



# Beginnings Matter

## Why Sexual Violence Perpetration Should Not Remain on the Dark Side of the Moon

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### Introduction

Whenever I write texts or do lectures about my research, I often find myself starting in very similar ways. My beginnings tend to go something like this: »Sexual violence is a widespread and damaging social phenomenon, creating suffering, fear and loss for those who are victimized by it, for their partners and children, their friends, families and their communities.« This statement is true, of course (Brown and Walklate, 2012; Walby and Allen, 2004). Thankfully, much – though not nearly enough – research has been done on sexual violence, its prevalence, correlates and consequences, in the fifty years that have gone by since the women’s movement and second wave feminists put it squarely on the political agenda. In doing so, they upended and fiercely protested the previously common notion that such violence was a private matter of no particular interest to politics, policy – or to the social sciences. Directing attention towards *seeing* sexual violence, its full extent and its impact, is and has been a consequential task for feminist and feminist-oriented research (Westerstrand, 2010), also within criminology (Walby and Myhill, 2004; Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2018).

However, as true and acute as my go-to-beginning is, it does direct our attention to only part of the problem or issue of sexual violence – namely victimization, its consequences, and how we can prevent further harm and damage to existing and potential victims of sexual violence. It does not, however, tell us much about those who cause such harm and damage through their actions. Perpetrators of sexual harm are almost conspicuously absent from my knee-jerk beginnings. It is as if their actions are only reflected after-the-fact, treated almost as a given or a constant, and not as something that can or should be unpacked, analyzed, understood – or prevented. I suspect it is not only me who have noticed the relative absence of perpetration and people who perpetrate harm, in this field of research.

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## 1. The Dark Side of the Moon?

Within and outside criminology, in the Nordics and beyond, scant research attention has been afforded to the perpetration of sexual violence, how the social and normative conditions conducive to such perpetration play out in the lives of those who cause sexual harm to others, and by implication, how our societies can and do address, confront, deal with and prevent sexual violence perpetration. Awareness of this knowledge gap is not new, and it has been addressed by scholars in disciplines such as psychology (Cossins, 2016), social work (McPhail, 2016), masculinities research (Gottzén, Bjørnholt and Boonzaier, 2021) – and criminology (Lussier and Beauregard, 2018).

So when I designed my PhD project some years ago, having already worked in research on sexual and other types of violence for quite some time, I tried to look for other beginnings, other entryways into understanding this damaging and harmful social phenomenon. The openings I was looking for were of the kind that would direct my attention towards comprehension of sexual violence perpetration as social and socially embedded action, as I believe that such comprehension is both timely and necessary.

My PhD project starts from the premise that in order to address and understand sexual violence as a social phenomenon, research should include perpetration of such violence, and the experiences of those who have sexually harmed others. Prevention of sexual violations and the harm it causes is considered a pressing issue in many countries across the globe, including the Nordic countries. For me, one good reason for contributing with perspectives on perpetration to the developing knowledge base on sexual violence is how such knowledge is necessary for effective prevention efforts (Isdal, 2018).

## 2. Stigmatisation, Dismissal and Alienation as Barriers for Comprehension

One barrier for comprehension of sexual violence as a social phenomenon, I argue above, is the relative absence of discussions about perpetration of such harm, and the people who do so. Another barrier is what tends to happen when these people are *not* absent from our conversations. When present, they are frequently portrayed as monsters, less-than-human – as either *mad* or *bad*.

People who have committed sex offenses are highly stigmatized and often treated differently from people convicted of other types of offenses, and they are frequently placed outside the imagined borders of the moral and normative communities that the rest of us share (McAlinden, 2007). As Gottzén emphasizes in the context of being a researcher on men's violence against women, »the challenge (...) is therefore to highlight and criticize violence against women, while realizing that we tend to end up on the same side as



the condemners that, through an individualization of men's violence, depict these men as monsters» (2013a, p. 198).

My research aims to counter the *dismissal* and *alienation* that mark common responses to people who commit sexual violations, and their acts. Dismissal and alienation often preclude the social contextualization of violence, leaving us with an image of individualized, 'defamiliarized' behaviour instead of intelligible, socially embedded practices (Waldram, 2010).

In a widely quoted article about perpetrators of sexual war violence, Lisa Price wrote (2001, p. 211):

When perpetrators are depicted as either mad or bad (crazy or demonic), the effect is at once dismissal and alienation. Dismissal means that the observer need not struggle to understand either the act or the actor, as by definition they are incomprehensible. Alienation represents the perpetrator as a monster, inhuman, unlike me. As with dismissal, it serves as an excuse to avoid thought, most especially, reflection on the social origins of abusive male sexuality.

Dismissal and alienation not only hinders the search for comprehension. I would argue that doing so also leads our societies to working on risk management instead of actual prevention, and this may leave many people feeling disempowered in the face of sexual violence. I consider overcoming such responses and trying to understand what happens when someone does harm to others as helpful to avoid a certain kind of powerlessness in the face of harmful acts, by refusing to turn them into something akin to natural disasters, which little can really be done to avoid.

One way of accomplishing such an understanding is through talking to those responsible for harming others – »listen to their stories and their meaning making« (Gottzén, 2013a, p. 199). The men I have interviewed for my PhD research have their own, concrete experiences with dismissal and alienation, enabling analyses of how such responses unfold in lived experiences, and the consequences they have. However, as Gottzén (2013a) also reminds us, as researchers into violence and abuse we should clearly remain critical of men (or indeed anyone) who commit violence and avoid colluding with them or uncritically taking over their perspectives.

Countering the dismissal and alienation of people convicted of sex offenses contributes to a criminology intent on understanding harmdoing as a socially embedded practice, inclusive of though not uncritically reiterating harmdoers' own perspectives on their actions and their lives. In 2002, Willem de Haan and Ian Loader spoke to an 'aetiological crisis' of mainstream criminology, in the sense that criminologists have insufficiently considered offenders' experiences, motivations, meaning making and, in particular, emotions as a significant part of our research agenda. They argue for the development and utility of theories that would allow for a »broader conception of practical and discursive consciousness and moral agency – theories that do justice to the feelings of the offender, the normative meanings that law-breakers attribute to their own behavior and the social and



cultural contexts within which such meanings are activated« (pp. 245-246). While it is arguably a valid question whether the 'aetiological crisis' that de Haan and Loader identified in 2002 is still a crisis in mainstream criminology, my research nevertheless aspires to contribute to such theorization that they advocated.

### 3. The Project

My PhD dissertation<sup>2</sup> is about the narrated experiences of men who are convicted of sexual violations. Research on sexual violence in the Nordic countries has not<sup>3</sup> provided many qualitative investigations taking the perspectives of the perpetrators as a starting point, although such understandings to a substantial degree must be considered as context-specific (Skillbrei, Stefansen and Heinskou, 2020). Therefore, the main aim of my PhD research was to illuminate the phenomenon of sexual violence via the perspectives of people who have committed such violence. In particular, I wanted to investigate how their life stories and self-narratives grappled with having sexually harmed someone else, and how they dealt with issues of shame, guilt and responsibility related to such harmdoing.

In order to do this, I interviewed and analysed the narratives of 17 men who were convicted of rape and other severe forms of sexual violations, and who at least to some degree acknowledged that they had committed acts of sexual harmdoing. More specifically, I researched the ways in which these men understand their own violating behaviour, and how they understand themselves as someone who has sexually violated others. This investigation further opened up for analysing the men's perspectives as embedded in their social contexts, and within discourses on sexual violence and violation.

The overarching question that my dissertation responds to is this: How do men who have committed sexual violations navigate expectations to acknowledge and take responsibility for their sexually violating behaviour, while at the same time trying to uphold an acceptable conception of self?

The research participants were interviewed about their pre- and post-conviction experiences as accused or convicted sex offenders. The recruited men had only sexually violated people they knew and were acquainted with, and only against adult victims or young peers around their own age. Most of the participants had been attending rehabilitation programmes in prison, undergone individual psychotherapy or participated in other forms of goal-oriented and structured conversations with professionals, about the acts that led to their convictions. Thus, they have to various degrees been confronted with the

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2. Kruse, A. E. (2020). *The Who, the Why and the Wherefore*. Explanations, self-change and social friction in men's narratives of sexual violations. Oslo, Norway: Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, Faculty of Law, University of Oslo. (Doctoral dissertation).
  3. With some notable exceptions, see for example Gottzén, 2016, 2019; Schierff and Heinskou, 2020.



'responsibilization' discourses that permeate the criminal justice rehabilitation paradigm (Garland, 2001).

It was typical for the participants in my study to state that over time, they had significantly shifted their notions of culpability and responsibility for their own violating acts. After some time in prison (sometimes a long time), in therapy or programmes, most of the men said that their perspective on both their own actions and on the people they had victimized had changed. In other words, they had spent time and effort considering and re-evaluating their own agency in and responsibility for the acts they had been convicted of. These were stories of engaging in processes in which they had chosen to reflect on their own role in how those violations had come about, and to a greater degree than simple denial would have entailed. Such processes, I argue in my dissertation, may be conducive to creating (narratives of) change.

#### 4. Sexual Violence (Perpetration) in the Nordic Countries

The Nordic countries are often portrayed as some of the world's most progressive nations with regards to social, political and legislative efforts to prevent and counter sexual violence, within a larger picture of gender equality policy and -ideals. Sexual violence has for decades been a contested and highly engaging issue in the Nordic public conversations. In Norway, mirroring the developments in the other Nordic countries, the legal definition and popular notion of rape and what constitutes it has changed quite dramatically the past one and a half century, and today encompasses quite a wide range of involuntary or forced sexual activities. Combating sexual violence is high on the official agenda for most Norwegian political parties, and the police and courts have in recent years been politically instructed to prioritize investigation of sexual violence and impose longer sentences in cases of rape.<sup>4</sup>

It can be argued that public discourse in the Nordic countries, including Norway, is generally characterized by social and moral condemnation of those sexually violent acts that are criminalized, especially in cases that end in a conviction in court. Despite these developments, taking for granted a universal condemnation or social unacceptability of all kinds of harmful sexual behavior seems naïve. The sheer magnitude of sexual violence victimization bears testament to the non-universality of such norms, as do the lived realities behind the massive and widespread nature of social media campaigns and social movements such as #metoo. This situation has led researchers to point out that sexual violence constitutes a paradox, in that it is at once a 'public anathema' and a 'private commonplace' (Brown and Walklate, 2012).

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4. See e.g., The Higher Prosecuting Authorities. (2020). Mål og prioriteringer for straffesaksbehandlingen i 2020 [Aims and priorities for the processing of criminal cases in 2020]. <https://www.riksadvokaten.no/document/riksadvokatens-mal-og-prioriteringer-for-2020/>



I argue that particularly in times of political and cultural change and legislative reform, understanding what creates conditions for perpetration of sexual violence is of great importance for our societies' ability to address, confront and deal with it (see also Skilbrei, Stefansen and Heinskou, 2020). Such understanding is also vital for figuring out what may prevent, and foster desistance from, sexual violence perpetration, and for developing resolution strategies that can represent alternatives or additions to traditional criminal justice system responses.

The Nordic criminal justice systems are often represented as rehabilitation-oriented correctional paradigms (Scharff-Smith and Ugelvik, 2017). Responsibilization is an integral part of such an orientation, through being a central value and guiding principle for much of the work done with prisoners. In much correctional treatment and forensic psychology literature, acknowledging one's actions is also seen as an essential 'first step' towards the treatment goal of taking responsibility and, hence, towards rehabilitation (Schneider and Wright, 2004). The fundamental rationale of individual responsibilization is that by accepting the normative condemnation of your acts, by accepting personal responsibility for them and working to correct the wrongs they have caused, chances of desisting from future condemnable acts increase. At the same time, your commitment to the normative community that condemns your acts is demonstrated.

Being convicted of rape in a society that harshly condemns such violence can be a perplexing experience. Receiving a conviction for having committed a sexual crime can – provided that one accepts the legitimacy of the legal system and the collective norms it intends to uphold – result in a process of (re-)consideration, where sense of self, understanding of the acts that led to conviction and understanding of what separates right and legitimate behavior from wrong and illegitimate are up for debate. Such undertakings may be termed processes of acknowledgment and taking responsibility, and they form a central tenet in the subject matter of my PhD research.

Prisoners with sex offense convictions occupy the bottom rungs of the prison hierarchy, and in popular opinion, (convicted) sex offenders generally constitute a particularly despised group, often a target of outrage, sparking feelings of risk and danger and a need for protection. In such a context, it seems clear that acknowledgment of and taking responsibility for sexual crime is qualitatively different and may pose a greater threat to identity and self-conception than for example property crime, tax fraud or drug offenses. Following from this, I argue that responsibilization and rehabilitation processes in convicted sex offenders are of particular importance to discussions about how people deal with their own past wrongdoing and how this relates to future persistence in or desistance from crime. Criminological inquiry into responsibilization processes for this particular group can helpfully contribute to such discussions, in particular by investigating how the stories they tell about themselves, their wrongdoing and their imagined future – their self-narratives – are constructed in and through such processes.



## 5. Normativity, Masculinities and Sexual Violence Perpetration

A central question that researchers on sexual violence have grappled with concerns the normative superstructure of sexual violence. Strong, pervasive ideals of consensual and reciprocal sex, the right to bodily integrity and sexual self-determination co-exist in the Nordic countries with relatively high numbers of self-reported sexual violence victimization and increasing levels of police reported sex crime. This situation is similar to what has been termed and discussed as the 'Nordic paradox' in relation to intimate partner violence (Gracia and Merlo, 2016). My research aims to shed light upon how perpetration of sexual and other forms of interpersonal violence in the Scandinavian countries can be understood in juxtaposition with – and in opposition to – gender equality ideals and particularly norms for respectable and acceptable masculinity.

How can we understand sexually violating behavior as a masculine, gendered practice in a society that seems intent on condemning and distancing itself from all forms of violence against women, and where male perpetrators of violence against women are 'Othered', marginalized and subjected to various exclusionary practices? How does this situation affect experiences of shame and stigmatization among convicted sex offenders in Norway and the other Nordic countries, and how does it affect the role that shame and shaming plays in Nordic men's narratives of perpetrating (sexual) violence? Do they construe their acts as normatively defensible or as normative disruptions, and what could an eventual shift over time in their considerations towards normativity entail? I consider questions such as these particularly relevant to ask in research on sexual violence perpetration in the Nordic countries.

My own research attempts to shed light upon the narrative processes with and by which men who have sexually violated others understand their own sexual harmdoing. It also discusses how and to which degree these men understand themselves as someone who have sexually harmed others – and their stories of how and why they got to a time and a place in their lives where they did. My ambition is that these insights can inform current debates on how our societies should understand, confront, address and prevent sexual violence perpetration, and aid an exploration of how desistance from sexual harmdoing may be fostered – a topic that until recently has been only peripheral in contemporary sexual violence debates in the Nordic countries.

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