

“The Accused” Analysis and Reflection Paper

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## **Personal Reactions**

I was rather emotional throughout the movie since the movie successfully included so many pertinent details and scenes that reflected the physical, medical, emotional, social, and legal struggles associated with rape. Knowing that the movie was closely based on a true story was also heavy on my heart and mind. I often wondered if men would have similar depths of reactions as I did when watching. I know that rape is an issue for both men and women, but the higher percentage of 21.3% of women reporting rape versus 2.6% of men (Smith et al., 2018) shows that it is too often a women's issue.

The opening scene of the woman fleeing the bar and the man's concerned 911 call made me instantly realize this was a brutal rape. Noticing this reaction forced me to recognize how often rape cases are categorized in our society. Unfortunately, many believe that only brutal, gang, or stranger rapes are the situations that harm the victim or deserve legal repercussions for the perpetrator. This leaves many victims feeling confused and invisible when their perpetrators are friends or family or if the situation of giving consent can be easily blurred. Consent is another issue that frustrates me in a societal and legal sense. I believe that consent or lack of needs to be respected and can also be taken away at any time while a sexual encounter escalates.

The victim suffered emotionally and physically after the rape too. Starting with how uncomfortable she seemed during the process of collecting physical evidence and personal account details. I was appalled that the detective and lawyer immediately took the victim back to the bar after the rape kit. I cannot imagine how re-traumatizing it would be to directly walk back into the environment and see the perpetrators so soon after the horrific experience. Another aggravating factor that started immediately after the incident was the repetitive discussion of

how the victim had drugs and alcohol in her system. It was disheartening that the victim did not have much of a support system while processing what had happened to her.

The lack of legal punishment for the three rapists was unjustified. I am happy that the bystanders that helped motivate the crime were held accountable, but there was still a massive injustice in this case. Lastly, the final scene of the movie was the most unbearable. I even had to pause and take breaks before being able to finish it. This scene still lingers in my mind in such a way that I cannot write many of my reactions as they are still too overwhelming. I do believe that movies and media coverage on the severe effects of rape are essential. We as a society should be highly disturbed and uncomfortable when facing the reality of this issue.

Rape is more focused on power than sexuality, in my opinion. I also believe that rape should be more of a man's issue in that men need to focus on stopping the prevalence of this type of crime and behavior. Less about what the woman is wearing or doing should be talked about, while more should be done to teach men that women are not lesser or inferior.

### **Consequences for Perpetrator**

There are many times when perpetrators of violent crimes do not suffer social or legal consequences. Rape is often one of those crimes. When individuals see high-profile rape cases such as this one was and then see such minimal criminal charges enforced for the perpetrators, it sends a loud signal to women and men that rape is not often punished. While our society holds rape as a sensitive issue that exists, we still see rapists get off easy with not just our legal system but sometimes with masses of people spreading support for the perpetrator's innocence. This was the case for the real-life incident that inspired "The Accused." The city of New Bedford publicly rallied in support of the accused while vilifying the victim (Bruney, 2020). This type of message promoting positivity for the perpetrator and negativity for the victim makes a lasting impact.

Women are much less likely to report rape because of the potential social backlash and lack of legal justice (Ordway, 2018). Seeing how rape reports play out in our society not only keeps the victim from officially reporting the rape but far too often keeps them from sharing their traumatic experience with anyone. By not holding rapists accountable for their crimes, women become silenced with fear.

### **Pornography and Violence**

I do believe there is a link between pornography and violence against women. Rostad et al. (2019) found through empirical research that teenage boys' exposure to violent pornography increases the risk of sexually violent acts and rape tolerance. The same study found no substantial correlation between exposure to pornography and sexual violence among teen girls. I think a reason for the higher risk of sexual violence for boys could reflect how the majority of pornography dehumanizes women. Lykke and Cohen (2015) studied differences in men's and women's access and acceptance of pornography over the past decades. They found that despite opposition among both sexes decreasing, women continue to be more opposed to pornography than men. Lykke and Cohen (2015) also discuss that the degrading depiction of women in pornography is a critical factor in opposition and acceptance differences among men and women. While pornography may reflect already existing discrimination towards women, I believe that it still exacerbates the high number of violent acts committed towards women.

### **Alcohol and Drugs as Mitigating Factors**

I feel that alcohol and drug use is regularly used to blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator's actions. While they both may be details of the event, I do not think they should have such heavy weight in both the public and police views on rape. Some rapes that involve alcohol or drug use still involve the perpetrator secretly drugging the victim. Other times

perpetrators take advantage of a motionless body that has passed out from alcohol consumption. The act of rape in these cases has an intention of violence and manipulation that far exceeds any social alcohol or drug use. Again, I think that rape is more a power dominance issue than a sexual issue, and at times that means the rapists devise plans to force the victim to be powerless or lacking control of the situation. Yes, in some instances, alcohol and drugs are present but not always. When we put too much emphasis on alcohol and drugs, we miss the foundation of the problem that rape can be a seemingly casual crime in our communities' eyes when instead it is a violent and vicious crime.

### **Victim's Appearance**

I also do not believe that a victim's appearance or however provocatively dressed should be of concern in a rape case. This thought goes back to the real problem deriving from a culture that sees men as superior and treating women as secondary sex. I realize that a victim's appearance sadly has a lot of weight in the public and legal opinions, but this is yet another factor that angers me. Focusing on how a victim is dressed or alcohol consumption are just ways that distract the real issue that a culture shift of how women are viewed needs to occur. We also need to use that attention to focus more on how to change men's views and behaviors that perpetuate violence towards women.

### **Police and Hospitals**

A social worker should serve as a rape victim advocate and be present with the victim during the medical and legal process of gathering information and evidence. This is an overwhelming time for the victim, and if not done properly, it can increase stress and trauma. The rape victim advocate should be properly trained and trauma-informed with competency in basic general therapeutic skills. I served as a rape victim advocate for six years with the

Partnership for Families, Children, and Adults in Chattanooga, TN. The Chattanooga Police Department collaborated with the Partnership and formed a plan for each rape victim that filed a report. The victim would be brought to the center and provided a detailed explanation of what would happen during the examination for physical evidence. There was a sterile medical room in the center for these examinations to complete the rape evidence kit. I believe that performing these examinations outside of a medical setting or hospital helps provide comfort. The victim would have ample time to rest and process their surroundings before submitting to the exam. Compassionate and helpful workers need to be present with the victim during this entire process. Many women are emotionally overwhelmed or in shock for hours to days after a rape.

I do believe that police and hospitals should utilize a community-based program that specializes in rape victim advocacy. These programs will have professionals that are trained to treat the sensitive situation adequately. I also firmly believe that all hospital and police personnel should undergo extensive sensitivity training as a requirement of their job since they serve as direct communication when rapes are reported.

### **Protective Factors**

During my time as a rape victim advocate, I learned how important it is to utilize strengths found in personality, life, or social supports. In Sarah's case, I think her dedication to fighting for her own justice is a great strength. She differs from some victims that do not report their rape to the authorities or friends out of fear or shame. During the ongoing publicity of Sarah's case, we saw her fight and confidence dwindle as she faced the adverse reactions of the system and the public. As her social worker, I would have reminded her of her true self, determination, and righteousness. I think she needed this type of support and reminder as everything unfolded. I would have also connected her to helpful resources to ensure she received

the care, attention, therapy, and reassurance needed. I would also hope to connect her with further legal advocacy resources. Her lawyer eventually served as a supportive character, but she could have benefited from some additional help as she was dealing with such a complicated system.

Sarah had also endured a lot in her lifetime and seemed to be a survivor from historical trauma. I would work with her to uncover what helped her in those past difficult situations to form an action and safety plan for the present day. I would have utilized her protective factors of having at least one supportive friend. I think Sarah's protective factors were limited overall though. She could have found strength in community by being connected to a victim's support group. I would have worked with her to identify what the transition from victim to survivor looked and felt like for her and assisted in helping meet these goals.

### **Conformity**

Galdi and Guizzo (2020) discuss factors that encourage sexual violence and harassment through the Media-Induced Sexual Harassment framework. This framework is concerned with the three target groups of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. It focuses on how sexually objectifying media cognitively and emotionally affect these target groups through the dehumanization of women, disruption of empathic resonance, and conflict in gender norms. Galdi and Guizzo (2020) interpret that sexually objectifying media is a risk factor for normalizing violent behaviors, engaging in violent behaviors, heightened acceptance of violent behaviors, and decreased bystander intervention.

I agree with these findings and honestly believe that media affects the rape culture in our society. I think that sexism, discrimination towards women, and media accessibility create a toxic world for women and equality.

## **Cultural Diversity**

As a social worker, I value cultural competency and diversity. I also think self-determination and empowerment are of the utmost importance in the helping relationship. I would consider any cultural differences when working with a client. Also important is to spend time learning the client's culture through the person-in-environment perspective. That being said, I would have to create some boundaries with this process if violence or danger is involved. If a person is being hurt in any situation, my duty to report and confront the issue may take precedence.

## **Conclusion**

The movie reminded me of the various difficulties that a rape victim endures during the process of transitioning into a survivor. I minored in Women's Studies as an undergraduate nearly 20 years ago. During that time, I completed an extensive curriculum on the issues surrounding the medical, social, public, media, and legal consequences that inevitably occur when a rape is reported. While this movie and my studies occurred decades ago, there is not much difference in the current times involving rape and reporting. This is deeply disheartening, but I am also reminded of how happy I am to be a part of a field such as social work dedicated to the struggles and injustice that individuals experience. I am motivated to continue my professional and personal future to be an advocate, caring helper, and therapeutic source for those in need.

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