

The Phenomenology of Rape

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Sharon Mixon¹ served as a combat medic during Operation Desert Storm. In June 1991, while waiting in Saudi Arabia to return home, she was drinking with a group of soldiers when she was drugged and gang raped. She told her story to reporters:

“The next thing I remember is waking up facedown on a cot. Somebody was on top of me, penetrating me.” She was disoriented, as if under anesthesia. She remembers two men holding down her arms. They told her, “We’ll kill you if you talk about it...”

Hours later, Mixon reported her assault to a military police officer. “He said, “What did you expect, being a female in Saudi Arabia?” she recalled, “When I told him it was fellow American soldiers, he told me if I knew what was best for me, to keep my mouth shut. I was too dumbfounded to even react.”
(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 14.)

Greg Halle was raped by a fellow soldier while serving in Viet Nam. He describes the rape as a defining life event.

One June night in 1969 I had been out drinking with my buds. I don't remember if it was in an EM (Enlisted Man's) club or just behind a bunker. Wherever it was I went to my bunk intoxicated. I know that this was in my bunk in Long Bien. My room was on the second floor, southwest corner. The "room" was open with only a four-foot wall around it. There were two bunks in the room. I am not sure if I had a roommate at the time.

Sometime during the night I was awakened. I remember wondering what was happening and soon realized that my boxers were being pulled off. I had no clue what was happening. Then I remember my legs being forced apart. I remember trying to turn over but being forced back down. I will always remember his face. Then I felt him forcing himself into me. I remember the pain. I can remember his entering me over and over again, not being able to do anything about it and really not sure even what was happening to me. It seemed like he pounded me forever. I was not a virgin and I knew what he was doing.

The next thing I remember it was morning. I was naked. I remembered what had happened. This was an event I could not forget and my attacker is a name and a face I would never forget. He was a fellow soldier and was bunked across the hall from me. I remember hating him. I remember giving him hate looks that I know he understood. I

wanted to kill him. I have no idea why I didn't kill him. I had my chances. I often wish I had. I have attempted suicide six times because of the rape. (Halle, 2004)

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RAPE

We come to know about people's experience by listening to the stories they tell. The stories of rape, however, are too often kept silent (Raine, 1998). There are many reasons for this silence, some having to do with the victim's difficulties telling about the rape experience (Wigren, 1994), and some having to do with society's reluctance and difficulty hearing what rape victims have to say when they do venture to speak (Herman, 1992).

People speak more freely and fully when they feel that they are listened to; when they feel that a listener can tolerate hearing with they have to say, can understand it, and can imagine it to be true. The capacity to hear about rape does not come easily, or at once. It must be developed. Developing this capacity requires an active, willing, empathic extension of the self into areas of human failure and malevolence. This takes practice. The purpose of this paper is to help you, our reader, begin that practice. By introducing readers to the inner world of the rape victim we hope to create a psychological context for listening, hearing and understanding, so that victims will be emboldened to speak, and when they do, listeners will hear.

In this paper, we rely primarily on victim's testimonies to chart the phenomenology of rape, that is, the subjective experience of rape from the victim's point of view. In doing so we are knowingly exposing readers to material that is unsettling. Some of the material is graphic and cumulatively is it likely to be disturbing. Typically, people deal with emotionally disturbing material by avoiding it. You may find your attention wandering, or you may find yourself wanting to set the paper aside. We encourage you to do so, when you need to take distance in order to psychologically process what you are reading. But we also encourage you to return. What you hear in this paper will help you hear what victims need to be able to say when they try to speak about being raped.

As our initial passages begin to attest, rape presents victims with an event that redefines their relationship to themselves and to their community. In addition to whatever physical harm they suffer, victims must come to terms with a loss of control over themselves and their bodies, and they must confront the intentional malice of the perpetrator. Others may, through their actions and reactions, provide support validation and protection, and thus help to mitigate the trauma of rape. Or, they may exacerbate the trauma by subjecting the victim to blame, shame and isolation.

Although each rape is unique, certain themes emerge across victims' stories. Themes are broad categories of feelings and meanings that capture core features of the rape experience; namely the overwhelming feelings and deeply troubling meanings which characterize the subjective experience of the event. Themes are a useful rubric for mapping victims' experiences because they help us to listen more precisely, they facilitate tracking commonalities across victims while highlighting individual and unique experience, and they allow us to follow the thread of an experience as it changes over time (Lebowitz and Newman, 1996).

Presenting thematic material derived from first-person testimony is also a way to represent the voices of victims within the professional literature. Historically, the experiences of men and women who have been raped have been erased, minimized or distorted. By highlighting their voices and their

perspectives we hope to ensure that the professional conceptualization of the experience of rape is anchored in the victims' understanding of the experience. Further, we hope that highlighting the voice of the victim will illuminate the active, psychologically constructive and adaptive struggle of responding to victimization (Lebowitz and Newman, 1996).

The eleven themes we use in this paper have been derived from the systematic analysis of first person narratives provided by rape survivors (Lebowitz, 1990). The themes reflect the multiple and layered dimensions of traumatic impact. Some themes such as fear, helplessness and shame evidence the visceral impact of the assault. Others, including loss of meaning and sustaining beliefs, legitimacy and validation, self-blame and guilt, emerge as the victim contends with rape-imposed challenges to their ways of making sense of themselves and the world. Other themes, such as betrayal and loss of trust, isolation and alienation reflect shifts in the victim's internal relationship to his or her community. Finally, themes such as diminished sense of self, grief and loss express the pervasive impact of rape on broad aspects of identity

As you listen to the themes that emerge in the following testimonies, you will notice that the themes that define the rape experience are fluid and overlapping: for example, fear and helplessness represent distinct and at the same time inseparable aspects of the rape experience. Themes interact synergistically and tend to reinforce and amplify each other. For example, betrayal and loss of trust leads to isolation and alienation, which exacerbates the diminished sense of self and leads, in turn, to greater feelings of grief and loss. In the absence of resolution, themes tend to expand. What initially characterized the experience of a single event can come to shape ones experience of self, world and other people. For example, a moment of externally imposed helplessness becomes a shamed and disempowered identity, or feelings of fear come to color the world as an unsafe place. Themes also have different meanings to different individuals -- anger and rage may be a part of healing for one person and condemn another to an unremittingly negative feeling which further isolates and defines them.

We hope that these themes, in describing, from the victim's perspective what it feels like to have been raped, will prepare you to better receive the testimony of victims and in doing so to help them make the best possible choices for themselves.

FEAR

For victims, the most common and predominant response to rape is visceral feelings of fear

I was always terrified. I was terrified. Just the unknown part...I didn't think he would use the knife if I cooperated but I couldn't be sure. That element of unknown. So the nature of the emotion I felt the whole time was fear. I was just afraid.

"Shirley", raped at knifepoint at age 50. (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 94)

It was like an instinctive thing for me to do whatever they wanted me to do so they wouldn't kill me. I really thought they were going to kill me...One of them came back upstairs and I thought for sure he was going to kill me and that was at the point that I really thought it was all over because I couldn't see what was going on...the thing that bothered me the most was that I thought that they were going to kill me...that bothered me more than the rape...the danger of losing your life...

"Cindy", raped in her home at 32, by a stranger (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 224)

I was so scared that I just wanted it to be over with and just live through it.

"Rachel", raped at 24 by raped by her boss's son after he drove her home following a dinner party. (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 298)

Rape is a trauma that happens on the body. It is profoundly intimate. It usurps a victim's authority over his/her own physical experience, and it denies the victim's capacity to keep the body safe, free from intrusion and violation.

Once you are rendered powerless and your body is in the control of a malevolent other, there is always the very real possibility of horrifying physical injury or death. It is not uncommon for victims to feel so frightened that they dissociate, or leave their body, during the rape.

Her drill sergeant stood there. He smashed the door into her face, she said, bloodying her nose. Behind him stood four other men. Dressed in fatigues, they pushed their way into the room.

The men took turns raping and sodomizing her, Hood said. They beat her and kicked her, fracturing her ribs, right knee, nose, right cheekbone and spine. They urinated on her, burned her with cigarettes, split her lip and spit on her, while threatening to kill her.

Hood would later recall it seemed as though her spirit left. And so, detached, she watched her body suffer.

The men ransacked the motel room, taking money and travelers checks, before filling the bathtub and dumping Hood in. They dunked her head under water, she said, until her drill sergeant said, "We're done." Then they left.

Marion Hood, raped after she reported her drill sergeant for pressuring her for sex during basic training.

(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 15.)

It's important to realize that while the fear sometimes reflects an objective fear of being killed or mutilated, it is also always about losing control over one's life, and this, in and of itself, is terrifying.

Needless to say, at this point I was completely terrified (whispering). I realized I was completely out of control...I mean I was in so much fear I could not really experience anymore.

"Nadine", kidnapped and raped by a sheriff at 13. (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 94)

Mortal threat activates our most basic defenses, insuring survival, but exacting a cost. Specifically, the visceral terror and horror of the attack stimulate the biological fight, flight, and most prominently, freeze responses that are the archaic responses of prey to predator. These extremely high physiological arousal states mobilize the body for survival, at the expense of all other functions. The freeze response is the most desperate of these states, and essentially signifies, 'when there is no possibility of escaping death, be still and perhaps you will go unnoticed.' This state frequently leads to a dissociation of consciousness from bodily experience. The price of the protection that dissociation provides is the loss of connection to the self.

I remember feeling my arms to see if I was still, still alive. And the whole time it felt like ... I was looking down on another person...It was like it's all slow motion and it's

happening to somebody else...I felt a light-headed feeling and just that I was looking at a TV screen and it was somebody else on the TV screen. Like I was just looking down and it was just part of a novel. I never really felt like I was there...I still go through real and unreal times about it. There are still some days that there is no doubt it happened to me. And there are some days where it happened to my twin sister you know, it didn't happen to me.

"Ginny", raped at 23, at gunpoint, while working alone in a store. (Lebowitz, 1990, pp. 140-141)

I denied, starting immediately, that it [was] happening...it was somebody else. I sort of left the scene. I stayed like that for three days. It happened to somebody else.

Interviewer: "What happened when you came back in to yourself?"

Well that was the first time I cried. First time I really felt like I was crying for me.

"Rachel", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 140)

In such a state of emergency arousal, the brain is primed for rapid intake and assessment of sensory cues related to danger. In order to provide for the quickest possible physical response, higher thought processes are essentially shut down. Events that are encoded in such states persist in the memory with particular and problematic characteristics: they include unusually specific and vivid sensory information, but may be entirely lacking in the "what, where, when, why" aspects of narrative memory that result from cortical processing and allow people to make sense of experience. These fragmented traumatic memories resist the natural wearing away processes of time and may haunt the victim as flashbacks that are stimulated by a broad array of environmental cues associated with the rape.

I recall an incident over the Christmas holidays with my seventeen-year old niece...We were strolling arm in arm along a path in Muir Woods...

Suddenly and without warning I felt a rush from behind that conveyed the same supernatural feeling as the recurring dream. I jumped like a startled animal. My niece seemed to absorb the charge and force of my terror, "what is it?" she asked, spinning around on the path...

The physical sensations of terror, including, most horribly, the sense of separating from myself, returned on this occasion in the form in which I had experienced it that afternoon so long ago. It lasted several days. I felt as if I had been attacked again because my body was responding the same way. Once the terror faded, I returned to a state of chronic fear. But in addition to the fear, I felt something worse--self contempt. I seemed to be a person who was grossly overreacting--not to something but to nothing.

Nancy Raine, raped by a home intruder. (Raine, 1998, p. 227)

As Raine describes, the victim's response to being terrorized becomes, in the aftermath, itself a source of distress. In this quote, fear and terror engender a fragmented memory which returns in the form of a flashback. This flashback and its emotional residue is observed and judged harshly by the victim, in turn contributing to a diminished sense of self.

When fear persists it comes to define the internal landscape of the self: it makes the self and knowing the self a scary place. Lynne was raped by her college boyfriend the first time she smoked marijuana. The next day the relationship went on as usual. It took her two years of confusing and escalating

symptoms (nightmares, self-hate, irrational fears, and concentration problems, depression) to finally have a conversation with her boyfriend about it, whereupon he told her that he had raped her that night.

I did not remember that it happened. I only knew that there was this night in my life when I fell into the deepest terror I have ever known. But I didn't remember. All I knew was that there was something weird I couldn't let myself talk about -- that I was with Bob that night and I couldn't let myself think about that. So two years after this I had on occasion tried to talk with Bob about that, because he scared me, making me think that there was something inside of me, this deep hole of terror that I would fall into if I wasn't on my guard all the time, if I wasn't vigilant.

"Lynne", (Lebowitz, 1990, p.141)

Unfortunately, fear, like all aspects of trauma, is a kind of knowledge. It reveals the fragility of our lives and in doing so alters our schemas of safety, security, invulnerability, and the "myth" of the "just world", namely, the idea that people get what they deserve (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Without some "adaptive illusions" of safety, invulnerability, and predictability, (Taylor, 1983) we are prone to pessimism and chronic fear.

I believed that if you're careful enough it can't happen to you...I used to think I could be invulnerable ...because I am conservative, I do watch, I do, I am always with somebody, I don't go into dark parking lots by myself and all that. I thought that I could assure that it wouldn't happen to me, and that has been disproven, just blatantly disproven, and at that point I felt like anything in the world can happen to anyone. I just suddenly felt like everything is exposed. I'm a target for anything. If this can happen to me a bomb will fall on my head, personally. I suddenly just felt completely vulnerable to any malevolent forces in the world...it's just the sense of being a target for anything.

"Elana", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 96-97)

Victims frequently turn to alcohol and drugs in order to withdraw from their feelings, in particular their chronic fear. This creates a cascade of life problems.

"I drank wine to keep myself under control. I was so scared I would see him again... One day at work I began crying hysterically. I asked for the chaplain, and the next thing I knew I was admitted to the psychiatric hospital." ... After getting out of the hospital, she said, people shunned her. "I was treated like an outsider and a coward."

Susan Armenta, sexually harassed, assaulted and raped while serving in the Army. (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.45)

The loss of a sense of safety, and the chronic fear that ensues, may change the life choices that we make.

We had planned to be 'women out west' you know, my friend is married and it was like, we'll show my husband we can do it, you know pioneer women. We had this real progressive spirit and I had to write her a letter and tell her I couldn't do it anymore. In a way my decision to get married is kind of tied into [the rape]. I mean, I feel like, how many years can I go on by myself? You know a dog can protect me somewhat but...I always envisioned myself going off and doing field work in different places, I did in fact do field work in a fairly exotic place [before] and I didn't worry. [Now] that's not nearly so possible. ...I don't feel that strongly

about the profession anymore. Even though I really thought I had found my niche, I no longer feel like my future is in it. It's a macho profession and I'm sick of it...The assault really did impact on my career.

"Tess", raped during a hiking trip. (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 232)

These life choices in turn shape how we think about ourselves, and of course the experience of being scared all the time also changes our schemas about ourselves.

The rape made me realize I am not so strong...[afterwards] I questioned myself a lot.

"Betty", raped during her High School senior class trip by a man she liked and agreed to take a walk with. (Lebowitz, 1990 p. 135)

I lost a lot of my self confidence

"Darlene", raped on her way to class in college. (Lebowitz, 1990 p. 132)

The intentional, interpersonal nature of rape also alters our schemas about other people, shattering our sense of trust. Everyone becomes a threat, and this too, reinforces the fear that endures.

Greg Halle, raped by a fellow soldier 30 years prior, reflects:

I feared my own comrades more than I feared the enemy. I kept a knife strapped to my bunk at all times. It was not going to happen again. I still have a knife close to my bed. My own bedroom is not safe. Nowhere is safe. And this has not changed over the years. I am always afraid.

(Halle, 2004)

Fear, like all the themes does not stay within the confines of a discrete emotion. Rather, if unresolved, it will have broad effects on one's enduring emotional states as well as one's perceptions of self, world and other people.

HELPLESSNESS

Like fear, helplessness is a core traumatic feeling. By violating our boundaries and eliminating our agency the rapist acts to obliterate our self-hood. Feeling completely helpless is such an erasure of the self that of all the feelings associated with rape, it seems one of the hardest to describe. Victims characteristically say very little about it directly, yet it defines the event: If we had not been rendered helpless we could not be raped.

I guess the biggest part of it was I felt really helpless.

"Betty", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 98)

Helplessness is a theme present in the initial moments of the assault that endures and continues to be salient as victims attempt to come to terms with the rape. The reality of having been overpowered can become a part of how one thinks about one's self post-rape.

Regardless of how I deal with this, you know, from now on, regardless of whether I even think about it again before I die, fact is, before I die, I will have been raped and it was

not by my choice and I don't like that. That somebody else made it their choice, and not me...In other words like being diabetic was nobody else's decision, that sort of thing, but this didn't have to happen, but there was nothing I could do to keep it from happening...It changed my life and nobody asked me first.

"Cindy", (Lebowitz, 1990, p.99)

In becoming part of how one thinks of oneself, helplessness contributes to self-blame and a diminished sense of self. Particularly in the military, where bravery, fearlessness and strength are so highly valued the experience of being victimized not only stigmatizes us in other people's eyes, but it also reduces us in our own.

I felt like I was weak. I let them break me.

Orlinda Marquez, raped by a soldier under her command while serving in the Army. (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.42)

Sometimes people begin to see themselves as not only having been helpless in the moment of the assault, but as having become powerless in general. A child victim describes being left alone with the man who raped her. As she watches herself act helplessly, she also judges and denigrates herself for it.

He said come over and sit by me and so I sat. We were on the stairs and so I sat beside him but I couldn't look at him...I think I was dumb. I guess I just had to do what he said.

"Karen", repeatedly raped by her cousin from age 8-9. (Roth and Lebowitz, 1988, p. 92)

Faren Jones, sexually harassed and twice raped while serving in the Army Reserves and the Navy reports:

They looked at me and laughed. I still get angry about that. I was powerless, and have been powerless ever since. But I'm working on it.

(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 43)

Thus, the helplessness that victims report is a function of being overpowered, but it also has broader psychological implications. It can lead to generalized feelings of powerlessness and ultimately to a diminished sense of self. It may also come to reflect the loss of positive ways of making sense of the world.

LOSS OF MEANING AND SUSTAINING BELIEFS

Being traumatized shatters positive operating schemas and activates negative, often dormant schemas. Profound feelings of confusion and disorientation ensue, reflecting the sudden loss of familiar ways of understanding and predicting day to day experience.

I couldn't believe it had happened and yet, it had. And I just kept trying to figure out some reason why. Was it random? Was it punishment? Was it this? Was it that? And it was just overwhelming.

"Esther" (Lebowitz, 1990, p.122)

"Rachel", raped by the son of her boss, described the pervasive fog of confusion as follows,

It was so confusing. ...For a while, all of it was confusing, everything was confusing everywhere. I couldn't think about anything. Now it's confusing just thinking about how confusing it was.

"Rachel", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 127)

A college student, raped by a trusted study companion described the inability of her pre-rape schemas to account for what had happened in this way,

I was just so unprepared for it...you can be in your own space and have someone come in and for the rest of the year there's this spot on the floor...I had never thought about it. I had never had a rape plan for what to do when someone [you trust] comes in and [just knocks you down]...no one had ever talked to me about things like rape, or that friends can rape you -- that had never been discussed.

"Lisa", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 338, 340)

Bereft of their usual ways of predicting and making sense of experience, rape victims often feel more permeable to the understandings and meanings that other people provide them. "Rachel" describes her reliance on a neighbor to help her grasp the fact that she had been raped:

"And what I did was contact a neighbor...I knew something was wrong but it took me until 7:00 the next day to know what was wrong. To admit what was wrong. Well of course when I did we called the rape crisis center. Not "of course." If (my neighbor) hadn't been there telling me what to do I would still be home staring at the walls wondering what was wrong."

"Rachel", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 140)

As victims attempt to reconstruct a meaning system that can accommodate the fact of their rape and its emotional and psychological repercussions, they are confronted with questions about the legitimacy of their experience, and whether it can be socially validated.

LEGITIMACY AND VALIDATION

Rape is a social interpretation of an event and victims depend on this social context to arrive at a sense of legitimate injury. When women are socially defined as subordinate to men, rape is typically understood as a crime against the property of the man. (This was once historically the case in this country and remains true elsewhere today.) In these situations the act of rape is legally understood as a crime against whoever owns the woman, rather than as an assault upon a person. For example, in situations such as this, it is impossible for a man to rape his own wife since that is akin to stealing your own silverware. While we have come a long way from this conceptualization of women and rape, it is worth remembering that how we define and understand rape reflects how we think about women and men and their relationship.

The theme of legitimacy and validation describes the search to define and understand the event in a way that justifies and makes sense out of one's response. Many people have the idea that if you are raped by someone you know, it is somehow not rape, not a real crime and therefore not truly a

traumatic event. Victims often need help knowing that they have been assaulted, that the assault is a trauma, and that they will need time and attention to recover from its effects.

“Rachel”, quoted above, was fortunate that her neighbor recognized that she had been raped and knew to call the rape crisis center. Susan Estrich writes that she feels “lucky” that if she was to be raped, it was by a stranger since this detail made it easier for her to garner the social support she needed

“In many respects I am a very lucky rape victim, if there can be such a thing. ...I am lucky because everyone agrees that I was ‘really’ raped. When I tell my story, no one doubts my status as a victim. No one suggests that I was ‘asking for it’. No one wonders, at least out loud, if it was really my fault. No one seems to identify with the rapist. ...As one person put it: ‘You really didn’t do anything wrong.’”

(Estrich, 1987, p.3)

Thus, women raped by strangers tend to have less trouble identifying the rape as an assault and a trauma. But the vast majority of victims are raped by people they know and may even trust, and for these victims, there is often a struggle to figure out how to label the event. A victim may know that she did not consent to a sexual encounter, but still have difficulty grasping that she has been raped. “Lisa”, a college student raped by her study partner, comes to define the assault as rape only after much consideration.

I guess the biggest issue for me to decide is whether or not it was really rape because this guy was a very good friend of mine...he was a study partner ... On Valentines Day he just came into my room and grabbed me and threw me down on the floor and pulled my clothes up, And he held me down and did it to me. ... I was so unprepared for it and he was so much bigger...I did a lot of thinking and finally decided that if he didn't ask me and he had to hold me down then it was probably rape.

“Lisa”, (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 116)

Even people violently raped by strangers may suffer from a sense of illegitimacy as their symptoms endure beyond some arbitrary time limit designated by others. Nancy Raine, held captive for hours and repeatedly raped by a home invader, describes a phone conversation in which a good friend tells her it is time to “get over it.”

“You’re overreacting.” ...

“Overreacting?” I repeated the word several times, as if it were a word in a foreign language.

“It’s been over two months, she said. ‘It’s time you got a job and stopped dwelling on what happened. It’s over and done with.’”

(Raine, 1998, p.89)

In this instance the search for legitimacy and validation revolves around crediting the event as a serious trauma that requires time and a process to heal. An accurate understanding and labeling of what has happened validates the time and resources necessary for healing.

Self-BLAME and GUILT

Self blame is frequently inversely related to legitimacy. When a positive sense of legitimacy is elusive, self blame tends to be considerable. The theme of guilt and self-blame is ubiquitous among victims and plays a central role in shaping the psychological consequences of the rape and in influencing decisions about choices such as seeking help and choosing to prosecute. Self-blame is ubiquitous because it is fostered by forces both within and outside of the victim. It reflects the psychological needs of both the victim and the bystander to defend against the helplessness represented by the assault, and it reflects social attitudes and structures and the wish of other people to maintain these social structures without undue disruption.

When men and women attempt to understand why the rape happened, they attribute the rape to nearly every self-related cause imaginable except, typically, the independent decision of someone else to do them harm. A man abused as a young child reports,

I used to blame myself for it. I always thought I was a real smart 2 year old. So why didn't I get out of it, I blame myself. I don't blame him. I could have got out of it; I was plenty smart enough.

(Lisak, 1994, p. 543)

In one study a list was made of the various reasons women thought they had been raped (Lebowitz, 1990). The partial list, tragicomic for its contradictory covering of all bases included: being promiscuous, being sexually conservative, being independent, being dependent, being drunk, refusing to go to a party, choosing a man's profession, refusing to have sex, not fighting harder, believing one's power or competence made one a target, being too trusting, accepting help, pushing one's hair out of one's face, being feminine, being too butch and finally, several women raped by strangers who could not come up with what they might have done concluded it must have been something, they just hadn't identified it yet.

For both victims and observers, blaming the victim is a way to avoid facing the reality that fate can be capriciousness and that anyone can be rendered helpless.

After Lynne decides she is not responsible for her boyfriend's decision to rape her she reflects:

Once I decided I wasn't responsible for getting raped, that in itself was pretty terrifying because it meant it was not in my control and that the most terrible and fearful thing that ever happened to me was something that I had no control over whatsoever.

"Lynne", (Lebowitz, 1990 p. 113)

Of course not only victims are motivated to defend against the threat of being out of control of their lives. Everyone in a position to hear about a rape shares the desire to believe it could not happen to them or someone they love. This basic human impulse to protect oneself from feeling unsafe or out of control translates into a proclivity to blame the victim.

In addition to the psychological need to defend against the threat of helplessness, there is also pressure to defend the extant social order. This impulse is particularly acute when, as it typical, victim and perpetrator belong to the same social grouping. The web of interdependency and connection that defines a social group means that an accusation of rape affects everyone. Herman (1992) has noted that all the perpetrator requires from us is our silence, while the

victim demands that we make disruptive changes in the social order. As the following mother anxiously told her 17-year-old daughter during a family counseling session,

“I hope you are not going to tell me something that will make me leave my husband.”
(Wigren, unpublished)

The need to preserve the seeming integrity of the social unit can preempt the search for truth. Often, the sanctions for disclosure, are, unofficially, more severe than the sanctions against assault. Children who report that they have been raped at home are often not believed; when they are not believed they often recant, and once they recant they have confirmed themselves as liars, forever destroying their credibility (Summit, 1983). The consequences of this predictable sequence are devastating for victims. Putnam (1996) in a prospective study of the impact of child sexual abuse, found, paradoxically, that victims who advocated for themselves by reporting victimization generally fared worse over time than those whose victimization was discovered and disclosed by others.

The military is of course a relatively closed social grouping -- it is often likened to an enormous family -- and as a result, blame, responsibility and disclosure are especially fraught for military victims and bystanders. The presence of rape in the unit signifies a profound violation of the bonds of mutual care and trustworthiness that are essential to the functioning of the unit itself. The reality of rape also highlights complicated and unresolved issues about gender roles, the uses of power, the meaning of helplessness and the limits of trust. In the need to avoid a disruptive grappling with these profound social concerns, and in the hopes of making the issue go away, victims are silenced, punished and blamed.

There is often an implicit understanding that rape is not to be acknowledged.

Susan Armenta never told anyone she had been raped twice while serving in the Army.

“You just didn’t hear about being raped in the military.”
Susan Armenta, (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.45)

At the emergency room a military police officer ... demanded, "what were you wearing?" I said, "a red t-shirt and jeans," and he said, well, what did you expect" ...I was treated like I had some something wrong and asked for it.

"Lori", raped by a fellow sailor. (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 54)

The negative consequences of reporting serve as a warning to other victims to be quiet about their assault.

... another woman in her unit reported that a drill sergeant approached her sexually, Thompson recalled. “She was chastised, severely harassed and disciplined. Eventually kicked out. I learned, don’t report, because if you do it will come back to haunt you.”
Iolanda Thompson, sexually assaulted while on detail in the Army. (Herdy, 2003)

Victims are told they will not be believed.

One of them attacked her, “He threw me down on the ground, ripped open my shirt, tried to stick his tongue in my mouth, attempted to rape me,” she recalled, wiping tears. “the other men didn’t try to help. They were close by.”...Heading back, her attacker was silent, but the other men said, “No one would believe me since there were three of them.”

Iolanda Thompson, (Herdy, 2003)

And often, they are not believed.

“My chief, everybody, said, ‘You weren’t raped.’”

Navy sailor Yuriria Acunapineda, whose accused rapist was cleared despite failing a polygraph test.

(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.47)

“He (the captain of her unit) just said that I should shut up and bear it because that was the only place I could work and anyway he didn’t believe it was happening because my sergeant was married.”

Diane Brent, repeatedly coerced to have sex with her Air Force supervisor.

(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.55-6)

When the victim is not believed, it is the rapist who is perceived as the injured party and victims are punished for their disclosures.

When she finally reported the assault (2 years later)...the battalion commander said she was making up the complaint to “ruin” the man’s career, she said. She was immediately given a reprimand for being overweight, then accused of cheating during a physical fitness test.

Orlinda Marquez, sexually assaulted by a soldier under her command. (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.42)

Several weeks after he reported he had been raped by a fellow sailor, Brian Partridge says that his story had been:

“completely turned around” by investigators, and he was given a choice: admit to participating in consensual sodomy and to beating up the other man, or face court-martial on both counts. If convicted, he would probably have received a prison sentence and dishonorably discharged...In the end, humiliated and terrified of what might await him in the brig, Partridge agreed to an other-than-honorable discharge, abandoning his military career.

(Jacobs, 2004)

People long to make sense out of their experiences and to ground them in a causal and meaningful world. A terrible event such as a rape demands to be attributed and explained. When society does not acknowledge the rape, nor clearly attribute the blame for a rape appropriately, victims are more likely to assume the blame.

In a context where the truth is inverted, the victim becomes the perpetrator and the disgust generated by the rape is transferred to the victim. Then society too often unwittingly re-perpetrates the rape. "Lori" describes her doctor's cruel horror when she sought medical care after being raped:

She had contracted herpes, which she told the doctor was from her rape. "the doctor wrinkled his nose," she recalled. "I was so infected and swollen the speculum stuck and he used the heel of his hand to force it in. He brought in students, and he made them watch. He told one of them to shut me up so they shoved something in my mouth and held me down on the table."

"Lori", raped by a fellow sailor. (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 54)

Transferring blame to the victim reverberates throughout the long arc of responding to the trauma. Often victims do not get help because they expect to be blamed and shamed. Self-blame worsens response to trauma and contributes to emotional and behavioral difficulties which in turn may result in more social condemnation, often from medical and mental health personnel.

Deborah Johnson was impregnated during a gang rape while in the Army. The pregnancy was aborted. Promiscuous sexual acting out following the rape resulted in another pregnancy, and a second abortion.

The nurse reviewed her medical records and became angry because Johnson was having another abortion, she said. The procedure involved injecting her with saline solution, which caused her to have a miscarriage. "So to teach me a lesson, (the nurse) left the baby there all night, curled against my stomach," Johnson said, crying at the memory. "I didn't think it was fair to have kids after that. I feel like a murderer." She retreated into an isolated life. "I buried it deep, and I forgot."

Deborah Johnson, (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.52)

Here the victim, denied appropriate succor and redress after the rape, manifests her distress in ways that lead to even greater levels of condemnation, self-blame and isolation.

BETRAYAL AND LOSS OF TRUST

As we have seen, the social meaning of rape has profound implications for our subsequent relationship to ourselves. It also undermines our faith and trust in the social world and this is manifest by feelings of betrayal and a loss of trust.

Feelings of betrayal and the loss of trust emerge from the interpersonal violation of the rape itself and its effect on our schemas about people, it reflects the ways in which society responds to victims and to the reality of rape more generally, and it is also a function of the victim's new sensitivity to the kinds of attitudes that rape rests on and which are widely shared.

"Rachel" for example, describes how she had no framework -- no existing schemas -- to account for the extremity and foreignness of the feelings she saw during the rape (namely the rapist's hatred). She then goes on to detail the ways in which the experience changed her schemas about whether it is safe or worthwhile to connect to other people. These changes in her basic capacity to trust, result in important losses for her.

You can see real hate on somebody's face. I had never seen it before. I can hate mint ice cream of something, but this is a real hate, this is something from another world. There's slime in people's minds. And it's frightening. Really frightening. Just like you can look at the person you like and just feel a real deep love, somebody can look at you with that much hate... Well, how could anybody hate me that much. And why was it happening to me? I don't even think about hurting people. Yes here was this awful thing. It was very confusing. ..

[It wiped out] trust -- in people. [Before the rape] I could take in stray people, talk to someone and really enjoy it, you know, even if it's just for a minute or 10 minutes, with somebody at a bus stop, or some old man with a funny hat and I always thought it was fun to do, to talk to strangers. I mean, mom said, "Don't get into any cars with any of them but it's Ok to talk", well, and like people. After [the rape] I found I didn't want to know any more people, that I already knew too many people, and I couldn't trust people that I thought were my friends. I couldn't trust myself because I was always so confused and forgetful and disorganized. Its hard to say what [the rape] wiped out because there's not anything that it didn't affect...The two people who blasted me out of the water with "bad things happen to bad people" were women. So [the trust thing] is with both men and women. ... I don't know why but I just don't have the energy to put into that. I used to like to go out, and [now]...I don't have time...what if I'm flirting with somebody who's not going to flirt [but instead] follow me home and do something.

"Rachel", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 127)

As we have seen, society as a whole struggles with the concept of rape. Part of the confusion about legitimacy and responsibility and blame emerges from societal attitudes that confuse rape with normal male sexuality, and therefore minimize its consequences for victims. “Elana” was raped as a teenager. Later, while she was working on a psychiatric unit, a male psychiatrist suggested that a patient enliven himself by raping an attractive nurse. Elana felt betrayed when the hospital administration made light of the incident.

I was working on this (sigh) in-patient service and a psychiatrist who...was working with a really severely regressed schizophrenic patient who had hysterical conversion disorder, he was paralyzed on one side of his body although periodically he would hit nurses with his paralyzed arm, so obviously the guy had a lot of hostility towards women, ...so the patient was lying in bed and the physician, male physician was in there and the nurse, and the physician said, “you know, John, there are a lot of good looking nurses around here, In fact, that nurse right over there she’s real good looking. You know what John, I’d like to see you up and around and chasing some of these nurses. In fact, I would consider it a therapeutic success if you got up, chased that nurse and raped her”. This is a true story. And the nurse said, “Well I wouldn’t like that.” And you know, she was just totally blown away, did not know what to say to the psychiatrist. ...When I heard about it, I was so enraged...it just sort of highlighted all the issues about men in power in relation to women, and the doctor-nurse thing and ...it’s really frightening thing and nobody, nobody in the hospital was willing to do anything so I drafted a letter just saying to the Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry that this is what happened...The man who was the director of the in-patient service (who) had met with the nurse, the nurse who was outraged about

it, and basically he laughed and said, "Come on, it was just a bad joke, it was a sexist joke, maybe a sexist joke, maybe I'm sexist too, but it's not that big of a deal." So then I was ready to kill him because he was so unresponsive. So ...I went to his office, this is my boss, and I said, "Listen, I heard about how you responded to the whole issue and how you feel about the whole thing, and I want you to know I've been raped and it's nothing to laugh about.

"Elana", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 150)

When society betrays the victim in order to maintain the social order victims feel alienated from their community. Victims learn, sometimes accurately, that they cannot trust their own and this has long term implications for fear, loss, anger and alienation:

I knew before I got to 'Nam I knew that I could not trust the VC [Viet Cong]. I soon learned that you could not trust any Vietnamese, man, woman or child. ... Now I could not even trust my fellow soldier. I did not know who would hurt me. I trusted no one. I was totally alone. I made sure to cover my own back; I could not trust anyone else to keep me alive. I did not allow a loaded gun behind me.

Greg Halle, raped in his bunk, by a fellow soldier. (Halle, 2004)

SHAME

Feeling betrayed and devalued by the rapist and by one's community, being blamed and blaming oneself, feeling helpless, isolated and alienated, all conspire to leave victims feeling profoundly shamed. Shame is a feeling that one's core self has been exposed and devalued. It both contaminates one's sense of self and inhibits one's ability to reach out. People hesitate to talk about what they are most ashamed of, and this interferes with getting help and leaves the victim alone with his or her experience.

I didn't report anything. . . . They told me if I said anything I was dead. After I got up off the floor, I stood in the shower for three hours trying to wash [away] the way I felt. I felt dirty and shameful.

Paul Branesky, raped by four sailors while in submarine training school (Snel, 2003, p.5)

People are ashamed about having been a rape victim, about having been touched by evil, and about having been helpless and weak. They are ashamed about the exposure of their body, they are ashamed about anything that they think they did or think other people will think they did that contributed to bring raped, and they are often ashamed about the response of their body to the assault. Sometimes, people don't understand how their body could not, miraculously, block the intrusion. Sometimes people's bodies respond to an assault with sexual arousal and this is a source of great shame and confusion.

One woman, reflecting on a rape that happened many years before says,

I really hadn't told anybody...there's a feeling you know, I should be ashamed of what happened to me. I know that's real typical and yet it's still astonishing to me that I still carry that around. I mean, my apartment's been robbed twice, and I am sure if I had been mugged, or you know, hit on the street and it hadn't been a sexual assault, I would

relate that to people as part of "oh, yeah, I had a horrible experience," but having been raped is not the kind of experience I feel comfortable sharing with most of the world and I think that's because there's such a stigma attached to the whole issue.

"Elana", (Lebowitz, 1990, p.253)

Victims are also ashamed as a reflection of the rapist's treatment of them. The overwhelming and intentionally interpersonal harm of the attack ruptures the borders of the self and forcibly imposes the rapist's vision upon the victim's body. In the aftermath of an assault it can be hard not to view oneself through the rapist's eyes.

“Rachel” was raped by the son of her boss after a dinner at a friend's house. He offered to follow her home, to insure her safety, because she was having car trouble. Her quote is striking in the ways it highlights the meaning of the hatred embodied in a rape. She had no prior trauma history and the rapist used only the level of force he needed to subdue her; other than the rape itself she was not threatened and she was physically unhurt.

I felt really humiliated...to be told so violently that yours is not a life worth being on earth, no matter how long you've lived not feeling that before, anybody with a strong argument, whether you agree with them or not, can sort of sway your mind a little, to their side? And maybe that's why I felt so humiliated. Like if somebody just spent all that energy to convince me that I should not be, that I had no right to myself, well that's pretty powerful. ... I wasn't embarrassed about calling and saying that it happened to me, I wasn't embarrassed about going to the emergency room and having the exam or even about saying, listen, get me a psychiatrist because I think I'm going to have a big problem. That wasn't embarrassing but something was, and I think what it was is just that it had been communicated to me so much that I was worthless, that even though I had lived 25 years before never believing that, the rape wiped out a lot of positive stuff that I felt about myself. It didn't take very long to do it either, but it sure took a lot of violence... Just the idea that somebody wished me dead and was just treating me like worthless garbage. Just the way he looked at me and the things he said. And there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"Rachel", (Lebowitz, 1990, p 103)

ISOLATION AND ALIENATION

The shame, betrayal, loss of trust and blame associated with rape leaves victims isolated and at risk for alienation. In addition, any extreme experience tends to shift one's sense of belonging, particularly in relation to people who have not experienced a similar experience. The sheer intensity of rape makes everyday life feel distant..

I felt different than the other people. I felt somehow that they couldn't have known what I went through. That I had been through ...a real different experience. And I really felt in that way a little bit separate from them. I was dealing with thoughts and feelings that they weren't. ...It was like I was in another place.

"Debbie", (Roth and Lebowitz, 1988, p.97)

The negatively altered schemas victims have about themselves, other people and the world also make them feel isolated and alienated. The following quote follows a long description about of

how the rape changed Elana's schemas about the world, her beliefs about the presence of evil and her assumptions about other people. She sums up this description by saying

It makes me feel alienated you know. Like other people probably don't hold these attitudes, and I do. And I don't feel like holding them, but I know I hold those attitudes and those feelings and that makes me feel so distant from other people. ... For a long time I felt like I wouldn't get involved with anybody. Like nobody would have me is how I felt. I felt that way despite expecting to feel that way, and trying to think about not feeling that way.

*"Elana", raped at 16, on a date with a man she had met several times before.
(Lebowitz, 1990 p. 119)*

There is also the sense of having been so close to something evil and ugly that it has tainted the self, and thus the self must be hidden or it will be rejected.

I felt this was something that I had to hide because it would drive people away...like I was malignant, myself you know. That somehow, having been a victim, I was just as horrible, I had been the victim of the violence and so there was something horrible about me now, that people couldn't stand to be with , to see, to touch, to love and if I didn't hide it, I would lose them. And that was my experience with a couple of people.

"Elana", (Lebowitz, 1990, p.119)

When victims who are struggling with a sense of isolation and alienation do reach out, they may be greeted with disgust and rejection. The impact of this can be devastating. Greg Halle describes telling a friend he had been raped.

I had been attending a local group for men with sexual trauma. Although mine was very different than the rest, it was good to be in that group. However, the questions were very hard, very direct. On one night, it was especially tough. I left the meeting very upset. I stopped and bought three large cans of beer and drank them while driving home. My wife was gone that evening. I had made a very good friendship while in California. He was my roommate, but he did not know my story. We had been talking regularly since I left California, supporting each other. When one would slip, the other would pick him up. So I called him. He was my buddy. And I told him about the rape. About a week later I received a letter from him. In that letter he basically said not to call him, write him, or come out and see him. The rejection was total and complete. In 'Nam, when you made a mistake someone died. I felt I had made a huge mistake and I had lost another buddy. Although he was not dead, I had killed a friendship. I was devastated. My world totally changed forever.

(Halle, 2004)

The lack of social support interferes with efforts to process the trauma, and victims often revert to avoidant strategies for coping with their distress.

"I went to my dorm, locked myself in my room, and my whole life changed...I've always kept myself under the radar—trying not to make waves."

Sofia Rodriguez, raped by an instructor while serving in the Air Force. (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 46)

DIMINISHED SENSE OF SELF

Ultimately, the most profound legacy of rape is a changed sense of self. At some level nearly all the themes lead here eventually. The sense of being chronically fearful and out of control of one's emotions, feeling targeted --first by the rapist and then by blaming social attitudes -- the change in one's basic meaning systems, one's increased vulnerability to subsequent stresses, and the losses that attend each and every theme we have covered, all have the potential to lead to a diminished sense of self.

As we initially noted while talking about the impact of fear, victims often describe a loss of freedom and confidence after they have been raped. Victims who have been outgoing and ambitious may find themselves withdrawing. The loss of a sense of safety, and the chronic fear that ensues, changes the life choices we make and this in turn changes how we think about who we are and how we feel about ourselves.

Orlinda Marquez had wanted to be a military officer since she was a child, even running to school with a rucksack on her back to get a head start on her physical training. She was raped in the Army by a soldier under her command. Afterward, Marquez said,

“I quit. I found every excuse I could from a stubbed toe to a cough that wouldn’t go away” to not participate in any events....my life has been all about dropping out ever since...in 12 years’ time I’ve gone through 31 jobs. No relationships to speak of, I push them away....Why can’t I fit in? Why am I always on the outside looking in?...I felt like I was weak. I let them break me.”

Orlinda Marquez, (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.42)

Diane Brent was repeatedly raped by her Air Force supervisor. She describes a pattern, not uncommon among victims, in which drinking to avoid feelings is associated with an increasing inability to promote or protect the self, leading to reduced life expectations, and increasing failure.

“I was drinking pretty heavily” to deal with the pain. Her self-esteem plummeted. “It formed a pattern after that because I didn’t expect to be treated any differently. That’s what I felt I deserved.” She went on to have a string of abusive relationships, continued to drink and got into trouble on the job, finally leaving the Air force. ...Estranged from her family, she could not hold down a job. “If I tried to work, I would get anxious, panic and then shut down.”

Diane Brent, (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.55-6)

“Esther,” raped at 18 while hitchhiking, was left by her boyfriend following the rape because he could not tolerate being with someone who "had been so violated". In this instance, his rejection dovetails perfectly with her post-rape feelings about herself. She described her response to the combination of the rape and the rape-related rejection in this way:

When it really hit me what had happened, then I felt very very dirty. I remember taking a bath but it was like you were internally dirty. You couldn't get clean no matter how you tried. ...I felt worthless. I felt like something like this can't happen to somebody worth anything. And [his rejection of me] just made it feel more. I mean, it was like it all fit into this new picture that suddenly developed. Up until that point it was the best I'd ever felt in my life. And suddenly it was all gone and this new picture of myself had developed of just a worthless piece of shit. ...And I had no way to deal with it except to feel bad. And I just felt bad. Like bad, me bad. ... after that I didn't care what happened to my body. ...I worked in these massage parlors, basically a prostitute. Or I would go to bars and I really didn't care about my body at all. Like what did it matter anymore so I made money on it...At that point you know, it's like you've been violated so so so bad that it didn't matter. You could be swimming around with a hundred guys, what did it matter now?

"Esther", (Lebowitz 1990, p. 131, 156)

“Elana” talks about coming to feel like her sexuality had been ruined by the rape and she describes how this contaminates her sense of self-worth.

...the feeling that somehow I had been violated and, or it was dirty, or there's something wrong with my sexuality and [with] me. ...He ruined [my sexuality]. He made it bad, he made it dirty. And I carried that around with me. That [my sexuality] was bad so I was bad.

"Elana", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 133)

Changes in aspects of gender role are often reported by victims. Women describe giving up aspects of feminine identity that they have come to experience as threatening, while men often feel that they have been feminized by the rape, and may struggle with or act out concerns about homosexual identity.

“Georgia” was raped on the street while walking to a party at age 22.

“Well, I certainly have no urge to go out and make myself any more alluring. I mean, that is, if I might have otherwise turned into the kind of person who would wear high heels and short skirts, that has been nipped in the bud...

“Georgia”, (Lebowitz, 1990, p.270)

Arabella Ribera, was sexually assaulted and harassed while serving in the Air Force. Later, she said,

“I was disgusted with myself. The guys I slept with, I didn’t even like... I became one of the boys. Had a foul mouth like the men. Drank like them. I didn’t now how to be a lady anymore. I didn’t show emotion. I didn’t cry.”

(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 40-41)

This loss of self esteem gradually pervades other aspects of identity. Beverly Klondel was lured home at age 18 by a military colleague and raped in his bedroom. He joked about the sheets bloodied with „her virgin blood“, and how he would have to hide them from his wife. She describes how her life changed after the rape.

My life was ruined. I had been brought up Catholic. Virginity was for your husband...I felt like I was ruined, damaged goods. As a result, I’m not a mother and I’m not a wife. ...”I don’t know who Bev Kondel is, and I live in her body. And I don’t know how to find out who I am. I’ve had guns put to my head over the years—I’m not very good at picking men. After being raped, you don’t think you deserve much in life. So it’s real hard to get it when you don’t think you deserve it. “I think I should have been a different person”
(at age 47).

(Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p. 44)

In the following quote a college woman raped in high school describes the cumulative effect of feeling overwhelmed and helpless, how this changes her sense of herself and how those changes are reflected and exacerbated by the rapist's attitude towards her and her friend's lack of support.

[The rape] made me realize that I'm not so, you know, I'm not so strong, I guess, emotionally not so strong and not, you know, I'm not always so in control of myself is what I am trying to say. I mean, that's a situation where you don't have any control at all. ...Especially when you've pretty much been in control of everything all of your life...it's a big slap in the face...and so I questioned a lot. I [questioned] myself a lot. You know, "are you really the person that you think you are, or like my low self-esteem I suppose...I just saw myself as being somehow dirty and degraded...no worth...If the rapist had no respect for me, has little enough respect for me to treat me like a piece of shit, then who was I to say that I'm not...And also, probably part of it has to do with the way that my friends handled itto them its no big deal. When you have friends you'd think they'd care. And I just didn't get that feeling. It was like another slap in the face.

"Betty", (Lebowitz, 1990 p.135-136)

ANGER AND RAGE

Later, sometimes much later, the cumulative emotional response to the rape and its consequences locates in anger. This anger may represent an aspect of healing, a reclaiming of lost agency and self-regard.

“Well once I got mad It helped a lot to get rid of the fear, so if I could’ve done that instead of being afraid in the first place, I could’ve skipped over being scared and went right into being mad, maybe I would have been able to scream.”

“Rachel”, (Lebowitz, 1990, p.302)

But as “Rachel” indicates, it is often difficult for victims to access their anger. The rapist’s anger was terrifying, and their own anger is equally frightening. Often feelings of rage and wishes for revenge conflict with deeply held values. “Elaine,” raped by a home intruder, responds to a question about what she might want from her rapist. We not only hear the intensity of her anger, but also, her deep ambivalence about its presence in her life. :

“...I don’t know, like to make him take responsibility for me feeling this way (sigh). And, um, that’s like my more benevolent fantasy. And, um, my other fantasy is maybe, you know, electrocution (voice breaking, crying throughout)...And, um, I’m not, I don’t believe in capital punishment, you know, its like, see the rape stirred up all sort of things that I had a hard time dealing with. I suddenly felt murderous, I felt like, if I could, I would have killed him you know, and I would and I would now... you know, like the pain was too much, it was just too much, it was too horrible, it was the worst, it’s just a horrible think to do. And nobody like that should be allowed to live...”

“Elaine” (Lebowitz, 1990, p.286)

Rage fuels fantasies of revenge, a wish that the rapist would share in the experience of victimization. Greg Halle says,

I do think about meeting (the rapist) again. I dream about grabbing him by the hair, slitting his throat, and looking his eyes while he slowly dies. I want him to know who took his life, since he took mine. I know that the teachings of Jesus tell me to forgive this man. But so far I cannot. I do not hate Vietnamese, but I do hate him. The lifetime effect of his act is worse than death. I would want him to know the hell I have lived and continue to live..

(Halle, 2004)

“Wendy” details her fantasies of torturing her rapist. The scene she sets up provides an eerie mirror image of the victim’s experience; here it is the rapist who must choose between survival and submission to a hideous sexual mutilation:

“if any kind of torture was going to be done, I wanted to do it. ..If I had known then what I know now, I wouldn’t have done it legal, I would have told my husband and (his friend) to drown him, or beat the crap out of him. Or do what they do to rapists in Vietnam. Do you know what that is?

... Well they nail their testicles to a tree stump and they hand him a knife and they set the tree stump on fire and they give him his choice. He can burn to death or he can cut them off. I think that’s great (short laugh)”

“Wendy”, (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 105)

Such feelings are distressing and frightening to victims, and also to the victim’s friends, family and care providers. Working through such anger is vitally important. When it remains unattended it can persist as an unremitting rage that in itself affects the victim’s life course. Maureen, for example, was raped at 21 by two officers while she was serving in the Air Force. At 72 she still sleeps with a weapon in her bed. She looks back at the rage she has felt throughout her life:

"I'm trying to control my rage. I don't get angry like I used to. Sometimes I feel like ripping the world apart. It's a horrible thing, rage...I don't like people. I don't trust people. I can't work with the public. That's why I stopped driving...I can tell you no one will ever touch me without my consent again. Never."

Maureen, (Herdy and Moffeit, 2004, p.45)

Other victims suppress their rage at the expense of appropriate self-assertion. Victims of severe childhood abuse sometimes enter adulthood with their anger so completely suppressed that they are unable to access it even for basic self-protection.

After victims are able to confront their anger and begin to take appropriate steps to assert and protect themselves, their lives begin to improve. Then, they often encounter a daunting reservoir of grief and sadness about what the rape has cost them, about who they have become and who they might have been had they not been raped and they begin to grieve their lost potentials.

GRIEF AND LOSS

Ultimately, what many victims report the rapist took from them is themselves. This is reflected in an inner sense of a separation from the self who was. Thus, as Nancy Raine begins her book on rape recovery, she says,

*...on October 11, 1985, (I) died. Another person was born that day.
(Raine, 1998, p.2)*

Being raped alters one's life course. The following quote, from "Cheryl", 20 years after being raped in college by a date, sums up much of what we have been talking about. In this longer quote we can hear the interweaving of several themes. In her story, not having the rape recognized or legitimized as a trauma inhibited getting appropriate and sensitive care. This in turn, left her bereft of a useful framework with which to make sense out of what had happened to her. She therefore grabs readily available culturally located schemas (good girls versus bad girls) which allow her to continue to function normally in some spheres (academically and professionally) yet which are very detrimental to her sense of self, her self-regard and her sexual agency. This diminishment in her self-regard drives a host of self-destructive behaviors. In the end, these behaviors and her compounded, unresolved feelings create a painful legacy so central to her sense of herself, that even recovery feels like a loss of identity.

*I told my college roommates but they didn't seem to understand the trauma of it...
(They) told me to go to the health services and tell them [I] had been exposed to VD. I had never had a pelvic so I did this. The nurses and the physicians hence treated me like the sleazy person of the campus so that was rather traumatizing.*

I knew something awful had happened and that my world had been shaken and that they were treating me like I was a whore. I was too upset to be angry. I remember feeling I am really alone in this. I am cut off from all those previous myths. I am no longer a nice middle class girl. I am a sleazy whore because these people who are the medical professionals are telling me that. It was like proof that something irrevocable had happened and you can't get back. You've really lost something.

The rape made me very distrustful and cynical of the rules of life, male female relationships and trusting other people. All the myths that I'd had about virginity and control in a relationship -- that idea of being able to be loved and cherished-- were shattered. [The rape] really made me question everything about my world.

[Afterwards] I felt like less of a person. I felt I had no choice but to be sexually active because this had happened to me. It was almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy in that since the medical profession told me I was a sleazy whore I acted like it. I felt like such a victim in all my sexual experiences after that. Like I had no control and no choice because this had happened to me. I wasn't a virgin anymore, so I wasn't valued for that, or valued in general, and if the men I had semi-relationships with wanted sex what right did I have to deny them because I was a sleazy whore.

This pattern of getting into relationships but not really trusting persisted [for 6 years]. [I felt] I'm unlovable because these terrible things have happened to me, so who's ever going to love me, and how can you trust anyone to take care of you when someone that you knew -- who was theoretically in the trust category -- did this to you.

I think I compartmentalized my life. [The hurt and negative self-image] was secret and I clung to success in other ways. I mean, as far as functioning, most people would be stunned to believe that [I believe I'm a worthless whore] on some level. The whole compartmentalization -- the professional successful me and the dark secret me -- the good girl and the bad, I think there is still some of that that goes on, but it's getting more integrated.

Sometimes I wonder will I ever resolve [these feelings]? If it goes away, will I be different? And that's almost like another loss. I feel that because it's gone on for so long and it's so much a part of me that were I to recover and give up the anger, and the depression and all the things there, what would be left [of me].

"Cheryl", (Lebowitz, 1993, p.88-89)

Eventually, the knowledge of what one has lost, and the ensuing feelings of grief come to represent all the changes, both adaptive and maladaptive that one makes to cope with this event that one did not choose. The grief reflects the loss of a way of being in the world and it is mourned like any death would be. And as with any death, the loss endures, even as the cause of the pain recedes into the background.

Time. Just like...you lose someone...someone dies and for the first year or two you are in mourning for them. And you feel terrible. Then afterwards you just learn to live with it.

"Esther", (Lebowitz, 1990, p. 138)

CONCLUSION

When victims talk about the experience of rape, they are attempting to tell a story: to bring together feelings, thoughts, questions and meanings in a narrative that makes sense of what has happened, and what it means for and about themselves and the world they live in. The story of the rape changes over the course of recovery, becoming more complete and personally meaningful as the experience is processed and integrated (Wigren, 1994, Roth and Newman, 1991).

In this paper we have described the common themes that emerge from the stories told by victims of rape. Not all victims express all of these themes, but most victims do experience most of them.

Listening for themes helps the listener hear what is most salient to a given victim at a given moment in time. Certain themes are likely to be more prominent depending on specifics of the rape, for example, betrayal and loss of trust for a victim of acquaintance rape, or isolation and shame for a male victim. Certain themes will be more prominent depending on the timing of the disclosure, for example fear and loss of meaning early on, anger and grief later. Other themes gain prominence depending on the particulars of a victim's sense of self, for example helplessness is particularly salient for victims who have been previously disempowered, or who have worked hard for mastery. Finally, changes over the course of life may bring new themes into sudden, sharp focus, for example the newly empowered victim may find him- or herself reacting more strongly to social attitudes that de-legitimize rape trauma.

Recovery from rape, as from all traumas, is an arduous, personal, often private journey. The responses victims evoke in their encounters with others are often pivotal in charting the course of this journey toward recovery and reconnection or toward alienation and despair. Victims can only rely on others when those others—family, friends, colleagues, superiors, advocates, care providers—have developed some capacity to listen to and to bear the reality of the trauma of rape. In this paper we have tried to map the experience of rape victimization through the lens of common themes, and to allow the victims to teach us about its phenomenology.

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ⁱ Full names are used when victims have spoken, and allowed themselves to be identified, for public record. In all other cases, pseudonyms are used and identified by quotation marks around the name.