jokes, word and the imagery, rather than solely in physical violence (see p. 9). It opens up the conversation, rather than limiting the topic to physical sexual violence.

When asked to give an alternative to rape culture to reflect on the culture surrounding sexuality, they start with ‘sexism’, but soon agree that sexism is too general. They come up with ‘oppressing culture’, but find it too general, and not describing the sexual nature enough. In the end, they stick with the definition as given by Buchwald et al. stating that even though it is a strong definition, sometimes you need to use a strong definition to start the conversation.

At the end of group three, participant 9 tells how she has been assaulted two times in her life, once during travelling, and once in her work in Utrecht. She worked at a restaurant and explains how her boss used to follow her, into the freezer or behind the bar, and would press himself close to her, this happened multiple times. After realizing that his happened to other female co-workers as well, she decided to confront her boss, stating that she would call the police if it were to happen again. However, not much later she is fired from the job. She explains that even though it happened to other female coworkers as well, she still doubted herself what happened, and did not want to make it any bigger than it was (paraphrasing participant 9). A short quotation of the conversation:

Participant 9: “it is so bizarre that it [doubt] sneaks in on you like that”¹³

Participant 8: “yes, while it is so bad that *you* lose your job for it”¹⁴

Participant 7: “that is the [rape] culture indeed, that you lose your job and still think you encouraged him somehow”¹⁵

Participant 9: “yes”

Participant 7: “which is never true of course, he did it systematically, to multiple colleagues”¹⁶

¹² Original quote participant 7: “‘verkrachtingscultuur? Huh, ik heb niet iemand verkracht, ik zou dat nooit doen’, van, ‘ik distantieer mij ervan’, weet je wel?”

¹³ Original quote participant 9: “dat is zo bizar hoe het dan op die manier er in sluipt”

¹⁴ Original quote participant 8: “ja, terwijl het toch dan heel erg dat je je baan er voor verliest”

¹⁵ Original quote participant 7: “dat is toch precies de cultuur inderdaad, dat jij je baan verliest en dan alsnog denk van dat je het zelf hebt uitgelokt”

¹⁶ Original quote participant 7: “wat natuurlijk nooit zo is. Dat hij het structureel doet, bij meerdere collega’s, als baas zijnde”

As is shown in this section of the conversation, the definitions of rape culture helped them to see the structure in which the emotions and thoughts participant 9 expresses are created. Furthermore, they link this event to other more general events, such as groping, whistling, as well as inappropriate touching, like when a man walks by in a crowded space and lays hands around the waist, rather than the shoulder. For them, the definition did not only suit their experiences, it also helped them discuss certain patterns.

In focus group two it was asked if they ever heard of the term rape culture, and if so, how would they describe this. Participant 4 linked “boys will be boys” and “locker room talk” to rape culture, giving multiple examples of rape culture in the USA. Participant 5 links these concepts to a documentary she saw on Netflix, which was about an American teenager who committed suicide after she was raped at a party. Then they move on to how judges do not punish rapist sufficiently, either because of a ‘bright future’, or favoritism. They do not mention rape culture related to another country than the USA. However, when given the first definition by Buchwald et al. they refer back to earlier in the conversation, when they talked about a woman who was from Macedonia and the different perspectives on macho culture. Participant 5 adds: “or in India where everyone is raped on every corner, or something [...]”¹⁷. This focus on other countries rather than the Netherlands continues throughout the conversation, also after the second definition is given. When explicitly asked about rape culture in the Netherlands they bring up sororities and fraternities. However, none of them are a member of one. This way, they keep the conversation about rape culture or sexual violence against women at a distance, something that happens somewhere else, not in their own circle of friends, their own city. The ease they talk about other countries, such as Macedonia, Russia, and the USA, the difficulty they have when talking about their own experiences. They do not state that there is not a rape culture in the Netherlands; however, they do not talk about it in the context of the Netherlands, Utrecht, either. As earlier noted on the topic ‘upbringing and culture’, participant 6 avoids talking about the risk of sexual violence by reinforcing certain sex myths. When asked if they find the term a righteous term to reflect their experiences, participant 5 and 6 state it is too intense for them. However, participant 4 expresses that she has seen this violence against women with her friends. She tells about how some male friends use drugs and beat their girlfriends up after sex. Participant 6 then states that rape culture might be somewhere in the Netherlands in a group, but if it is, it is a smaller group than elsewhere in the world.

¹⁷ Original quote participant 5: “of in India, daar wordt ook iedereen op een hoek verkracht ofzo [...]”

In focus group one the reception of the definitions of rape culture are positive, participant 2 expresses how she feels that this (the definition stated by Buchwald et al) is the situation we live in right now. Participant 1 agrees, following that she feels like it is an unchangeable situation. Participant 2 disagrees on this point, but that it is a long way to change all the small things that perpetuate the rape culture. They then discuss how the younger brother of participant 1 has different curfew rules than she did, or how they text other female friends when they returned home after cycling in the dark. When the conversation continues they discuss how sexuality is seen as an awkward topic, and how certain patterns can be seen as rape culture. The definition of rape culture initiated critical thinking towards certain behavior, thoughts and patterns. However, when asked if it is a useful term to make these patterns more negotiable, they state how they think it would backlash, as there would be too much focus on rape, rather than sexual intimidation in all its forms. Participant 1 states that “people who sexually intimidate would say “oh but I would never rape someone””¹⁸. They suggest the term ‘intimidation culture’ would provide a more negotiable topic, and people would not only think about the act of rape itself.

So the reception of the definitions of rape culture was similar in that they all feel that the term rape culture itself focuses too much on physical rape, rather than a system of ideas. Focus group one suggests intimidation culture, as it would include other forms of sexual violence as well. Focus group two suggest unconscious boundary crossing behavior, to emphasize that most behavior is done unconsciously. They discuss rape culture distantly, first about other countries, and when explicitly asked about the Netherlands, they turn to subcultures they are not a part of, thus implicitly stating that rape culture is not a part of the mainstream in the Netherlands. Focus group three agrees upon the term rape culture, even though the concepts linked to rape culture, such as slut shaming, catcalling and victim blaming are, for them, a better way to start a conversation, rather than using the word rape.

Conclusion

What can be concluded from the analysis is that the three focus groups have similarities as well as differences. Where group one and three found the term rape culture an appropriate term to reflect their experiences, group two did not come to an agreement: participant 6

¹⁸ Original quote participant 1: “mensen die seksueel intimideren dan zeggen “oh maar ik zou nooit iemand verkrachten””

distances herself from the term, while participant 4 saw the definition of rape culture happening within her personal circle.

The trending ‘#metoo’ created awareness amongst most participants, creating a way to reflect on sexual intimidation, and on the scale on which women deal with this intimidation worldwide. Even though some participants initially thought it was a way to seek attention, they all agreed it was a good way to show sexual intimidation. However, participating in the online trend created a boundary, which could only be crossed if experienced some emotional trauma. They did not feel victimized themselves to participate in this online trend, even though they later on speak about sexual assault. This reinforces the critique Kipnis stated: rape culture perpetuates the idea of women as victims, with no agency, and the participants did not feel like they are agency-less victims, thus distancing themselves from the online trend and/or rape culture. Furthermore, female sexuality is still seen as something private, something that should not be shown. The TSS was visible multiple times during the conversation. On some occasions explicit details were given to show how the subject of the story is not promiscuous, while these details did not matter for the argumentation they used.

All three groups expressed how the term *rape* culture lays the focus mostly on rape, as it is an extreme choice of words. They rather use words as unconscious boundary crossing behavior, or intimidation culture to reflect on their experiences. The groups express how they distance themselves from rape itself: group one feels that they have to experience a traumatic, emotional experience to be able to participate in the topic of ‘#metoo’, or when they talk about rape. Rather, they talk about how smaller events stigmatize certain beliefs, such as slut shaming, fear, and victim blaming. Group two distances from rape by talking solely about rape within other countries or cultures than the Netherlands. Group three expect backlash when using the term rape culture, and fear that others will not listen when not given the full definition of the term. They rather use the concepts linked to rape culture to articulate their experiences, than use rape culture on it’s own to reflect. However, when the definition was given, all conversations connected the “smaller” incidents together, and in focus group three, they discussed how certain thoughts and behavior could be linked to rape culture. It connected individual smaller events to a bigger, complex system in which the events occur and are related to one another. Thus resulting in rape culture as a useful term to discuss and reflect on their experiences, but not to *resist*. When used for resistance, the participants fear it will create friction, jokes, and distance, rather than an open discussion.

Conclusion

What has become clear is that talking about sexual harassment and violence is helpful to resist and understand the situation concerning sexual violence, however, that rape culture itself does not have to be the term to address the specific situation these women are in. Rape culture is a helpful term to understand, but not to resist the harassment of/and violence against women. Furthermore, the gendered implications of the term perpetuate the idea of female passivity, which is shown as problematic. In the overview of the field the definition of rape culture was given. It was shown how this definition is based on the TSS, where female sexuality is limited to passive, as her worth is linked to her sexual activity. Furthermore, the history of rape culture showed how it is linked to the sex wars, where feminist were at “war”, either camp power feminism, or camp dominance feminism. Power feminism believed in the female power, female agency, and was opposite of dominance feminism, who according to them framed the female solely as victims of the domination of men, naming this feminism ‘victim feminism’. However, Schneider showed how there can be agency while being victim of subordination, how agency and victimization are interrelated, rather than exclusive.

Kipnis and Duits gave critiques on the term rape culture. Kipnis showed how rape culture uses the aggressive male predator as framing of narrative, thus dismissing the complexity of sexual encounters and interactions. It is a limiting narrative in which the woman can only be passive, without agency, while the man can only be active and the initiator. Furthermore, Kipnis showed that the idea of power is often more complex than male over female, as she demonstrates a student's power to cancel teachers, while teachers are seen as the powerful beings in the rape culture narrative on campus. Duits noted that the term is rather gendered, perpetuating the idea that solely male violence is targeted at women, rather than an oppressive system to all. Additionally, rape culture reinforces the idea that female sexuality is passive, while it is shown that women as well as men can be active initiators. Duits wants to distance herself from the term because of its origin in the sex wars. The dominance feminist are now called radical feminist, who were rather exclusive than inclusive.

So rape culture would not be a helpful term to resist violence against women mainly because of two reasons, first of all, it reinforces the gender narrative of male/aggressor, female/passive. Secondly, the history of the term is troubled, as its roots are in dominance feminism, which was also known to be anti-pornography, anti sex work, and trans exclusive (Duits, 2017).

In the analysis the three topics of ‘#metoo’, upbringing, and the participant’s reception of the definition of rape culture was discussed. All participants shared how they felt on the

word rape culture; how it would distract the conversation about what it signified. They all feared that the word *rape* would create too much backlash; people would distance themselves quicker when such strong words are used, creating no opportunity to share experiences or open up discussions. Furthermore, in the discussion about ‘#metoo’, it became clear that an invisible boundary was set, and this boundary could only be crossed if you have experienced rape, sexual assault, and experienced emotional trauma because of it. Focus group three expressed how they thought this boundary could only be crossed if it was for the ‘greater good’: if it were for the movement it would be all right to share ‘#metoo’, but not if it was to share personal experiences. Additionally, it was shown that there is a culture of shame surrounding female sexuality. In focus group three they shared their thoughts on how they feel ‘#metoo’ was at first a scream for attention. Furthermore, they expressed how they would not want to be the talk of the town by sharing ‘#metoo’, as it would be shameful for their parents. Thus it was shown that once the discussion about sexual assault and violence against women is started, experiences and sexual encounters could be shared. However, starting the conversation can be troubled by the culture of shame, and by the ‘hierarchy’ of emotional trauma experienced.

Certain rape myths were discussed, as well as multiple points of the TSS (see p. 12-14). A couple of times these myths and ideas were linked to rape culture. This way, rape culture became a tool to resist these trains of thoughts, as it shows how all these thoughts are correlated, connected and part of a bigger system, overseeing this bigger system can be used to fight internalized sexism.

So in conclusion, rape culture is a helpful term to understand the harassment of and violence against women. However, to resist, the concepts of rape culture, such as slut shaming and victim blaming are found to be more useful terms, as the term rape culture could create backlash. Discussions and conversations help to initiate the talk, to unfold structures, and the term rape culture in itself does not have to be key to resist the sexual violence of women. When asked to come up with their own term to express the culture of sexuality, the conversation opened up, multiple answers came around, whereas rape culture needed more explanation and background to get the conversation started.

But to understand is to resist, so once the conversation takes place, rape culture as a discourse will be helpful to resist harassment. Talking about a rape culture can show how certain ideas “provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall, 1997), and

therefore resist how these ideas regenerated themselves. This was already shown in the conversation of group one, on the topic of clothing, and in group three, when was discussed how participant 9 was fired from her job. They linked their own thoughts, behavior and associates to rape culture, and how they were taught to think in a certain way. Even though the gendered definition is problematic, discussing this definition and its background can produce critical engagement, rather than just reinforcing those ideas. However, this research is not a final answer, these gender implications should be researched further: how does the conversations unfold when the participants are male, or non-binary? It would be interesting to see how other groups, inside and outside the gendered terms of the definition of Buchwald et al. react to the definition and position themselves. In the end, talking is resisting, sharing is evolving, and to do so, the conversation starter needs to be an open, approachable topic, even if the topic of sexual violence will never be easy.

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