

# More feminist anthropology

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"Starting at a very young age boys get the message that males are expected to be strong, brave, self-reliant, all-knowing, emotionless, aggressive and competitive. Also very early on boys begin to get the message that there are severe consequences for breaking the code of conduct. Boys who act in any way "unmanly" run the risk of being labeled gay and resoundingly rejected by their peers."

Not to mention being rejected by \*girls\*.

"At the exosystem level, Brown explains, comes the powerful influence of peer pressure and culture. Unfortunately for many boys, the direct benefits of peer approval often far outweigh the hypothetical risk of getting accused of rape. Likewise the benefits for girls of having a boyfriend and being popular with their friends outweigh the risk of putting themselves in situations where date rape is possible. "It's discouraging to see just how pervasive traditional sex role attitudes and behaviors are with the adolescent girls I work with," notes Brown, "despite all the progress of the women's movement in this country. Teenage girls want so badly to be liked that they are willing to put up with tremendous abuse."

Another reason is that girls are horny for aggressive, strong boys with status and have contempt for shy, weak boys with no status. Probably from years of evolutionary hard-wiring. But no scientist dares mention this because the "liberals" who dominate academia would drum that scientist out of his job.

– (Offshore Eddie, 2004)

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## Sexual Coercion and Reproductive Health

### Chapter 2

#### Gender Stereotypes and Sexual Coercion

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During the panel's third presentation, Steve Brown, a clinical psychologist and sex educator who works with troubled youth in the United States, helped participants understand how stereotypes about "appropriate" male and female sexual behavior operate at the individual level to fuel sexual coercion among U.S. adolescents.

Brown introduced a multilevel ecological framework to help explain the many interrelated factors that contribute to sexual coercion by adolescent boys (see Figure 3). Brown's model organizes psychological and social forces into four levels of analysis, each level embedded in and interacting with those surrounding it. The innermost level of the framework examines the factors in a young person's personal history - such as prior sexual abuse - that might contribute to his or her involvement in a sexually coercive situation. The second layer, the microsystem, refers to the forces operating in the immediate context in which the sexual coercion takes place - such as the presence of alcohol or drugs. The third level is the exosystem and refers to the formal and informal social structures such as peer pressure - that impinge on the individual and his or her circumstance. Finally, the macrosystem refers to the larger cultural values, beliefs and power structures that foster sexual coercion through their strong influence over the forces that operate on the inner three levels.

To illustrate his model, Brown took the case of sexual coercion among dating partners ("date rape"), a common and growing problem in the United States. Despite the increasing flexibility of gender roles in U.S. society, traditional stereotypes - operating at the level of the macrosystem - still strongly shape the attitudes and behaviors of U.S. men and women, and are often especially rigid among boys and girls. "It is these stereotypes that set the stage on which sexual coercion gets played out," Brown argues. Starting at a very young age boys get the message that males are expected to be strong, brave, self-reliant, all-knowing, emotionless, aggressive and competitive. Also very early on boys begin to get the message that there are severe consequences for breaking the code of conduct. Boys who act in any way "unmanly" run the risk of being labeled gay and resoundingly rejected by their peers.

As Brown points out, this male code of conduct includes an extensive array of sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that are religiously ascribed to, especially by the troubled teens with whom he routinely works. Among the common attitudes of boys are:

- It's unacceptable for a male to be a virgin. Boys earn their manhood via sexual conquest.
- Boys don't talk about sex, they just do it.
- Boys are supposed to be sexual initiators. 'Girls like guys who take control when it comes to sex. Girls want sex as much as boys, but they have to say "no" to maintain their reputation. Therefore, when a girl says "no," she really means "maybe" or "yes."
- Girls want to be persuaded and are expected to struggle a little bit. Even tears are a part of the act.
- If a guy is persistent and persuasive, the girl will eventually fall into his arms and be glad she did.

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- Intercourse is the only real sex.
- Even if a girl doesn't want to have sex, it's still sex and can't really feel that bad.
- The penis has a mind of it's own. Once aroused, it can't be controlled. These attitudes are woven into the U.S. cultural fabric: in its advertising, books, movies, television - and many are implied if not explicitly stated in religious doctrine. To some extent these ideas are part of the socialization of all American males. But high-risk teens, most of whom have other negative forces impinging on their lives often interpret and act upon these stereotypical ideal as fact.

At the exosystem level, Brown explains, comes the powerful influence of peer pressure and culture. Unfortunately for many boys, the direct benefits of peer approval often far outweigh the hypothetical risk of getting accused of rape. Likewise the benefits for girls of having a boyfriend and being popular with their friends outweigh the risk of putting themselves in situations where date rape is possible. "It's discouraging to see just how pervasive traditional sex role attitudes and behaviors are with the adolescent girls I work with," notes Brown, "despite all the progress of the women's movement in this country. Teenage girls want so badly to be liked that they are willing to put up with tremendous abuse."

At the personal level Brown cites such factors as a history of sexual or physical abuse, the absence of positive male role models and an almost complete lack of information or positive socialization about sexuality or healthy male/female relationships. As Brown points out, without realistic modeling of what it means to be male, the boys are left only the exaggerated models of maleness and sexuality provided by society at large and their male peer group.

For girls, the defining personal feature of many who end up in sexually coercive relationships is a history of sexual abuse in childhood. Brown estimates that in the facilities for troubled teens where he works anywhere from 75 to 100 percent of girls have been sexually abused. He notes: These girls often find themselves in extremely risky sexual situations because sex is the only way they know of getting attention, touching and intimacy. Sometimes they sexually act out because it gives them a feeling of power over men that they've never felt or it proves that they now control their own sexuality. Sometimes it is intentionally self-destructive, rooted in their negative view of themselves. Sex in which they are submissive and a partner's need dominates is often all they know. Many times these girls can't tell the difference between touch that is friendly and caring and touch that is intended as a come on.

Similar to the boys, the intense neediness of these girls, which is partly rooted in their personal abuse histories, makes them significantly more vulnerable to gendered stereotypes about sexual behavior. Brown also pointed out how cultural stereotypes of acceptable female behavior also play into the dynamics of coercive sex. "Both boys and girls learn from a young age that good girls are not supposed to admit to wanting sex. The American 'sexual script' says that girls have to pretend 'no' even when they mean 'yes', which gives boys the perfect excuse to ignore 'no'."

Significantly, this double bind appears to fuel the dynamics of rape in other cultures as well. The authors of a recent research report on child sexual abuse in Zimbabwe make almost the exact same observation:

Women are culturally obliged to say "no" to sex even when they want it and men generally see no problem in exercising some force when pressing for sex. These attitudes facilitate rape in women of any age. They are especially disturbing when considering relationships between older men and young girls, since young girls are traditionally bound to obey older men. Therefore, the dividing line between agreeing and refusing sex is often unclear which makes it more likely the girl will get raped-and carry the blame for it afterwards (Meursing, 1993:16).

These examples illustrate the importance of challenging traditional notions of acceptable "womanhood" in addition to dominant definitions of masculinity. Women must feel free to express their desires openly-both when

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they want sex and when they don't-if the word "no" is going to be taken seriously. This is not to say that any "mixed message" justifies force or coercion. At the same time, it is important for teenagers and prevention programs to recognize that cultural ambivalence toward female sexuality helps put young women at risk.