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Rape¹ and respectability

Ideas about sexual violence and social class²

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Abstract

Women on low incomes are disproportionately represented among sexual violence victims, yet feminist research on this topic has paid very little attention to social class. This paper blends recent research on class, gender and sexuality with what we know about sexual violence. It is argued that there is a need to engage with classed distinctions between women in terms of contexts for and experiences of sexual violence, and to look at interactions between pejorative constructions of working class sexualities and how complainants and defendants are perceived and treated. The classed division between the sexual and the feminine, drawn via the notion of respectability, is applied to these issues. This piece is intended to catalyse further research and debate, and raises a number of questions for future work on sexual violence and social class.

Keywords

Class, femininity, gender, sexual violence, rape, respectability, sexualities

Women on low incomes form a disproportionate number of victims of sexual violence in England and Wales: in the 2000 British Crime Survey, women from households with an income of less than £10,000 per year were three times more likely to have been raped than women from households with an income of more than £20,000 per year, a finding which is consistent with other research on social class and violent crimes (Myhill & Allen, 2002: 3).³ Despite this, however, feminist

theorising and research around sexual violence has paid very little attention to social class, even in the face of long-standing claims that academic feminism tends to reflect middle-class women's experiences (Segal, 1987) and evidence that the social construction of femininities and masculinities varies across categories such as social class, ethnicity and sexual orientation (see for example hooks, 1981; Skeggs, 1997; Halberstam, 1998). In recent years, much valuable research on sexual violence has been conducted in the United States. However, many of these studies are psychological and carried out by academics on their own undergraduate students, a group which is likely to be largely middle class and more homogeneous than the general population (Nagel et al, 2005). This, combined with the relative invisibility of class in US research (Hollander, 2001: 97; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005), is perhaps why feminist work on sexual violence has engaged with issues around rape and race relations, but has been largely silent on class.⁴

In this paper, I argue that, given what we know about how social class structures life chances, experiences and the construction of gender identities, it is necessary to build feminist perspectives on sexual violence which engage with class differences. The continued centrality of class to our social life and symbolic economy in Britain (Reay, 2005; Skeggs, 2005) suggests that sexual violence may be experienced and perceived differently in differently-classed communities. Studies of domestic violence consistently make reference to socio-economic status (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005), which suggests that class is pertinent in at least one common context for sexual violence, namely the home. It also seems evident that the cultural class war which encompasses a variety of pejorative constructions of the working classes (Johnson, 2008) may impact on how victims of sexual violence are viewed and treated in the criminal justice system and society at large. The discussion here is largely theoretical, and intended to catalyse further research and debate. It will engage with major feminist perspectives on sexual violence, arguing that they are incomplete and in some ways unhelpful when it comes to class analysis. Recent ideas about social class, femininity and sexuality will then be used to begin a classed engagement with sexual violence pertaining to constructions and experiences of victims.⁵ Questions will be raised throughout which would need to be addressed in

order to create a more comprehensive and rigorous feminist analysis of sexual violence and social class.

Rape, violence and working-class brutality

Susan Brownmiller's classic book *Against Our Will* (1975) has provided a basis for much liberal-feminist theorising about rape. She constructs rape as a crime of domination through violence rather than the result of an uncontrollable male desire for sex, and the threat of rape as a form of social control which limits women's freedom and causes them to look to men for protection. Brownmiller does not incorporate class into her analysis; however, she does state that most of those who engage in and are victimised by violent crimes come from lower socio-economic classes, citing a relationship between inequality and violent cultures and working-class machismo (Brownmiller, 1975: 174, 181, 195, 348-9). These points are largely folded into her discussion of rape and race, which perhaps should be expected in a US study due to the specific constitution of American society and the inextricable links between the class system and racial segregation. However, this means that Brownmiller's narrative cannot shed much light on the relationship between sexual violence and socio-economic stratification in the British context. In addition, her comments about working-class culture are in danger of playing into an essentialised idea of the uncivilised working classes which has been central to the regulation and denigration of these communities and which has been used to discredit working-class rape complainants as well as defendants.

Bourke (2007: 121) argues that rapists have often been seen as the product of 'defective urban cultures that espouse perverse ideals of masculinity', and that the working-class or unemployed man has been portrayed as particularly prone to committing sex crimes (Bourke, 2007: 125). One of the main arguments of the 19th century temperance reformers was the link between alcohol and sexual violence against working-class girls, which sat within overarching concerns about the wild and rowdy working classes at large on the urban streets (Bourke, 2007: 54-56). The mid 20th century saw similar concerns in academia and public opinion about subcultures of violence in which rape was normalised, coupled with ideas about familial cruelty

and sexual indiscipline, seen as peculiarly working-class (Bourke, 2007: 130, 134-136). In the 1970s these theories were bolstered by the notion of a crisis in masculinity, precipitated by the shift to post-Fordist production and the entry of women into the labour market, thought to have caused (mainly working-class) men to deal with their obsolescence using a variety of means which included sexual violence (Bourke, 2007: 138).

Arguments continue to circulate about the fact that in the neo-liberal West, working-class young men are battling to adjust to a new economic regime and shifting gender order and are increasingly drawing on codes of crime and violence in order to feel a sense of power (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1999; Hall, 2002; Nayak, 2006: 814-5, 822). Nayak (2006: 819) contends that violence plays a part in the survival strategies of both 'rough' and 'respectable' working-class masculinities, often with a nod to older forms of white masculinity encompassing 'drinking, fighting, football and sexual conquest'. Sexual violence is seen as one of the ways in which working-class men demonstrate masculinity in contexts in which other routes to status are not available (Messerschmidt, 1999; Johnson, 2001). There is also evidence that domestic violence, which can (but does not always) include sexual violence, is more prevalent in economically deprived communities (Lockhart, 1987: 603, 609; Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005: 41; Swan and Snow, 2006: 1038).

However, it has been argued that identifying violence against women as solely the preserve of working-class or unemployed men merely serves to allow middle-class men to engage in these behaviours with impunity and perpetuates dangerous stereotypes (Westlund, 1999: 1047; Humphreys, 2007: 123). Working-class cultures do not have a monopoly on sexual violence, confirmed by the occurrence of rape-supportive and sexually violent cultures among middle-class student fraternities in the US and the high rate of victimisation in student communities in general (Lees, 1996: 41; Boeringer, 1999; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000). Researchers have found little or no evidence that rapists tend to come from any one social class, although working-class defendants are more likely to be arrested, charged and convicted, and receive more severe sentences than middle-class offenders (Stanko, 1985: 91; Lees,

1996: 155, 210, 215-216), which perhaps explains the statistical 'realities' and which highlights the role of the criminal justice system in managing poverty and marginality (Tombs and Jagger, 2006; Bumiller, 2008). There are a number of questions to be asked here about why working-class cultures have been characterised as violent, why working-class men are seen as more likely to rape, and the impact of this on victims of sexual violence.

Class politics operates in part through the projection of negative value on to others, a form of symbolic violence largely perpetrated by the middle classes upon the working classes, although it can be reversed (Skeggs, 1997 & 2005; Johnson 2008). The unruly, uncivilised, violent working-class Other is a repository for the qualities middle-class cultures fear and appear to reject, which functions as a means of social regulation and also produces practices of self-governance (Skeggs, 1997). It is a painful irony that this construction of the brutal working-class rapist from a violent and deviant subculture does not appear to evoke more sympathy for the working-class rape victim. On the contrary, the experience of these victims is devalued by the same class politics which positions them as most at risk of victimisation. Rape, Bourke (2007: 72, 134) argues, has historically been seen as an inevitable hazard for working-class women, with the connotation that it is hypocritical for them to complain about it. As a result, the working-class woman is not often credible as a rape complainant. Her assumed vulnerability to sexual violence seems to imply that she should accept it as her lot.

Rape, femininity and heterosexuality

The other dominant feminist perspective on sexual violence is rooted in the work of radical thinkers such as Andrea Dworkin (1981; 1987) and Catharine MacKinnon. They characterise rape as a wholly sexual crime, a function of the dynamics and gender identities formed by compulsory heterosexuality. Heterosexuality, MacKinnon argues, is based on a dynamic of dominance and submission which means that women's sexual consent is not meaningful and rape is 'indigenous, not exceptional, to women's social condition' (MacKinnon, 1997: 42). There is a problem differentiating between consensual heterosexual sex and rape in a context of male

social dominance and female socialised passivity, since women are conditioned not to resist (and in many cases not even to name) sexual violations. Empirical findings confirm that being verbally pressured into sex is a common experience for young women, part of a pattern in which young men are expected to work at sexual access and young women slowly surrender bodily territory (Holland et al, 1998: 132). It is also interesting to reflect on the fact that sexual offenders rarely meet the diagnostic criteria for recognised mental illnesses (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998), which lends credence to the argument that sexual aggression is built into 'normal' male heterosexuality.

However, little attention has been paid to possible class differences in sexual scripts, although some scholars have suggested that passive acceptance of victimisation is a white and middle-class, rather than a universal female, paradigm.⁶ For instance, working-class women who remain in violent relationships tend to do so out of economic necessity rather than psychological dependency (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005: 53). In Skeggs' (1997: 130-134) ethnography of working-class women, some research subjects saw themselves as relatively powerless and passive in heterosexual encounters, but many were able to challenge traditional heterosexual roles. Day et al (2003: 143,154) further state that in opposition to the fragility and submissiveness of the ideal, physical aggression plays an important part in the construction of some contemporary working-class femininities.

It is possible, then, that radical feminist theories homogenise femininity and do not pay sufficient attention to the differences between gender identities in different socio-economic contexts. The claim that sexual violence and the fear of sexual violence cuts across boundaries such as ethnicity and class (Ramazanoglu 1989) has been an important political tool, but is perhaps empirically inaccurate and may be counter-productive from the point of view of developing policy interventions. Ramazanoglu and Holland (1993: 241) allow that radical feminist analyses are weak in their sensitivity to social divisions between women, and other theorists have shown convincingly that heterosexuality cannot be treated as a monolith (Jackson, 2003: 72). Further empirical research may find that, although they are not

homogeneous, working-class femininities may be broadly more resistant to heterosexual conventions than the formulation proposed by radical feminists.

However, it is also necessary to remember that low-income women are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to be victims of sexual violence. Therefore, we should not assume that differently produced working-class femininities offer an escape from sexual victimisation. It is possible that working-class women may be exposed to greater levels of violence as a punishment for unfeminine behaviour, since rape can be seen as a means of putting difficult women in their place. Indeed, literature on domestic violence shows that men often use physical domination to punish female partners who fail to meet their needs (Anderson and Umberson, 2001: 359). The original 'rape myths' identified by Herbert Field in the 1970s included the idea that it would do some women good to be raped (Ward, 1995: 38), and Anderson and Umberson (2001: 359, 367, 372) concur that violence can be a way of demonstrating masculinity in the face of an aggressive, dominating woman. A rapist, Marcus (1992: 391) argues, 'chooses his target because he recognizes her to be a woman, but a rapist also strives to imprint the gender identity of "feminine victim" on [her]'. This suggests that radical feminists are right to posit a relationship between femininity, heterosexuality and sexual violence, but that this nexus may be constituted differently for different women. Allowing sexual violations may be part and parcel of the experience of performing appropriate femininity in traditional middle-class contexts, while in other settings, sexual violence could be used as a punishment for refusing to do so. These complexities will need to be explored if the radical feminist framework is to be developed further.

One of the few feminists who have attempted to develop contemporary theorisations of sexual violence, Ann Cahill (2001) provides a possible theoretical framework for studying the complex relationships between femininity, heterosexuality and sexual violence in different contexts. She (2001: 3) contends that previous scholars have failed to tackle the interplay between power, sexual hierarchisation and corporeality, and in this vein explores the significance of sexual violence in constructing the feminine body. Indeed, she positions rape and the threat of rape as so formative that

'even bodies of women who have not been raped...express the truths and values of a rape culture' (Cahill, 2001: 143). The work of Young (1990) and Bartky (1997) provides a basis for this analysis (Cahill, 2001: 153). Young (1990) is concerned with the limited scope of feminine motility, arguing that due to a fear of harm, women often fail to make use of their bodily potential. In Young's opinion, women approach the world with trepidation because it does not belong to them, and must live with the threat of invasion of their bodily space. For Bartky (1997), the production of the docile feminine body requires three different types of disciplinary practice: the maintenance of a diminutive bodily size, the mastery of a vast number of tools and techniques of ornamentation and a repertoire of postures, movements and gestures focused towards a restricted lived spatiality.

In Cahill's opinion, both analyses describe a bodily comportment marked by fear: fear of one's own bodily desires, and fear of harm. She argues that this expresses the position of the woman as a guilty pre-victim, one who can expect to be hurt if she wanders beyond her safety zone. As a result, women see harm as their own responsibility, a result of the vulnerability of their bodies and their failure to restrict themselves appropriately, which triggers the self-blaming responses of many rape survivors (Cahill, 2001: 157). Cahill allows that the femininity described in Young's and Bartky's work is a distinctly white one; however, it is likely that it is also middle-class, due to the conflation of class and race in many US studies and also because of what we already know about the specific constitution of working-class femininities. Cahill nods to embodied differences between women such as those of class, race and sexual orientation, but does not go into detail about how these may structure the experience of rape. Her suggestion that it is necessary to work in particularities rather than generalities (Cahill, 2001: 113-114) could be usefully taken up with regard to social class.

The concept of embodiment facilitates a view of femininity as a *process* which may occur differently in different social contexts, and is therefore potentially a useful tool with which to deconstruct the interactions between gender, heterosexuality, social class and sexual violence. A formulation of feminine embodiment which is sensitive

to the differences between women could show how power is written on to female bodies in specific and contingent ways. Violence would be positioned as central, but should be seen as a context-dependent structuring principle which has multiple impacts on the experience and aftermath of sexual violence. In an attempt to begin such an analysis (which will need to be developed further in future work), it will be argued below that via the notion of respectability, working-class women may already be positioned outside the limited, fearful femininity Cahill describes, and as such may be held culpable for their own victimisation, in both the criminal justice system and public opinion. There are also questions to be raised about how this shapes victims' own reactions to the trauma of sexual violence.

Rape, femininity and social class: issues of respectability and consent

For Skeggs, 'respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class. It informs how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others...and how we know who we are (or are not)' (Skeggs, 1997: 1). Respectability and femininity are deeply intertwined, femininity emerging in the 18th century as a middle-class construct defined in opposition to the deviant bodies of working-class women. To be a lady in the 18th and 19th centuries, Skeggs argues, one had to prove oneself as respectable through one's appearance and conduct, and investments in the feminine ideal provided middle-class women with (albeit limited) status and moral superiority over their working-class counterparts (Skeggs, 1997: 98-99). Work on Britain's imperial past has shown how the respectable, white, middle-class woman was set against the peoples of the colonies (and emigrants of 'lower' classes and ethnicities), and how the presence of such women was seen as essential to the development of 'civilised' society. Female emigration promoters, as well as male, were convinced that the 'wrong' sort of women emigrants would merely serve to impede the Empire's proper domestication (Chilton, 2003).

Historically, Skeggs (1997: 99) argues, black and white working-class women were the sexual and deviant Other against which respectable femininity was defined. Femininity required forms of cultural capital, or types of conduct and embodied characteristics, which were not in their possession (Skeggs, 1997: 100).

Respectability, then, has historically functioned as a means of social stratification and a category through which women have been classified and subjectified. It has been a sign of difference between women, which has enabled them to be judged, and to judge and monitor other women and themselves. Skeggs also contends that the 'excessive, unhealthy, publicly immoral', working-class woman continues to be an important symbol in forms of state regulation and self-governance (Skeggs, 2005: 968). The bodies of these women are positioned at the limit of national public morality: 'loud...excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar [and] disgusting' (Skeggs, 2005: 965). She cites the media obsession with chavs, as well as a consumerist policing of lifestyles manifested in reality TV programmes primarily exposing working-class families, especially mothers, and a moral panic about (particularly young women's) binge drinking (Skeggs, 2005: 968).

Although she does not tackle sexual violence specifically, Skeggs argues that a 'dangerous perverse sexuality' has traditionally been attributed to working-class women (Skeggs, 1997: 118), which tallies with other work on the construction of working-class sexualities as excessive, promiscuous and vulgar. Working-class bodies, Johnson (2008: 70) argues, house 'sexual/biological drives not entirely amenable to bourgeois codes of civility'. This can be seen in the construction of working-class men as more likely to rape, and it is also likely that a perceived lack of femininity and chastity makes working-class women less credible as rape victims in the courts and in public opinion. Historically, Brownmiller (1975: 23-29) argues, rape was a crime in English feudal law only if it was perpetuated against a virgin, reflecting the belief that a woman who was unchaste could not be sexually victimised. This idea already seems to be part of our cultural common sense, reflected in the 1988 film *The Accused*, which focused on a working-class gang-rape complainant and her struggle to secure the conviction of the perpetrators (Internet Movie Database, 2008).

Rape trials generally turn on the issue of consent, and it seems that this is inversely linked to respectability, since those who fail to meet the respectability criterion are thought to have permanent consent to sexual violation written into their behaviour. As MacKinnon (1997: 46) argues, the law divides women into indices of consent, the

paradigm categories being 'the virginal daughter and other young girls, with whom all sex is proscribed, and the whorelike wives and prostitutes, with whom no sex is proscribed.' The process of judging one person's word against another in a rape trial in actuality often means weighing up one person's reputation against another (Lees, 1996: 130), and as part of this process, female rape victims' previous sexual histories have frequently been used to discredit them (see for example Lees, 1996; Stevenson, 2000; Larcombe, 2002; Temkin, 2002a, 2002b; Kelly, Temkin and Griffiths, 2006). This persists even after the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of 1976 and the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act of 1999, both of which attempted to curb the use of sexual history evidence (Temkin, 1984; Kelly, Temkin and Griffiths, 2006).

Feminist scholars have documented in detail how it is often the rape victim's responsibility to make the perpetrator understand her non-consent, rather than the responsibility of the perpetrator to gain consent in the first place. 'The ethical question that courts must pursue becomes whether the victim sufficiently communicated her nonconsent, or whether that nonconsent was likely given the history of the victim' (Cahill, 2001: 174-175). It is this second element which becomes key, as judges and juries attempt to assess the victim's credibility as a withholder of sexual consent, which is often linked to an idea of her respectability and hinges on her sexual history and reputation (Stanko, 1985: 90). Indeed, raped women are often treated as though what happened to them was a commentary on their sexual behaviour (Stanko, 1985: 43; Ward, 1995: 77). A rape complainant has to prove that she is 'good' and 'nice' in order to be believable as a sexual non-consenter, and if she cannot prove this, it is assumed that she must be at least partly culpable for her own victimisation (Stanko, 1985).

Proving goodness and niceness involves the complainant displaying a number of attributes such as cleanliness, passivity and ingenuousness (Stanko, 1985: 91-92). The key characteristic is sexual purity, as complainants are judged according to the two poles of 'provocative...or innocent, chaste or unchaste' (Stanko, 1985: 73, 118) depending on their previous sexual behaviour and sometimes on other cues such as dress and speech. Attention may be drawn to behaviour such as excessive drinking

or smoking, swearing and the wearing of so-called seductive clothing (Temkin, 2002b: 9). Questions addressed to female complainants in trials monitored by Lees (1996: 134) included whether they were single mothers, whether the men they were living with had fathered their children, whether they smoked cannabis and drank alcohol, and whether they wore false eyelashes and red lipstick. From recent sociological work on class, gender and sexuality, it is evident that most if not all of these behaviours are either ascribed to or frowned upon in the working classes as part of the symbolic violence of class conflict (Skeggs, 1997 & 2005; Johnson 2008).

Despite this however, feminist analyses of rape trials have not generally focused on social class. Arguments in this area tend to be rather ahistorical and atheoretical, focusing on how individual sexual reputations are measured against stereotypical constructions of feminine behaviour, with little attention paid to where such stereotypes come from and in whose interests they operate. A key problem is that respectability is seen as a paradigmatically feminine characteristic rather than as a concept marked by both gender and social class. It is sometimes allowed that being white and middle-class contribute to a victim's credibility (see for example Stanko, 1985: 91, 117; Frohmann 1997: 538, 549), but this is largely explained in terms of the relationship between employment and assumed moral character, or the belief that poor women may make accusations for monetary or other gains, rather than with reference to an embodied class politics. I suggest that in the criminal justice system and public opinion, 'good' rape victims may be divided from 'bad' ones partly through drawing on a symbolic economy of embodied classed characteristics. The codes of appropriate feminine behaviour a complainant must adhere to in order to achieve credibility are deeply classed via the notion of respectability, and thus the working-class complainant may be seen as culpable for her own victimisation. In the 'moments and movements' of such a body, Cahill (2001: 160) writes, reside the sexual offender's defence: 'she was somewhere she should not have been, moving her body in ways she should not have, carrying on in a manner so free and easy as to convey an utter abdication of her responsibilities of self-protection and self-surveillance'.

For Margaret Davies (1999: 336), the legal, civic and social person is 'proper', and in losing her chastity, she argues, a woman has lost her property (her sexuality) and thus her claim to propriety (Davies, 1994: 373). Therefore, an unrespectable woman cannot achieve legal or civic personhood, so cannot be a credible complainant of sexual violence. The worst complainant of all is the sex worker, who is seen as the ultimate example of the unrespectable poor (Day, 1994: 185), as well as the definitive unchaste provocateur. These women are positioned as incapable of non-consent (Day, 1994: 181): the sex worker's 'no' can never mean 'no' (Marcus, 1992: 387), since she has already agreed to give sex away and this seems to hold true for all her sexual encounters. As a result, having sex taken by force is seen as part of the naturally unsavoury character of prostitution (Stanko, 1985: 93; Day, 1994: 184): indeed, in 2008 *Daily Mail* columnist Richard Littlejohn characterised death by strangulation as an 'occupational hazard' within this profession (Littlejohn, 2008). Unsurprisingly, it has been notoriously difficult to prosecute rape cases on behalf of sex workers (Temkin, 2002b: 6). It is unfortunately evident which position prostituted women occupy on the Madonna/whore binary which often emerges in rape trials (Kelly, Temkin and Griffiths, 2006: 3): however, I suggest that classed assumptions situate many women in similar positions on a spectrum between the good and the bad victim.

Women who press charges of rape often report that they endured a second rape in court (MacKinnon, 1997: 50), and this may be particularly true for the working-class complainant. Indeed, domestic violence research has shown class to be a more salient variable than gender in determining the quality of procedural justice received by victims (Richman, 2002), which suggests a similar role for class in sexual violence cases. Temkin (2002b: 6) argues that women who are socially or educationally disadvantaged are less likely to be able to withstand the criminal justice process. These women, in Skeggs' (2005: 974) terms, may be unable to 'tell' themselves in appropriate ways: they do not have access to the right resources or techniques for performing propriety, and their cultures have already been defined as deviant. Additionally, Skeggs argues, 'working-class women are more likely to refuse victimhood, cover up injury and endure to display that they can cope' (Skeggs, 2005: 971).

Although Skeggs does not address the topic directly, this may be especially true for women who experience sexual violence, and it has also been argued that for poor women, a rape may confirm an 'unjust world' hypothesis rather than shattering ideas about a just one (Wasco, 2003). All this may shed some light on why middle-class women are more likely to report instances of sexual victimisation (Pain, 1997: 239). It also suggests a classed element to two of the other rape myths – that all victims react in the same way after being raped and that a rape victim will always report promptly (Kelly, Temkin and Griffiths, 2006: 2) – which are used to cast doubt on complainants' narratives.

Discussion

This paper has engaged with existing research and feminist theory around rape and sexuality in an attempt to think about possible interactions between sexual violence and social class. Much of the existing work, it has been argued, does not fully address issues of class, and there are questions which need to be answered through further empirical research to create a more comprehensive analysis. Recent sociological work on class, gender and sexuality was used as a starting point: this does not necessarily engage with sexual violence, but it can be applied to what we already know about the issue. Much of the discussion pertained to the treatment of victims in the criminal justice system, since this incorporates obviously classed aspects and tallies well with cultural theories of class stratification based on the concept of respectability. However, there is clearly also a need to consider other issues, such as prevalence, types of and contexts for sexual violence in differently-classed communities, victims' experiences of and responses to trauma, and the possibility that access to support services, like other resources, may be differentially distributed between social groups (see for example Westlund 1999).

It was suggested that constructions of working-class masculinities as deviant, perverse and violent, characteristic of the cultural class war, might have an impact on how defendants and victims are treated. Working-class men are constructed as more likely to commit sex crimes than their middle-class counterparts and are more often prosecuted and convicted, as well as receiving harsher sentences upon

conviction. However, working-class women are often seen as less credible as victims, due to the fact that sexual violence is thought to be a natural part of their social experience and also due to the same constructions of out of control working-class sexuality, which situate them as provocateurs. This contradiction, it seems, can only be explained in terms of a class bias directed at both complainants and defendants. Brownmiller mentions that within a feudal structure designed to protect the nobleman's interests, it was difficult if not impossible to secure justice for raped women who were not from the propertied classes, although men from the same social stratum were much more likely to be prosecuted and punished (Brownmiller, 1975: 28-9). It seems that this is still the case in the contemporary context, and this certainly warrants further investigation.

It was also argued that the nexus between femininity, heterosexuality and sexual violence might be constituted differently for women from different social groups. Research on working-class femininities positions them outside the passive, limited, fearful and victimised/victimisable feminine theorised by feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Ann Cahill. However, it was suggested, these differently constituted femininities might not provide immunity from sexual victimisation. On the contrary, it is possible that the working-class woman may be more at risk of sexual violence as a punishment for unfeminine behaviour, and may be held culpable for failing to protect herself by adhering to the stereotypical script. In the US during the period of slavery, white women who were raped by black men could be regarded with suspicion in court if they had failed to adhere to middle-class norms of sexual behaviour, cited by Joanna Bourke (2007: 109) as evidence of the misogyny that accompanied (and sometimes competed with) racism. There is also a need to pay attention to the politics of class: the passive femininity designed to be sexually violated is a white and middle-class ideal, and women who conform to this and refuse it may experience sexual violence for different reasons and in different ways.

In the criminal justice system, a complainant's respectability is linked to her credibility, since rape cases often turn on the believability of her sexual non-consent and 'cheap' women – a classed and embodied category - are thought to have already

consented to all forms of sexual activity (Lees, 1996: 129). Using the notion of embodiment, we can explore how working-class femininities and sexualities have been constructed and devalued as licentious, excessive and immoral, with the result that working-class women find it difficult to approach respectability and are likely to be less credible as rape complainants. In the question of whose 'no' can never mean 'no', slaves, Black women, and prostituted women have often been defined as subjects incapable of non-consent (Brownmiller, 1975; Bourke, 2007). It was argued here that there could be a spectrum between lascivious and innocent, whore and Madonna, on which working-class women may also be disadvantageously positioned. In existing work on sexual violence, respectability has been seen as a function of performing stereotypical femininity: this concept is undeniably also classed and therefore the division between 'good' rape victims and 'bad' ones may be partly drawn via the embodied symbolic economy of social class, as well as that of gender.

More research is needed on the interactions between sexual violence and social class, and the discussion in this paper indicates a variety of empirical avenues. One is to explore how differently-classed femininities and sexualities structure the occurrence and experience of sexual violence. For instance, questions could be raised concerning whether working-class women embody the same fearful, pre-victimised femininity as that identified in the feminist literature, and what might be the consequences if they do not. It is necessary to consider whether working-class women experience sexual violence as a punishment for transgressing middle-class feminine norms. Such work would also prompt questions around different responses to sexual violations: if contexts for sexual violence differ, it is likely that this will lead to variation in reactions to and coping strategies for trauma (already signalled by domestic violence research on how working-class women are more likely to resist violent partners – see for example Rajah, 2007).

Furthermore, criminal justice procedures may pose difficulties for working-class women, and they may have problems accessing or using statutory support services. This links to another possible research topic, on the experiences of and attitudes to

differently-classed victims of sexual violence. This would link to and throw a classed light upon existing work around the respectability criterion in rape trials, as well as prompting further analysis of how statutory and community services deal with victims from different socio-economic groups. An ICM opinion poll conducted in 2005 found that up to 30 percent of people thought a rape victim was partially or totally responsible if she was wearing revealing clothing, had had many sexual partners or was drunk (Walklate, 2008: 46). Such attitudes in the general public warrant further investigation, and questions need to be raised about their relationship to the pejorative constructions of working-class culture which characterise the cultural class war.

A variety of methods could be used to address these research questions, including interviews with survivors of sexual violence and ethnographic research in working-class communities to explore the embodiment and performance of femininities and (hetero)sexualities, and women's experience of sexual violence and its aftermath. Courtroom observation and examination of transcripts, interviews with lawyers and judges, analyses of police files and interviews with police officers could shed light on how class structures processes and attitudes in the criminal justice system. Media analysis, interviews and focus groups could give an insight into the issue of class and sexual violence in public opinion. Some such research has already been carried out in relation to domestic violence, and this literature contains important insights and guidance for further research, although as Sokoloff and Dupont (2005: 39-40) point out, it is still under-developed. However, other contexts for sexual violence need to be examined, such as acquaintance and stranger rape of working-class women, and the perennial and often ignored problem of violence against sex workers (Humphreys, 2007).

Sandra Walklate (2008: 50) has argued for the 'central importance of situating violence against women within its socio-cultural and economic context'. In her review of the legal and policy changes in relation to violence against women which have been put in place over the last 30 years, she argues that despite much effort, women's experience of violence has not changed. Furthermore, she contends, some

policy measures, especially those focused on criminalisation, can harm women who have already been on the receiving end of damaging state interventions, or women can feel patronised and controlled by statutory support services (Walklate, 2008: 42). Walklate does not incorporate class into her analysis: however, it is likely that many such women will be from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. This suggests a need for more sensitive reforms and services, which requires in-depth empirical work on particular contexts for and experiences of sexual violence. Reform of policy, law, criminal justice procedures and statutory services around sexual violence should be undertaken on the basis of knowledge about the specificities of victims' experiences, and this paper has attempted to show that social class is an important and hitherto neglected analytical category for this purpose.

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¹ This paper uses the terms 'rape' and 'sexual violence' almost interchangeably, since although much academic research focuses on rape there is also a need to look at other violent acts such as attempted rape and sexual assault, which are included in the definition of sexual violence. Links are also made with the issue of domestic violence, which may but does not always include sexual violence.

² This paper focuses specifically on sexual violence rather than the broad continuum of violence against women which ranges from sexual harassment to sexualised murder (Kelly, 1988), with a sense that it may be necessary to treat different acts of violence separately for in-depth theoretical engagements. This may be especially useful when exploring the intersections of violence against women with social categories such as class and 'race', which may be more or less pertinent in different cases (honour killings, for example, are viewed more appropriately through the lens of racialisation).

³ This is not a result of the fact that young women are a high-risk group, as Myhill and Allen (2002) found that young women were not disproportionately represented in the lowest income bracket.

⁴ This is not the case for research on domestic violence, which will be referred to during the discussion in this paper.

⁵ This paper will largely engage with theory and empirical evidence regarding men as perpetrators and women as victims of sexual violence, partly because this is by far the most common configuration and also because the intersections of class and gender may be different in female on male or same sex sexual violence. This is a starting point, however.

⁶ On the surface this does not seem to correspond with the fact that middle-class women are more likely to report sexual victimisation, as discussed later in the paper. However, it may be the case that while working-class women are more likely to resist heterosexual conventions, a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system causes them to be less likely to report sexual violations.