

Men Who Commit Rape in Singapore

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Abstract

Introduction: Rape is regarded as one of the most serious forms of sexual assault, yet there has been a lack of clinical information on convicted rapists in Singapore. This paper attempts to confirm the hypotheses that rapists come from disordered backgrounds, from large families and are poorly educated. We further hypothesize that they are more likely to have a history of antisocial behaviour and to have had recent exposure to pornography. **Methods:** Rapists serving sentence in a Singapore prison were compared with 2 control groups, one consisting of violent non-sexual offenders and another comprising non-violent non-sexual offenders. **Results:** Rapists tended to be men in their late thirties who rape women in their early twenties. A large majority of the rapists and their victims are known to each other. Rapists are more likely to come from large, disordered families, attaining low educational levels but seemingly less antisocial when compared with the controls. More rapists and violent controls reported recent viewing of pornography before committing their offences. **Conclusion:** The demonstrated similarities between rapists and violent controls lend support to the view that rape is an act of violence carried out in a sexual manner rather than a sexual act violently expressed.

Ann Acad Med Singapore 2001; 30:620-4

Key words: Antisocial personalities, Educational level, Family size, Pornography, Rapists

Introduction

Of all the sexual crimes committed, rape stands out as one of the most serious forms of sexual assault, yet there is a general lack of clinical information on convicted rapists in Singapore and elsewhere. We believe this to be the first such study in Singapore. One of the reasons for the paucity of information worldwide is that few rapists are referred for psychological evaluation. An exception exists in Massachusetts,¹ where any person convicted of a sexual assault has to undergo psychological/psychiatric observation and psychosocial rehabilitation to assess the risk such individuals pose to the community and the likelihood they will re-offend. Most rapists are believed to have no formal psychiatric diagnosis. Yet, according to Groth and Birnbaum,² the rapist is someone who has serious psychological difficulties which handicap him in his relationships with other people and who sexually act-out while under stress.

From available data,²⁻⁴ it would appear that those who commit sexual assaults belong to low economic backgrounds and who are poorly educated, yet who are less

likely to have committed previous criminal or sexual offences. Such assaults also appear to be more likely to be committed when the perpetrator is under the influence of alcohol.

In Singapore (Penal Code Section 375, chapter 224), a man is judged to commit rape when he has sexual intercourse with a woman under any of the following circumstances:

- a) against her will;
- b) without her consent;
- c) with her consent, when her consent has been obtained by putting her in fear of death or hurt;
- d) with her consent, when the man knows that he is not her husband, and her consent is given because she believes that he is another man to whom she is or believes herself to be lawfully married or to whom she would consent;
- e) with or without her consent, when she is under 14 years of age.

This paper examines the characteristics of a cohort of rapists in a Singapore prison and attempts confirmation of the following hypotheses:

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- a) rapists come from disordered backgrounds, from large families, and are poorly educated;
- b) rapists are more likely to have a history of antisocial behaviour; and
- c) rapists are more likely to have had recent exposure to pornography.

In testing each hypothesis, the choice of an appropriate control group is central. As we study jailed rapists, we controlled for jailing by making comparison of the rapists with control groups of both jailed violent and non-violent males who had committed non-sexual crimes.

Materials and Methods

The study was carried out at Changi Prison, the largest prison in Singapore and where most rapists serve sentence. Of the original list of 80 rapists supplied by the prison, only 63 were interviewed, as 7 were discharged before they could be studied, 5 were transferred to another prison and 5 refused to participate in the study. The control group of 62 prisoners comprised 32 prisoners serving sentence for violent, non-sexual [violent controls (VCs)] and 31 serving sentences for non-violent, non-sexual [non-violent controls (NVCs)] offences, with subjects randomly selected for comparison with the rapists. With the prisoners' consent, a semi-structured interview was conducted with pre-coded responses. All other data (e.g., demographic characteristics, the type of offence committed, duration of sentence and, in some cases, the statement of facts about the offence) were obtained from prison records.

Data were analysed using the SPSS programme. In testing for statistically significant differences between rapists and controls, the chi-square and odds ratio tests were used for categorical variables. The Student's *t*-test was used to test for statistical significant differences between mean ages of rapists and control subjects.

Results

The mean age of the rapists was 37 (SD 11) years, as against 43 (SD 13) years for the NVCs, and 38 (SD 14) for the VCs. Thus, the rapist group had a similar mean age to the VC group ($t = 0.44$) but were somewhat younger than the NVC group ($t = 2.30$, $P < 0.05$).

Table I compares the rapist group with members of the two control groups with regards to risk factors assessed in this study. Compared to the NVCs, the rapists were significantly less educated, from large families, were in more conflictual relationships with family members, were less likely to have been previously imprisoned and to have committed non-sexual offences—but more likely to have committed a sexual offence, less likely to have used illicit drugs and more likely to have had recent exposure to pornography. They were also likely to be single.

In Table II, several listed risk variables are quantified by odds ratios.

Table I also shows comparison between the rapist group and the VC group. The rapists were again significantly more likely to come from larger families and to have experienced more conflict in their families, were less likely to have been previously imprisoned, more likely to have committed a previous sexual offence, but less likely to have committed a non-sexual offence and had more recent exposure to pornography. There was a trend for Malays to be over-represented in the rapist group and an over-representation of Indians in the VC group.

The rapist group had a lower level of education in contrast to NVCs ($\chi^2 = 9.84$, $P < 0.05$) but, in comparison with the VC group, the educational difference was not statistically significant. In contrast to a third of the NVCs who were single, about half the rapists were single, while divorce rates in the NVC group (29%) were more than double that of the rapist group (11%) ($P < 0.05$); 38% of the rapists were married in contrast to only 16% of the VCs, although the difference failed to reach significance. In contrast, divorce rates were higher in both control groups.

There were no significant differences between the rapist group and both control groups with regards to occupation, with a large majority (82.5%) of them being manual workers. Extramarital affairs were reportedly more prevalent in the parents of rapists (14.3%) than in VCs (9.4%) and NVCs (3.2%). In both cases, the differences were not statistically significant ($P = 0.09$ and $P = 0.43$, respectively). In terms of rates of parental divorce, separation or single parenthood, there were no differences between rapists and both sets of controls. Eight per cent of rapists (versus 3% VCs and none from NVCs) had been looked after by adoptive families, only a small trend, not amounting to statistical significance ($P > 0.1$).

Compared to both groups of controls, the rapist group was more likely to have come from families with more than 10 children ($P < 0.05$). More than half (53.3%) NVCs reported close relationships with their fathers, whereas only slightly more than a third of both rapists and VCs felt they were close to their fathers. Significantly, 81% NVCs reported no obvious problems within the family, in contrast to slightly more than 50% of the rapists and VCs ($P < 0.05$). In contrast, about 30% (7% NVCs and 16% VCs) rapists reported fairly frequent conflicts with other family members. One third of rapists while two-thirds of NVCs and VCs reported previous criminal convictions and imprisonment ($P < 0.05$); 11% of rapists confessed to previous sexual offences compared to none of the controls. Three rapists (5%) had committed a previous rape offence.

The controls, especially NVCs, were more likely to have used illicit drugs ($P < 0.05$) and more likely to have been

TABLE I: COMPARISONS OF RAPISTS (R) WITH NON-VIOLENT CONTROLS (NVCs) AND VIOLENT CONTROLS (VCs)

	R	NVC			VC		
	%	%	χ^2	P	%	χ^2	P
Education level							
No formal education/primary	51	42			62		
Secondary/tertiary	49	58	0.7	0.42	38	1.2	0.28
Race							
Chinese	43	58			50		
Malay	44	32			22		
Indian	6	10			19		
Others	6	0	4.0	0.26	9	6.5	0.09
Employment							
Unemployed	8	0			13		
Non-manual	10	19			9		
Manual	83	81	4.0	0.13	78	0.5	0.77
Marital status							
Single	51	32			66		
Married	38	39			16		
Others (separated/divorced/widowed)	11	29	5.5	0.06	19	5.3	0.07
No. of children in the family							
1 to 5	35	65			59		
6 to 9	43	26			34		
10 or more	22	10	7.5	<0.025	6	6.5	<0.05
Conflict with other family members							
Frequently	13	7			13		
Occasionally	54	74			81		
Never	33	19	3.6	0.17	6	8.9	0.01
Previous offence and imprisonment							
Yes	33	61			63		
No	67	39	6.6	<0.01	38	7.4	<0.01
Previous sexual offences							
Yes	11	0			0		
No	89	100	3.8	0.052	100	3.9	<0.05
Previous non-sexual offences							
Yes	31	55			63		
No	69	45	5.1	<0.05	38	8.8	<0.005
Used illicit drugs							
Yes	25	48			44		
No	75	52	5.1	<0.05	56	3.6	0.06
Previous admission to DRC							
Yes	5	29			31		
No	95	71	10.8	<0.025	69	12.4	<0.00

DRC: drug rehabilitation centre; NVC: non-violent control; R: rapist; VC: violent control

admitted to drug rehabilitation centres ($P = 0.00$). At the time of committing the alleged offences, the 3 groups admitted to having been under the influence of illicit drugs/alcohol (rapists 54%; NVCs 62%; VCs 69%) although the differences were not statistically significant ($P > 0.1$). Six months or less prior to committing their alleged offences, 30% of rapists [in contrast to 13% NVCs ($P < 0.05$) and 26% VCs ($P > 0.05$)] confessed to having viewed pornographic material.

A comparison between married and unmarried rapists revealed that the unmarried ones were more likely to have received disciplinary action by their teachers ($P < 0.005$), abuse illicit drugs ($P < 0.05$) and to have been convicted for previous non-sexual offences ($P < 0.05$), including previous imprisonment ($P = 0.05$).

More than a quarter (27%) of offences were committed in the offender's home and a similar proportion (25%) occurred in the victim's home or in a secluded public place

TABLE II: ODDS RATIOS COMPARING RAPISTS WITH NON-VIOLENT CONTROLS AND VIOLENT CONTROLS (REFERENCE POINT IS THE GROUP LEAST LIKELY TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH BEING A RAPIST)

Characteristics	Non-violent controls (NVCs)		Violent controls (VCs)	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Education level				
No formal education/primary	1.0		1.0	
Secondary/tertiary	0.70	ns	1.61	ns
Race				
Indian	1.0		1.0	
Chinese	1.13	ns	2.53	1.32-27.1
Malay	2.10	ns	6.00	ns
Employment				
Non-manual	1.0		1.0	
Manual	2.08	ns	1.04	ns
Unemployed			0.63	ns
Marital status				
Divorced/separated/widowed	1.0		1.0	
Married	2.57	ns	4.11	ns
Single	4.11	1.22-13.80	1.31	ns
No. of children in family				
1 to 5	1.0		1.0	
6 to 9	3.07	1.14-2.11	2.12	ns
10 or more	4.24	1.06-17.12	6.04	1.22-3.40
Conflict with family				
Frequently	1.0		1.0	
Occasionally	0.37	ns	0.65	ns
Never	0.88	ns	5.25	ns
Previous imprisonment				
Yes	1.0		1.0	
No	3.17	1.30-7.73	3.33	1.38-8.00
Previous sexual offences				
No	1.0		1.0	
Yes	2020.5*	ns	2085.7*	ns
Previous non-sexual offences				
Yes	1.0		1.0	
No	2.81	1.16-6.84	3.86	1.58-9.45
Used illicit drugs				
Yes	1.0		1.0	
No	3.00	1.20-7.47	2.49	1.00-6.17
Previous admission to DRC				
Yes	1.0		1.0	
No	8.18	2.03-33.0	9.09	2.29-36.12

DRC: drug rehabilitation centre; OR: odds ratios;

ns: not significant

* Odds ratios inflated by no such offence being reported by any NVC or VC subject.

e.g., on the beach or in a park. Nearly 70% of the victims were known to the offenders, and only 27% were strangers. The mean age of victims was 18.7 (SD $\pm$ 8.9) years .

Discussion

Comparisons were made between the rapist, NVC and VC groups. Similarities between the rapist group and the VC group could be identified in terms of age, educational level, employment and relationships between parents. All 3 groups were similar in terms of degree of closeness to their parents, being closer to their mothers than their fathers, although nearly 10% of the rapists but none of the VCs and NVCs reported frequent conflict with their fathers. Physical or psychological distance from fathers has also been described in sexual murderers.³ Alcohol/drugs consumed at the time of committing the offences could have had a disinhibiting influence and have been reportedly associated with the use of greater force and consequent victim injury.⁵

What distinguished the rapists from the controls were large family size, more frequent conflicts with family members, perhaps marital infidelity in the parents and recent exposure to pornography. Thus, the above-mentioned might be relevant predisposing factors in rapists, an observation previously reported.^{3,4,6}

All three prisoner groups worked in manual jobs, with a higher proportion of rapists uneducated. Similarly, there was a history of conduct problems (e.g., truancy) in the 3 groups, ranging from 59% to 75% of the prisoners studied, with 40% to 59% having received disciplinary action from their teachers. It is uncertain, in the absence of non-prison controls, to what extent these findings are significant. Nevertheless, rapists could be distinguished from controls in having had less previous criminal convictions, and less tendency to substance misuse. Assuming that such antecedents are characteristic of antisocial personalities, it would appear that a large proportion of the controls belong to this category as well. If the controls comprised individuals chosen from the general population, then the rapists in comparison to these controls would come across as more socially deviant.

The results seem to confirm the view⁷ that rape is perpetrated by poorly educated men of low socio-economic backgrounds and from large families. Such individuals are likely to have antisocial personalities although the controls appear even more so. As the ability to form enduring heterosexual relationships requires a certain maturity and stability of personality, it is those who have dissocial and violent traits (as in the case of VCs) who are more likely to be single. Although large family size was a significant factor among rapists, it is unclear whether the trend towards having smaller families in Singapore will make any difference to future rape statistics as there could be other as yet poorly defined antecedents that need to be taken into consideration as well.

The issue of the role of pornography in sex crimes is

controversial and still unresolved. Earlier researchers⁸⁻¹⁰ have proposed that pornography is an important contributor to sex-offences. They cited evidence indicating an increase in violent sex crimes in countries where hard core pornography is available.¹⁰ Some have demonstrated an increased acceptance of sexual violence by male university students¹¹ and a decrease in inhibition for aggression towards women¹² after viewing violent pornography. Others¹³ were convinced that televised pornography produced detrimental effects on children's sexual development, thus giving rise to harmful attitudes towards sex and male-female relationships.

Conversely, it has been observed¹⁴ that the number of sexual assaults in Denmark decreased after pornography was legalised, and this was attributed to the "safety valve effect" of pornography.¹⁵ Others¹⁶ have argued that in countries with no restrictions on the sale of sexually explicit materials, the rates of sexual offences were even lower or no different¹⁷ than in the case of countries where sale of such materials was illegal.

More recently, a study examining the sexual habits of molesters found that molesters were less likely to report viewing pornographic material compared to thieves,¹⁸ which is surprising given that in our present study, rapists were more likely to have reported prior exposure to pornography. Thus, instead of providing a "safety valve", the presence of such materials might have led to a disinhibition of sexual drives. It has been suggested that although rapists might find pornography stimulating, it is not sexual arousal but the arousal of anger^{19,20} and fear² that leads to rape and that some studies have even shown that rapists are generally exposed to less pornography.² An authoritative review²¹ concluded that although sexual assaults might have been perpetrated by people who seem to have an interest in pornography, there was no clear cut evidence for a simple cause and effect relationship between pornography and sex crime. Some²² have even declared they were unable to establish that pornography in its purely erotic form had any detrimental effect on human behaviour.

Conclusion

Although rape is an offence which involves both sex and violence, the comparisons of rapists with prisoners who have committed violent/non-sexual and non-violent/non-sexual offences in the present study have demonstrated that rapists are more similar to violent rather than non-violent prisoners. This is in contrast to the often-held view that rape is primarily a sexual activity carried out in a violent manner.

Our study seems to suggest that rape is an act of violence expressed in a sexual way thus confirming the view² that rape is a pseudo-sexual act driven by forces of anger and power but not sex.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Director of Prisons, Singapore for his kind permission for us to carry out this study and Changi Prison staff for their help in arranging for the prisoners to be interviewed and for tracing their records; we also thank our research assistants, Ms M I Loh and Ms Kay Roy, for their painstaking efforts in data analysis.

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