



# What differences arise between European American and African American women when it comes to sexual assault?

Alyssa M. Young

University of California,

Merced

Authors note

Alyssa M. Young, Undergraduate student, University of California, Merced.

Questions and comments can be addressed to [ayoung32@ucmerced.edu](mailto:ayoung32@ucmerced.edu)



### **Abstract**

Research surrounding sexual assault is abundant, but a majority of the research focuses on European American women, leaving out the unique experiences of many other ethnic groups. This literature review examines some of the research that has been done on sexual assault that focuses on African American women, who experience sexual violence in different ways. Looking at four (4) aspects of sexual assault (types of harassment; leaving relationships; health effects; coping) this review examines the differences that arise within these relationships when African American women are involved. The examination of research suggests that there may be a need for better methods of reporting for these women, along with the completion of sexual assault studies within other ethnic groups, since there is such a vast difference between European and African American women.

Keywords: African American women, sexual assault, recovery, coping



What differences arise between European American and African American women when it comes to sexual assault?

Extensive research has been conducted to provide insight into some of the best approaches to prevention, intervention, and treatment for survivors of sexual violence (Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, Tillman, & Smith, 2010; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Gross, Winslett, Roberts & Gohm, 2006; Krebs et al., 2011; Najdowski & Ullman, 2011). Although there is a large amount of research focused on various aspects of sexual assault, most of this research focuses on European American, or white, women. This leaves a gap within the research because of this narrow focus, excluding the experiences of other ethnic groups from published research. Specifically, for African American women, there tends to be many aspects of their lives, both cultural and societal, that make sexual assault more complex than that of European American women (Gross et al., 2006; Krebs et al., 2011; Najdowski & Ullman, 2011; Taylor 2002a). This review of the literature examines some of the limited research that exists around African American women's sexual assault experience in four (4) subsets; (1) type of harassment, (2) leaving the relationship, (3) health effects, and (4) coping. Each of these areas looks at how African American women are specifically effected because of varying aspects of their lives culturally, and how society views them.



### **Type of Harassment Faced**

Research in many domains has expressed that women in general are dehumanized into sexual objects by other men, and by other women as well (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002). However, research in a majority of these areas has focused on European American, or white, women. This Eurocentric approach neglects to investigate a potential difference between the experiences of women of color. Buchanan & Ormerod (2002) conducted research with 37 African American participants that evaluated the difference between their experience with sexual and racial harassment and the experience of European American women. After conducting six group interviews with the survivors, they concluded that racial harassment and sexual harassment tended to be combined for women of color (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002). They came to the conclusion of a mixed racially charged sexual harassment because while questions asked by interviewers were separated by racial harassment and sexual harassment, the women had a tendency to speak about both occurring simultaneously within all of the interviews that were conducted. Instead of simply being called a “whore” by someone, as a European American women typically would, African American women were more likely to be called a “black whore” (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002).

This research by Buchanan & Ormerod (2002) showed that African American women are seen in a different light than those of other ethnic groups due to their race. It also provided evidence to support the idea that woman of color experience not only racially driven harassment



or only sexually driven harassment, but a racially charged sexual harassment, making their experience of harassment potentially more harmful than that inflicted on European American women. The harm comes from the idea that their race is something negative, since it is used as an insult. This negative look upon the African American race contributes to the differences of experience as well as recovery for these survivors. The recovery process is altered because not only do they have to cope with being dehumanized as sexual objects, but also have to cope with having an important aspect of their personal identity attacked. Having two forms of harassment to recover from, especially since they are in different aspects of life, makes the recovery process longer and more complex for women of color. By seeing how race and sexual harassment lead to different forms of recovery, one may wonder what other differences may exist for African American women in possible sexual assault experiences.

An additional study conducted by Gross, Winslett, Roberts & Gohm (2006) focused on college-aged women, and analyzed the rate of sexual assault and race in order to assess if there were differences in the way these women were attacked. Using the Sexual Experiences Survey, researchers asked 903 college participants to complete this survey, which analyzed the type of assault faced, who inflicted the assault, and how often it occurred. After data collection, it was shown that the perpetrator of violence was often times someone the victim knew, most likely a significant other or husband (Gross et al., 2006). The results of this study found that women of color were assaulted at a higher rate than European American women; 36% of African American



women have experienced sexual assault, while 26.3% of European American women have experienced it from the sample. Another discovery was that African American women reported not attempting to stop their partner from assaulting them on multiple occasions because they felt fighting back would be useless, a concept known as learned helplessness. For learned helplessness to develop, the victim would have to have been victimized on more than one occasion. Additionally, emotional coercion was the second most common way African American women were attacked, while European American women are more likely to have been assaulted because they could not fight back because of extreme intoxication from either alcohol or other drugs (Gross et al., 2006). It is unclear if the alcohol or drug use was inflicted without the victim's knowledge, if the victim was using these substances at their own discretion, or if the perpetrator was pushing these substances onto them (Gross et al., 2006). From Gross et al. (2006), we can see that women of color tend to be conscious while assault is inflicted on them, while European American women tend to be inebriated or unconscious based on this college centered study. This brings up differences in memory of assault, but also in frequency of assault, which will have an effect on how these women cope and recover from the violence experienced.

Although both African and European American women have a sense of helplessness while they are attacked, the experiences are extremely different. While an European American woman could most commonly be unconscious during the attack, an African American woman may have attempted to fight back, but later could have given up hope for the situation to be



resolved. The experience of the white woman would be that she was wronged, while a black woman may feel that the assault was “earned” or that “she deserved it” because she was not able to defend herself, which is not the case. These two differences contribute to the experience of recovery for each of these ethnic groups, leaving African American women to recover from not only violence, but to rebuild their self confidence as well since they often feel a lack of power.

### **Leaving the Relationship**

Ending an abusive relationship is the first step for many women on the road to recovery. Ending these relationships is often hard for women, because they are typically unemployed, without friends, and without self worth (Taylor, 2002b). Without a job, these women can not support themselves, and the lack a social support in times of need complicates the leaving process even further (Taylor, 2002b). Taylor (2002b) investigated how women of color disengage themselves from their abusive partner. For this study, 21 African American women, who had been in an abusive relationship prior but were out of it for six months, were recruited and interviewed twice to gather information on how they removed themselves from their relationships. There were three main stages that each woman from this study went through to remove themselves from their relationships (Taylor 2002b). First, the women had a “defining moment” that showed them their relationship was not healthy, and that they were not in a good place (Taylor, 2002b). Taylor (2002b) found that this is often done when the victim speaks to someone about their relationship, when they see a similar relationship in their daily life, or when



they see the abuse effect someone close to them, such as a child or neighbor. The second, and the most difficult step, was “moving away,” which is defined as moving away from their partner into a safer space (Taylor, 2002b). This was often hard for women because they do not have the resources, such as a steady income or close friends to support them, and may fall back to their abuser (Taylor, 2002b). The final step was “moving on” (Taylor, 2002b). This step was centered around women discovering their own personal power again, since it is often stripped from them during these relationships (Taylor, 2002b).

Another key aspect of leaving abusive relationships is reporting the assault (Taylor, 2002a). For African American women, this can be a difficult for many reasons. One reason arises because African American women are often disregarded when they report these assaults, either because the one receiving the report does not believe them, or because they assume that they are lying about the abuse, and do not take the report seriously (Taylor, 2002b). In addition to these external complications, there is the cultural expectation to not create families or circumstances that go along with the creation of a “stereotypically dysfunctional black family” or to place more people of color into the racially biased justice system (Taylor 2002b). All of these complications hinder African American women from reporting their abuse, an important step in the recovery process. Without the reporting and conviction of the perpetrator, they are more likely to commit these crimes again, either on the same victim or on another vulnerable person.



## Health Effects

The aftermath of something as traumatic as sexual assault comes with not only physical health problems, but mental and psychological trauma as well. Many victims of sexual assault develop depression or post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010). Bryant-Davis et al. (2010) examined how social economic status affects the recovery of African American women who experienced sexual assault. In Bryant-Davis's (2010) study, 413 women completed a survey that assessed the prevalence of past childhood sexual abuse, personal income, substance use, suicidal thoughts, depression, and PTSD symptom presence. Bryant-Davis et al. (2010) found that African American women with lower income had a significantly higher rate of depressive and PTSD symptoms and would use illicit drugs at a higher rate than those with a higher income. It was also discovered that if the women had a history of childhood sexual abuse, they were more likely to have suicidal ideations (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010). This research shows that there is a relationship between types of coping and one's income, leading us to wonder why this difference exists. One theory is that women with lower SES cannot afford healthcare, leaving them to find other ways to cope with feelings of guilt and anxiety in a maladaptive way, leading to additional problems (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010). Maladaptive coping strategies that are easily accessible to women in lower SES, such as alcohol or drug use, can lead to issues within their own personal lives, or to revictimization (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010). Discovering these health issues within women of lower SES shows researchers that there is a need



for more accessible and affordable healthcare, specifically for these African American women affected by sexual assault.

### **Coping**

Once women remove themselves from abusive relationships, it is often hard for them to cope in healthy and effective ways. One study conducted by Bryant-Davis (2011) compared how religious coping and the use of social support worked towards decreasing PTSD and depressive symptoms in African American women. Using women from the Chicago area, the Sexual Experiences Survey as well as the Social Activities Questionnaire were used to gather information on past sexual encounters as well as current social activities that each survivor was involved in (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011). This study's results showed that more religious affiliation with less social support was correlated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011). This supports the claim and concept that social support is key to coping and recovery for African American women.

Sadly, for African American women traditional forms of psychotherapy do not provide the resources they need to recover. Many psychologists also do not connect to these women or build the proper rapport, making it difficult for survivors to confide in them because of this disconnect (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002). This makes it harder for women to find the support they need to begin a healthy road to coping, leaving them to find their own ways to deal with the pain. Mostly, illicit drugs and alcohol are used in order to remove these negative feelings,



although it is only temporary. This opens the window for further research on how African American women cope, and how we can involve tailored approaches to therapy for these survivors.

### Discussion

African American women have unique experiences throughout their lives, and the experience of sexual assault is no different. The road to recovery varies in significant ways for African American women when compared to European American women. Experiencing such a racialized form of harassment exacerbates the harm done to the victim, and makes the aspects of the assault vastly different and more complex than what is typically researched and published. Because of the differences that have been suggested, the gap between research and ethnicity needs to be filled. The exclusive focus on European American women is beneficial to a degree, but the life experiences and lifestyles that other ethnic groups face make the established research irrelevant to these groups after a certain point.

One of the limitations within the research was the limited sample size. The samples that were collected from a few of the studies were done with participants from the same pool. A mass amount of subjects would complete multiple surveys or interviews, and depending on what the researcher was looking for, they would have used the participant surveys that aligned with what they were researching. This gives us results on a very limited population for some of these studies, leaving us to question if the research is sound. Even though the participants were from



the same population pool, they often had a large enough number of participants to keep it diverse. Conversely, there were some studies with as little as six (6) participants. With the differences in sample size and the consistency that still existed within the results, it is plausible for more research in the area to be done.

Although there were some limitations within the research focusing on African American women, such as limited sample sizes and a lack of more recent studies, it is clear that there needs to be more research that is focused on the specific experience of women of color. Future research in this area should focus on how to take away from some of the cultural and social differences that contribute to the complications that come from assault these women face. Additionally, research should look at creating better methods of reporting for African American women to help remove bias that is often present when these women go to report their assaults. Finally, there should be research that looks at other ethnic groups to see what other differences may exist, in addition to those already presented, so that all women effected by sexual assault can get the help they deserve.



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