

Commentary:

**GENDER, POWER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A
COMMENTARY ON “YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN:”
RAPE, SEXUAL ASSAULT, AND CONSENT IN
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN DATING BOOKS**

Jessica L. Willis, Ph.D.
Eastern Washington University

Deborah V. Svoboda, Ph.D.
Eastern Washington University

Abstract

In this commentary on “*You Are Not Your Own: Rape, Sexual Assault, and Consent in Evangelical Christian Dating Books*” (Moon, 2014; see this present issue of JISS), we invite a feminist extension of the author’s primary argument that religious institutions are vital sites for investigating the reproduction and maintenance of sexist attitudes. We critically analyze the findings introduced in this study and discuss the contributions of this work to continued research on social justice issues and examinations of sex, gender and sexuality as they relate to the circulation of power at institutional and individual levels in society. In her work Moon (2014) calls attention to multiple ways in which traditional religious discourse, specifically Evangelical Christian discourse, contributes to the perpetuation of rape myths. The focus on language as a cultural system for communication and meaning making analyzes the construction of gender with regard to sexual scripts and gender role expectations. In this research, the author conducts a textual analysis of selected dating books that offer perspectives on relationships, connection and intimacy from a religious perspective. The conclusion of this study suggests that while rape myths may not be directly or explicitly condoned within the religious dating literature reviewed, the prominence of discursively limiting sexual scripts operate at individual and institutional levels with significant consequences on cultural definitions, recognition and perpetuation of sexual domination and violence.

Keywords: Sexual scripts, sexual freedom, heteronormativity, misogyny, racism, gender, sexuality, human rights, religion, spirituality, systems of inequality and privilege.

AUTHOR NOTE: Please address all correspondence to: Dr. Jessica L. Willis, Women’s and Gender Studies, Eastern Washington University, Spokane, WA 99004-2428. Email: Jessica.willis@ewu.edu

COMMENTARY

Scholarly and political attention to the institution of religion, at the start of the 21st century in the Western United States, indicates that even whilst the language of “science” operates as a major epistemological lens for interacting in the everyday Western world, religion as an institution concurrently maintains a stronghold as a major theoretical framework for culturally, symbolically, and discursively negotiating gender identity and sexual relationships at individual and institutional levels in society. The article, “*You Are Not Your Own: Rape, Sexual Assault, and Consent in Evangelical Christian Dating Books*” by Moon (2014; see this present issue of JISS) makes a timely contribution to social, cultural and longstanding feminist conversations that interrogate gender-based violence as inextricably linked to social and structural power dynamics. The author provides current statistical information on the widespread prevalence of sexual assault in the U.S. and examines religion as an institution that impacts social, cultural and community understandings of sexual intimacy and gender-based violence.

As a starting point of inquiry, Moon (2014) identifies ways in which sexism and misogynistic attitudes are evident in religious language and doctrine. Recognizing language as a powerful communicator of cultural norms, Moon (2014) examines the reproduction of traditional gender roles for women and men in Evangelical Christian dating books. Historical representations and philosophical characterizations of “woman” as not “man,” sets the stage for a plethora of false binaries in which females are routinely defined in opposition to males. One notable consequence of contemporary gender socialization in Western culture is the prominent experience of female subjects, as a population, generally receiving cultural messages that encourage perception of “self” as flawed or incomplete (Brumberg, 1997). “Femininity” and the female body are culturally scripted in patriarchal religious canon as an addition to the already whole male subject. Socialization practices intersect with institutional norms, while religious language contributes to the organization and production of subjects within a historical trajectory of changing gender ideologies. Consequences of traditional gender norms indicate that females and males experience limitations and constraints with regard to traditional binary approaches to gender construction (Johnson & Repta, 2012).

Maintenance of unequal power dynamics within social and structural contexts operates in contemporary Western culture in terms of ambivalent or *benevolent sexism* (Glick & Fiske, 1997); this term is especially useful for advancing critical engagement with prevailing sexist ideologies that operate as subtle and covert rather than blatant and overt. At a social level, benevolent sexism is observable in socialization practices that communicate to American children that characteristics associated with “masculinity” are generally highly valued while characteristics associated with “femininity” are generally valued less. For example, gendered assumptions of “masculinity” link cultural expectations of strength to “maleness” (or male identified bodies). Similarly, gendered notions of “femininity” link cultural associations of vulnerability to “femaleness” (or female identified bodies). In the most simplistic terms, behaviors, activities and expressions associated with “masculinity” generally communicate a belief system that ascribes female bodied individuals a secondary citizenship status within structural (Romany, 1993) and symbolic culture, as well as and within the cultural imagination.

Historical and contemporary understandings of sexual and gender-based violence are directly linked to social ideas about the physical body. In Western culture, sex assignment is determined based on a binary approach to genitalia; physiological markers serve as an indicator of social expectations and status. For example, being born into a female-identified body carries assumptions about an individual's physical strength and intellectual capabilities. The internalization of sexist and misogynistic attitudes helps explain how oppressed populations learn to participate in their own oppression (internalized sexism). Feminist author Susan Douglas (2010) extends the cultural consideration and conversation of the rise of benevolent sexism with her discussion of *enlightened sexism*. Enlightened sexism is the prevalent Western idea that inequality between the sexes is obsolete; equality between females and males has been achieved and is therefore no longer deserving of our serious social attention. In spite of structural indicators that clearly verify the continued existence of inequality based on sex with regard to issues such as wages and control of resources, the concept of enlightened sexism further explores the ways in which struggles to address power imbalances based on sex are popularly disregarded as insignificant within popular 21st century Western discourse.

Any approach to effectively challenging the cultural prevalence of rape myth acceptance (RMA), as discussed by Moon (2014), thus requires a focus on intersections between individual and institutional norms. Cultural and historical legal ideas about what it means to be a "man" and what it means to be a "woman" continue to spill over into contemporary understandings of identity construction. Discursive constructions of sex, gender, and intimacy operate at individual and institutional levels in a society (Smith, 1990). Prior to women in the U.S. gaining the right to vote in 1920, all female subjects were legally classified as property. The dominant perception and historical legal definition of women as property contributes to contemporary gender-justice issues. For example, the prominence of seeing and interacting with women as objects, rather than full and complete subjects, is observable in contemporary U.S. media (Kilbourne, 2012). Without diverting the conversation to an analysis of women's representation within media as a social institution, the point is simply that historical ideas about women's value, worth and capabilities continue to be impacted by past perception.

Women's historical legal status as property continues to impact their secondary status within structural institutions (Cott, 2009). Understanding females and males as fundamentally different, historically served functionally to differentiate between various forms of labor. During the Victorian era, separation of spheres between public and private was ascribed via sex/gender roles, but also and more importantly the types of labor performed in these divided spaces was valued differently and unequally (Kerber, 1988). Reproduction of power as a tool for dominance is not inevitable; however, Western emphasis on differences has traditionally operated in conjunction with social ideas about difference as linked to superior/inferior status positioning. The pervasive disempowerment, objectification and marginalization of women are directly linked to social practices of dehumanization. Hooks has extensively discussed this issue with respect to practices of "othering" (Fine, 1994). Defining bodies based on difference rather than similarity historically has operated as a rationale for inequality. The Western emphasis on difference as justification for inequality is observable in the strategic oppression of multiple groups, not only in terms of sex and gender, but also in terms of race, sexuality religion, nationality etc.

The stories individuals and institutions tell about sexual assault are directly tied to cultural ideologies of gender. In terms of sexual assault, the social practice of associating females with an animal status further indicates practices of dehumanization as a lens for interacting with female subjects (Dunayer, Birke, & Kheel, 1995). The commonplace reference to female-bodied subjects as chicks, foxes, cougars, bitches, etc. promotes a conception of females as less than fully human. Dehumanization leads to questions of citizenship and who is afforded human rights (MacKinnon, 2007). Animalization affords a critical lens for interrogating the socially widespread phenomenon of referring to females as animals. On the surface, this seemingly harmless approach to characterizing female subjects as animals has consequences tied to the reproduction of dominant representations that characterize females as less than fully human.

Social norms and practices in a society operate at informal and formal levels; thus, cultural change with regard to sexual assault requires attention to circulating definitions of deviance. How a culture defines who is fully human directly impacts experiences of citizenship, self-sufficiency and autonomy. Cultural ideas about sex and gender are projected onto bodies as a type of cultural text (Crownfield, 1992). Changes in social scripts and classifications of sex and gender roles are substantive ways in which women's reclassification as full citizens have contributed to the breakdown of binary gender ideologies. However as observed by Moon (2014) in the Evangelical Christian dating books reviewed, "...although Christian dating books do not overwhelmingly support rape myths, they reinforce several attitudes that correlate with rape myth acceptance, while promoting a vision for sexuality that ignores female autonomy and consent" (p. 57).

The deconstruction of traditional polarized thinking about sex, gender and the body invites a reimagining of socially constructed understandings of sex, gender and intimacy. Historical recognition of sexual and gender-based violence within Western culture indicates discourse plays a pivotal role in the circulation of cultural ideas about power, citizenship and the body. As argued by Moon (2014) in "You Are Not Your Own", although religious institutions may not condone the practice of sexual violence, they exist as powerful entities that shape discourse on the topic of gender and power relations. Material and theoretical examinations of power indicate that sex and sexuality function as culturally intertwined concepts that symbolically communicate status and power as they are linked to identity within a specific cultural moment in time.

Sexual violence as a means for establishing power over marginalized groups of individuals has an exceedingly long history; it is evident in the historical justification of rape (non-consensual sex) within the institution of marriage, widespread sexual violence perpetrated against African-American slaves by white slave owners, the use of sexual violence and rape as a "justifiable tactic of war" and the general categorization of certain individuals as human and "others" as less than human. Contemporary research identifies correlations between rape myths, victim blaming and trivialization of rape with increased incidence of discrimination in a multitude of forms (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Historically and contemporarily, people who challenge/transgress norms typically incur some kind of backlash. Sexual violence is absolutely about people with power and privilege controlling other's behavior and punishing as if they have a right to dehumanize others. Moon (2014) utilizes this context in her content analysis of the dating texts by observing the instances of "acceptance or rejection of sexism, gender roles, and dehumanization" along with instances of "rape myth acceptance or rejection" and "consent" (p. 61).

In a historical context, rape as a recognized crime within the institution of marriage was exempt from legal doctrine in the U.S. until the 1980s. Legal and religious justifications for not recognizing marital rape as a crime were tied to the way marriage was understood historically in most cultures. The historical definition of women and girls as legal property work to legitimate the structure of heteropatriarchy, reinforcing male birthrights to inflict harm on individuals defined as less than fully human. In actuality, even after legal views on rape were revised in the West, lawmakers continued to complicity condone rape in marriage with regard to reluctance to institutionally intervene and enforce punishment for crimes of sexual assault and violence. This was based on the idea that it was undesirable to interfere with the 'privacy' of a married couple and that marriage as an institution had to be 'protected' from outside intervention. This issue remains a major obstacle in contemporary proceedings with respect to legal action.

Social institutions set the parameters of what choices or behaviors are deemed acceptable or unacceptable in a society and therefore play a key role in defining and influencing gender roles and relations. Religion as one major social institution participates in the shaping of cultural norms at formal and informal levels in society. The historical separation in Western culture of private and public spheres continues to impact the social mores, laws, and social policy that support or perpetuate the rape myth acceptance across public and private spheres. The institution of religion in the U.S. has overtly crossed the boundaries of public and private through the established political movements backed by Evangelical Christians, particularly since the 1950s (Scheitle & Hahn, 2011), as well as globally (Razavi & Jenichen, 2010). The movement by the religious leaders and laypeople to become politically active, propose social policy, and to organize to further an Evangelical Christian agenda in the U. S. adds to the discourse of women's position in public (church, work, and community) and in private spheres (intimate relationships and family) (Pharr, 1996).

The position of influence noted by Moon (2014) of religious institutions on the portrayal of rape or sexual assault in religious based dating texts is a vital point of inquiry. Religious institutions are complex influential systems in the U. S. in which the leadership and membership determine the modernization of the religious social norms particularly in gender politics including intimate and familial relationships (Burke & McDowell, 2012). In this instance, Evangelical religious authors are directing their texts to the men and women who form relationships. Moon (2014) notes the literature documenting the attitudes of the clergy on "victim-blaming and RMA" (p. 60) but stops short of investigating references to the role of clergy or leadership in the personal lives of their congregants. Given the authority granted Evangelical clergy, the question remains how the texts portray the role of the Evangelical faith leaders in relationship to perpetuating or interrupting myths about rape and sexual assault.

Moon (2014) organizes the discussion around two other powerful social institutions, the institutions of family and media, in this case, books on dating for Evangelical Christians. The patriarchal role of the father in the family is clearly identified by Moon (2014) in her discussion of ownership of the body expressed through the father's authority to approve of the dating relationship before the daughter is even aware of the intentions of the potential wooer; secondly through the control of giving of oneself to other's prior to marriage; and lastly through submission by men and women to what their God plans for them. This lineage of a power-over and privileged male figure from God to

husband to suitor expects the submissive status of the women in the church (institution), in the family, and in dating. Reflected in the findings by Moon (2014), violence is built into our institutions and therefore is taught to males on a consistent basis, thus linking masculinity to violence and ultimately power and dominance. An underlying assumption in the Western idea of gender binaries that define women in opposition to men and, thus, as inherently different are in line with the philosophical adherence of biological reasoning for sexual aggression. The portrayal of women as meat, or animals, or an island to be conquered begs the question of how are men to behave. Moon (2014) confirms that this line of gender politics of inherent difference as bad is evident in the four dating books examined.

If we recognize that even a single incident of sexual violence is problematic, than sexual violence may be understood as pandemic within current U.S. cultural conditions. Further, when we consider the number of individual survivors of sexual assault and those individuals impacted by their relationship to an individual who has directly survived some form of sexual abuse, the cultural experience of vicarious traumatization is a widespread societal phenomenon. Substantive engagement and critique of sexual violence as a social issue requires recognition that it is not only survivors of sexual violence negatively impacted by sexual assault, but rather the entire culture, society and community impact of violence as it reverberates throughout social relationships, intimate and otherwise. Throughout the article, Moon (2014) considers the power of religion in the discursive influence of intimate and sexual relationships. Critical analysis of religious discourse invites complex understandings of the ways that religion as an institution both marginalizes women and constrains sexual expression. Religious and spiritual leaders are in positions of authority with a responsibility and obligation as people in power to engage critically with the social normalization of sexual violence.

Diverse collections of religious and spiritual leaders have organized around the banner to end sexual and domestic violence among the faith communities and by religious leaders. In the 1970s, one such collection was formed. Rev. Marie Fortune established a center for the prevention of sexual and domestic violence to break the silence on these topics and to increase the involvement of faith leaders and laypeople in preventing the violence in the FaithTrust Institute. Rev. Fortune and her national cadre of faith laypeople and leaders have actively worked to diminish the myths of rape, child abuse, sexual violence, and domestic violence through a model of education (FaithTrust Institute, n.d.). Evangelical Christians are among the religious communities involved in the FaithTrust Institute confirming the role identified by Moon (2014) of this particular group of Christians to influencing or educating their own faith community to emphatically speak out against sexual and domestic violence, as well as abuse by clergy.

Moon's (2014) research invites critical engagement and the tracing of specific ways women have been constrained within major world religions through creation myths, exclusion from sacred rituals, the role of church laws in regulating women's behavior in marriage and families, and the power of the church over women through church and state-sanctioned controls. Continued research needs to investigate how nationalism, colonialism, and globalization influence religious institutions and consequently contribute to the control of sexualities and limiting of sexual freedom for female identified individuals worldwide. The denial of culture, economic, and political autonomy under colonization reduces sexual

freedom through strict enforcement of heteropatriarchal gender norms. We might also continue to productively be curious about the ways religion has been empowering for women in providing opportunities for community with other women, leadership positions within the church and within local communities, and opportunities for self worth and spiritual growth.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Jessica L. Willis teaches Women's and Gender Studies at Eastern Washington University. She holds a B.A. in Literature and Women's Studies, an M.A. in Feminist Clinical Psychology, and her doctorate in Women's and Gender Studies. In her recent book publication entitled: "*The Making of Modern Girlhood*" she investigates girls' active contributions to re-imagining femininities, masculinities, sexualities and consequences of gendered embodiment at the early part of the 21st century, U.S. Dr. Willis' research interests include gender and sexuality in society, feminist contributions to political theory, feminism and the social construction of knowledge, women and politics, sexual citizenship, gender and sexuality in film, body image and identity formation. Address: Dr. Jessica Willis, Monroe Hall 207, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA 99004-2428. Email: Jessica.willis@ewu.edu

Deborah V. Svoboda is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and an Affiliated Faculty of Women's and Gender Studies at Eastern Washington University. She earned her B.A. in sociology/anthropology from Western Illinois University; a Masters in Social Work from Rutgers University with a focus on administration, policy, planning, and community organizing; and a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Her research interests include feminist organizations, the role of poverty in violence against women and children, and women's economic ingenuity and empowerment. She primarily teaches courses on social welfare policy, social work leadership and management, community practice, gender and sexual assault, women and social movements, and family violence. Address: Dr. Deborah V. Svoboda, 208 Senior Hall, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA 99004. Email: dsvoboda@ewu.edu