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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1vt7t14w>

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### Publication Date

2014

### DOI

10.5210/bsi.v.23i0.5534

Peer reviewed

## **FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF LABELING ACTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A COMMENTARY ON SASSON AND PAUL**

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Skinner (1945) and later Leigland (1996) outlined a research program for the functional analysis of terms, to identify the conditions under which mentalistic psychological terms are used (e.g., "intention"). In such a program, the target behavior is verbal, the manipulated conditions may consist of verbal and nonverbal stimuli, and the goal is the pragmatic reformulation of subjective, ambiguous, and hypothetical terms. This program has been adapted to assess verbal behavior in relation to important social issues, such as narcotics trafficking (Sanguinetti & Reyes, 2011). The work of Sasson and Paul (2014) represents a similar line of inquiry with respect to the ambiguity of terms related to sexual violence.

Effective January, 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013) recently changed its 80-year-old definition of rape ("The carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will"; FBI). UCR explains, "Many agencies interpreted this definition as excluding a long list of sex offenses that are criminal in most jurisdictions, such as offenses involving oral or anal penetration, penetration with objects, and rapes of males." The new definition is: "Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim." "Without the consent of the victim" is further qualified as follows: "the victim is incapable of giving consent because of his/her age or because of his/her temporary or permanent mental or physical incapacity."

The analysis by Sasson and Paul (2014) is timely given this recent change to a significant legal definition of rape. Though not written from a behavior analytic perspective, Sasson and Paul offer a type of functional analysis by identifying a target verbal behavior (labeling a vignette "rape" in a multiple choice response format) and manipulating verbal stimuli in the rape vignette between subjects. Specifically, the independent variables manipulated in the vignette were victim's relationship to perpetrator (stranger or acquaintance), victim's resistance (verbal, physical, both, or none), and perpetrator's use of physical force (physical force or none).

All versions of the vignette featured the two critical stimulus classes that should evoke the response "rape" according to the FBI's definition: (1) there was penetration and (2) it was not consensual. Perpetrator identity, use of physical force, and victim's resistance should be irrelevant stimuli, but the authors hypothesized they would affect the response "rape" because they feature in stereotypical myths regarding rape. Analyses revealed no significant differences in the tendency to correctly identify rape based on these features, which the authors interpreted as a small cultural shift away from acceptance of stereotypical rape myths.

A significant finding was that participants who labeled the vignette a rape were less likely to assign the victim any responsibility for the event. This finding strongly validates the importance of this line of research. The assignment of blame to parties involved in a rape features critically in the social and legal support victims receive and the social and legal censure perpetrators

receive. An important extension of this research could be investigating functional relations between rape features and classes of disclosure recipients of actual rapes—identifying types of rape that are disclosed to social support networks only versus those disclosed to law enforcement and other formal care providers (e.g., physicians).

Sasson and Paul (2014) were mainly concerned with the behavior of rape disclosure recipients, investigating potential functional relations between reported assault characteristics and whether the disclosure recipient labels the scenario a rape. Considerable attention in the introduction and discussion of the paper was also given to victims' behavior (acknowledgement, seeking support, and reporting to law enforcement), likely because of the inextricable connection between the victim and disclosure recipient. From a behavior analytic standpoint, one would also want to consider implications for the perpetrator of sexual violence—the source of the problem behavior. For the same reason we should not blame the victim, we can most effectively deal with rape by analyzing the behavior of the perpetrator. Certainly, the behavior of victims and disclosure recipients is also important as part of the perpetrators' environment.

We can celebrate a small cultural shift in the right direction, but there is still a long way to go. Forty percent of the rape victims in the study sample were unacknowledged. That percentage is even higher in other research and rape perpetrators are significantly less likely to acknowledge the event than victims (Kolivas & Gross, 2007). Perhaps some of this discrepancy is because, unlike the victim, the perpetrator is not affected by resultant emotional trauma that may evoke rape acknowledgement despite some dissimilarity between the objective event and the victim's stereotypical learning history regarding rape (i.e., mythical rape script). Another promising direction for this research is to analyze the verbal behavior of rape perpetrators to identify rape features they associate with their proclaimed innocence or guilt and develop targeted rape prevention strategies based upon the findings.

### References

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