

## Multiple perpetrator rape

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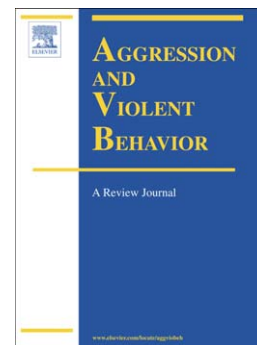
Multiple Perpetrator Rape: A Critical Review of Existing Explanatory Theories

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**Multiple Perpetrator Rape: A Critical Review of Existing Explanatory Theories**

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**Abstract**

Although multiple perpetrator rape is a relatively under-researched area, a few authors have proposed theories to try to explain this complex phenomenon. The majority of these theories only examined some factors that are believed to play a part in multiple perpetrator rape (e.g., socio-cultural factors and group processes). The most recent and comprehensive model proposed is the Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending. This article critically examines this theory and the factors and processes that are suggested as contributing to multiple perpetrator rape (i.e., individual, socio-cultural and situational factors including the interactions between them). Some evidence is found to support this model although further research is needed to fully test it.

**Keywords**

Multiple perpetrator rape, Gang rape, Group rape, Explanatory theories

## Multiple Perpetrator Rape: A Critical Review of Existing Explanatory Theories

### 1. Introduction

Since the appearance of the first academic papers on multiple perpetrator rape (MPR)<sup>2</sup> in the 1950s, a few theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. Some of them were based on what was already known at the time about sexual violence in general, whereas, others were tentative, proposing new ideas. These theories were influenced by the dominant psychological and sociological theories of their era. As time progressed they have developed from simple individual or sociological explanations to theories that integrate various factors to explain this complex phenomenon. The most recent and comprehensive explanatory theory of MPR was proposed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013). It is the Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending (MPSO), which states that various factors play a role in MPR and emphasizes the effects of group processes. Some of these proposed factors and processes had previously been identified as relevant in MPR by earlier explanatory theories (i.e., the psychodynamic theory, sociological theory of group rape, feminist theories and theories of power, control and male bonding). This article critically examines the Multi-Factorial Theory of MPSO and the factors and processes that this model and earlier theories suggested as contributing to MPR by considering if there is empirical evidence supporting the role of these factors in MPR. It is important to construct, develop and evaluate theories because they help guide research and practice. As Ward, Polaschek, and Beech (2006) eloquently stated: “Theories are usefully construed as cognitive tools that provide clinicians and researchers with maps to navigate their way through the complexities of clinical practice.” (p.10)

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<sup>2</sup> This term was proposed by Horvath and Kelly (2009) as an overarching term for any sexual assault committed by multiple perpetrators and includes a broad range of sexual offences.

## 2. Overview of early explanatory models of MPR

One of the earliest theories proposed to explain MPR was psychodynamic in nature (Amir, 1971; Blanchard, 1959). In this theory, a central factor is the existence of homosexual feelings of the group members for one another. Sanday (2007) referred to the term *polymorphous sexuality*, used by Freud, to indicate diffuse sexual interest with numerous objects. According to her, this means that some men who engage in such behavior can experience sexual desire for one another. Nevertheless, the fear of being considered homosexual can produce a tension between polymorphous sexual desire and expected heterosexuality. By taking part in a MPR, men are able to overcome this tension such that: “the brothers vent their interest in one another through the body of a woman.” (Sanday, 2007, p. 42). In summary, the psychodynamic theory suggests that, by participating in a MPR, men assure themselves of their heterosexuality and hide the actual object of their desire, in order to maintain their standing in the male hierarchy as superior heterosexual men (Sanday, 2007).

At the time that he carried out his study of lone and MPR, Amir (1971) acknowledged that the psychodynamic theory was the main explanation for MPR. According to Amir, this approach was speculative; therefore, he suggested an alternative sociological theory of MPR. He called it a *sociological theory of group rape*. Amir (1971) tried to integrate various factors that he considered essential to understanding MPR, which had not been examined in this context before. He associated MPR with adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who he believed had a tendency for actual or latent aggressive behavior, and were at a stage in their development associated with heightened sexual desires and sexual experimentation. The other contributory factors that he proposed were group processes; negative/stereotypical attitudes towards women and sexual identity; a precipitating event (e.g., a crisis in the group structure or available victims); situational factors and a person in the group such as a leader that facilitated the mobilization of the other members. Amir (1971)

was the first author in the MPR literature to not only write about the important role that group processes and dynamics play in this sort of sexual offending, but also to highlight that it is a combination of various factors that make this type of sexual assault possible. This not only contrasted with the psychodynamic theory but also with other explanatory theories of MPR that began to emerge at that time, which placed a great emphasis, almost exclusively, on socio-cultural factors such as masculine ideology of dominance and power (e.g., the feminist theories).

In the 1970s, sexual aggression became a relevant issue for the feminist movement. For some authors (Brownmiller, 1975; Donat & D'Emilio, 1992; Russell, 1975), rape was seen as a means to dominate and control women, enforcing gender roles and maintaining male dominance. Brownmiller (1975) was one of the first feminist authors to examine MPR. As with lone rape, she saw it as an act where men retain power and control over women: "When men rape in pairs or in gangs, the sheer physical advantage of their position is clear-cut and unquestionable. No simple conquest of man over woman, group rape is the conquest of men over Woman" (Brownmiller, 1975, p.187).

Several authors throughout the years have examined MPR based on various feminist perspectives (Franklin, 2004; Lees, 2002; Sanday, 2007). For example, Lees (2002), who analyzed cases of MPR in a community survey, viewed this type of sexual assault as an extreme form of normative masculinity, which boosts male dominance and solidarity. These views, and specifically Brownmiller's (1975) work, led to a great deal of empirical research of various feminist ideas and some of these views have been integrated into different theoretical frameworks to understand sexual assault (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992).

Themes of power, control and male bonding were also associated to MPR by other authors (Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Scully & Marolla, 1985). Groth and Birnbaum (1979) viewed MPR as a multi-determined act where factors such as power, control, camaraderie

and validation of masculinity are present. Additionally, they believed that there are also factors involved that are present in lone rape such as power and anger. Furthermore, these authors highlighted that the experience of rapport, camaraderie and cooperation with co-offenders is one of the unique dynamics in MPR. Not only are they participating in a group activity, they are also validating themselves.

Scully and Marolla (1985) also associated MPR to male camaraderie. In their sample of rapists, they found that the perpetrators of MPR regarded rape as an adventure or recreational activity. They saw it as a challenge to be able to “perform” in that situation and it was a source of reward. Themes of power, control, and dominance were also identified as being present.

These earlier theories differed from each other in the factors that they proposed played a crucial role in MPR. For example, while Blanchard (1959) considered that individual factors, such as sexual interests were central to MPR, the feminist theories highlighted socio-cultural factors such as negative and stereotypical attitudes towards women. Only Amir's (1971) theory included an interaction of various factors similar to those proposed by the most recent theory of MPR developed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013).

### **3. Multi-Factorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending (MPSO)**

Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) proposed a conceptual framework of MPR which was developed from the combination of two theories of human violent behavior. The first theory arose from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work related to the need for etiological models to consider factors at each level of an ecological model, in order to successfully reach a comprehensive explanation. These levels include ontogenic, micro-, exo-, and macro-levels. The second theory was the Proximal Confluence Model (White & Kowalski, 1998), which



considers that violence is due to the interaction of two or more people and the contextual environment.

Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) proposed that it is necessary to consider multiple factors when conceptualizing MPR, which include the interaction of the individual, as well as the sociocultural and situational context where the assault occurred. A multi-factorial model of MPSO was, therefore, constructed by them which is an adaptation of White and Kowalski's (1998) Proximal Confluence Model. Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg (2004) had previously adapted White and Kowalski's model to develop their multi-factorial model of war time rape. This model of war time rape also influenced the conceptualization of Harkins and Dixon's (2010, 2013) model of MPSO. Essentially, Harkins and Dixon's (2010, 2013) model proposes that various factors (individual, socio-cultural and situational) and the interaction between them play a role in different types of MPR (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE ABOUT HERE

### **3.1. Individual factors**

Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) proposed that numerous individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits, developmental factors and sexual preferences) contribute to whether a person takes part in an act of sexual aggression. They highlighted two factors which they believed increase the probability of a person engaging in sexual violence. These are deviant sexual interests and leadership traits. It was suggested by them that in some situations, it is likely that deviant sexual interests interacting with other risk factors may increase the probability of a MPR. This could be especially likely for the initiation of MPRs against children (e.g., child sex rings). Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) also considered that some

MPRs would not take place without the presence of a person in the group with leadership traits who is able to influence the offending behavior of the group.

### ***3.1.1. Earlier explanatory theories of MPR***

Some of the earlier explanatory theories of MPR also considered that individual factors played a role in this type of sexual assault. For example, the psychodynamic theory (Blanchard, 1959; Sanday, 2007) proposed that sexual preferences (i.e., homosexual feelings of the group members for one another) were a central factor. Amir (1971), on the other hand, highlighted other individual factors such as age (adolescence), belonging to a lower socio-economic group, having a tendency for aggressive behavior and heightened sexual desires related to the adolescent stage of development. Even though feminist theories considered that MPR can be found in all male communities, some authors (Lees, 2002) stated that it is more evident in adolescence as it coincides with the development of the “masculine” identity. Groth and Birnbaum (1979) whose perspective was related to the theories of power, control and male camaraderie suggested that perpetrators of MPR could have a range of negative feelings such as inadequacy and vulnerability and those related to humiliation and frustration. In relation to leadership traits, most of the earlier theories underlined the importance of a leader in the initiation of a MPR (Amir, 1971; Blanchard, 1959; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979).

### ***3.1.2. Empirical evidence***

#### ***3.1.2.1. Socio-demographic characteristics***

In terms of the research evidence for the role of individual factors in MPR, a number of empirical studies have examined socio-demographic characteristics including age and ethnicity. These include studies that compared perpetrators of MPR to lone sex offenders (Amir, 1979; da Silva, Woodhams, & Harkins, 2013; Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Wright & West,

1981) and studies that specifically examined characteristics of perpetrators of MPR (Horvath & Kelly, 2009; Porter & Alison, 2006). Perpetrators of MPR are generally younger than lone sex offenders and a great number of them are typically aged between the adolescent years and early twenties. However, it is important to note that most of these studies also found adult perpetrators of MPR. Furthermore, although Jewkes and Sikweyiya (2013) found a high number of young and older perpetrators of MPR in their South African sample, they highlighted that one-quarter of their sample consisted of individuals older than 26 years. These authors concluded that MPR seems to be frequently committed for the first time in the adolescent years, but it is not confined to this developmental stage. Bijleveld and Soudijn (2008) also found that almost one-third of their sample were older than 27 years and highlighted the need for further research examining the characteristics of these older perpetrators of MPR. Etgar (2013) pointed out that, in the lone sexual offending literature, it has already been established that there are clear differences between child, adolescent and adult sexual offenders (Barbaree & Marshall, 2006; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Chaffin, 2009; Longo & Prescott, 2006; McGrath, Cumming & Burchard, 2003); therefore, this should also be taken into consideration when working with perpetrators of MPR. In relation to ethnicity, several studies found that a significant number of perpetrators of MPR were from ethnic minority groups (Aebi, Vogt, Plattner, Steinhausen, & Bessler, 2012; Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2003; da Silva, Woodhams, et al., 2013; De Wree, 2004; 2010 Horvath & Kelly, 2009; Woodhams, 2008), whereas others did not find this (Gidycz & Koss, 1990; Ullman, 2007).

In terms of education and family background, some studies conducted with juvenile perpetrators of MPR found that these young people generally did poorly in school and had low education levels (Bijleveld, Weerman, Looije, & Hendriks, 2007; De Wree, 2004; Hooing, Jonker, & van Berlo, 2010). Furthermore, Bijleveld et al. (2007) and Hooing et al. (2010) found that perpetrators of MPR were often from single parent homes, whose parents

had separated. Additionally, not only was it common for their carer(s) to be unemployed (Hooing et al., 2010), they often had a combination of socio-economic problems which led to poor employment prospects (De Wree, 2004). Jewkes and Sikweyiya (2013) on the other hand, found that perpetrators of MPR came from more privileged backgrounds than men who had never raped: they earned higher wages and a higher proportion of their mothers had completed school. Their study differs from many other studies of MPR in that not only were adult perpetrators included, but their sample was composed of males in the community, while the samples of the other studies consisted of young males who had been convicted of a MPR. Additionally, Franklin (2013) has identified cases of MPR involving boys and men from higher status backgrounds.

#### *3.1.2.2. Personality traits*

A few studies have examined personality traits of perpetrators of MPR (Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2003; Bijleveld et al., 2007; De Wree, 2004; Jewkes & Sikweyiya, 2013). The majority were conducted with juvenile samples and these studies found that the perpetrators had fairly non-deviant and average personality profiles. Nevertheless, a couple of studies reported that perpetrators of MPR had below average intelligence (Bijleveld et al., 2007; Hart-Kerkhoffs, Vermeiren, Jansen, & Doreleijers, (2011). Jewkes and Sikweyiya (2013) found that the psychopathic trait of blame externalization was higher among men who had raped but at similar levels for lone and multiple perpetrators. However, Machiavellian egocentricity (a second psychopathic trait) was higher for perpetrators of MPR.

#### *3.1.2.3. Sexual interests*

There are no studies that specifically analyze the sexual interests of perpetrators of MPR. Psychodynamic theory proposes that homosexual feelings are central in this type of

sexual offending; however, even Blanchard (1959), who concluded that there was some evidence for this theory, found that in one of the two cases he examined, the sexual feelings that were stimulated did not appear to be homosexual. Additionally, Brownmiller (1975) stated that even though male bonding arises from contempt for women and is supported by distrust, it is not, in itself, homosexual. Furthermore, Groth and Birnbaum (1979) stated that: “Men do not rape woman out of a sexual desire for other men, but they may rape women, in part, as a way to relate to men” (p. 116). They implied that MPR meets a social need rather than a sexual need. Hooing et al. (2010) found that sexual arousal was given as a motive by fewer perpetrators of MPR compared to lone rapists and non-sexual motives seemed to be more prevalent. Recently Alleyne, Gannon, Ó Ciardha, and Wood (2014) developed and conducted a preliminary validation of the Multiple-Perpetrator Rape Interest Scale. They found that a large number of university males in their sample did not emphatically reject an interest in MPR. Moreover, they found that the predictors of sexual interest in MPR were rape-supportive cognitive distortions, violence related cognition and high risk sexual fantasies. Further research conducted with this scale (e.g., with convicted perpetrators of MPR) would make a valuable contribution to the understanding of sexual interests of perpetrators of MPR. Additionally, since MPR is a heterogeneous crime committed by diverse perpetrators from different settings (da Silva, Harkins, & Woodhams, 2013) the development of instruments that measure sexual interest should be tailored for use with different types of perpetrators of MPR, for example, those that commit offenses against children vs. those that assault peers or adults.

#### *3.1.2.4. Leadership*

Several studies have examined leadership in MPR (Amir, 1971; Blanchard, 1959; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; 't Hart-Kerkhoffs et al., 2011; Porter & Alison, 2001, 2004; Woodhams,

Cooke, Harkins, & da Silva, 2012). They have concluded that it is generally possible to identify a leader or an instigator in a great number of offenses. In order to identify leadership in a group, the Scale of Influence (Porter & Alison, 2001) which measures leadership behavior through degree of influence has been used. Porter (2013) concluded that in her studies of MPR, leadership was more commonly demonstrated through participative action than through direct order-giving. The Scale of Influence was further tested by Woodhams et al. (2012) and was found to identify leadership behavior in a significant number of MPRs. However, its validity could be further tested by comparing it to self-reports of leadership in a sample of convicted perpetrators of MPR (Porter, 2013; Woodhams et al., 2012). It is possible to conclude from research in this area that leadership traits are likely to be an important factor in MPR.

Overall, empirical research does provide some evidence for the role of individual factors in MPR. However, a few differences and inconsistencies have been found in the individual factors that have been examined, namely, in socio-demographic characteristics, personality traits and sexual interests. This could suggest that it is likely that there are different types of perpetrators of MPR. Chambers, Horvath, and Kelly (2010) proposed a typology of four types of MPR: violence, criminality, intimacy, and sexuality. They suggested that there could be an association between these four types and offender characteristics such as age. It is therefore necessary to conduct more research to further explore and test this typology and to possibly identify different types of perpetrators of MPR. Additionally, more studies conducted in the community would be useful to gain a clearer picture of individual characteristics of perpetrators of MPR, since most of the studies have focused on convicted offenders. Moreover, care should be taken to differentiate between juveniles and adults, as it is probable that they differ on various factors including individual characteristics.

### 3.2. Socio-cultural factors

Socio-cultural factors, such as those promoting negative attitudes towards women, male dominance, and hostile masculinity, have been integrated in some multi-factorial theories of lone sexual offending (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Beech, 2006). Similarly, Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) considered that the socio-cultural context which includes cultural norms, myths, beliefs and values about women, sexuality, and violence can play a role in MPR, depending on the individual. They suggested that factors, such as rape culture, rape myths and patriarchy, can influence the sexual behavior of individuals in a group. Rape cultures are characterized by a lack of social constraints that discourage sexual violence (Sanday, 2007), while rape myths are generally false beliefs about sexual violence that are widely held and that help justify sexual assaults against women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Patriarchy is related to traditional and rigid beliefs about gender roles where masculinity is seen as dominant and femininity is seen as submissive (Henry et al., 2004). This can lead to what Malamuth et al. (1991) termed as *hypermasculinity* which are exaggerated male stereotypical behaviors that can play a role in the initiation of sexual aggression. Harkins and Dixon (2013) identified studies where the males involved in a MPR held patriarchal beliefs and hostile attitudes towards their female victims (Bourgois, 1996; Hunter, Hazelwood & Slesinger, 2000). They concluded that rape culture, rape myths and patriarchy, in combination with other factors of the model can play a role in increasing the likelihood of MPR.

#### 3.2.1. Earlier explanatory models of MPR

Most of the earlier explanatory models of MPR identified socio-cultural factors as contributing to this form of sexual assault. Amir (1979) stated that one of the factors present

in MPR is related to distinctive tensions (including negative attitudes towards females) which are felt not only by the individuals but by the whole group. Socio-cultural factors, such as rape culture, rape myths and patriarchy, were central to feminist theories. For example, Franklin (2004) identified various factors which she believed were present in MPR. These included an exercise of masculine social power and control, punishment of individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms and an exhibition of aggression which is seen as proving masculinity. She concluded that MPR is used, on the one hand, to prove masculinity to peers and, on the other hand, to punish perceived deviations and violations of gender norms, which can be against women or men who are seen as feminine. Groth and Birnbaum (1979) believed that one of the reasons that the follower takes part in a MPR is to validate his masculinity. They suggested that the offenders appear to be using the victim as a means of interacting with other men and they conform with what they believe is expected of them.

### ***3.2.2. Empirical evidence***

In a few empirical studies, there is evidence of the existence of socio-cultural factors in MPR. For example, Scully and Marolla (1985) interviewed convicted rapists including perpetrators of MPR and identified themes of power, control and dominance over women which are evident in the following quote: “We felt powerful, we were in control. I wanted sex and there was peer pressure. She wasn’t like a person, no personality, just dominance on my part. Just to show I could do it-you know, macho.” (p. 260). O’Sullivan (1991) examined acquaintance MPR on campus and considered that it was normative and an outgrowth of conventional sex roles. She identified various factors that she believed were key in MPR commission which included attitudes towards women and gender roles. She highlighted how studies of college students identified the relationship between traditional sex-role attitudes and tolerance and prevalence of rape (Berger, Searles, Salem, & Pierce 1986; Hall, Howard,



& Boezio, 1986). Additionally, Hooing et al. (2010) found that the young perpetrators of MPR in their sample had negative attitudes towards girls. Furthermore, Jewkes and Sikweyiya (2013) reported that men who had raped, more often engaged in behaviors that showed dominance over women and tried to emphasize a heterosexual masculinity. The authors believed that this was associated to ideas of male sexual entitlement and gender hierarchy.

It is, therefore, possible to conclude that research does provide evidence for the importance of socio-cultural factors in MPR. Not only do most of the explanatory theories consider that this factor plays a role in this type of sexual offending, but empirical research provides clear evidence to support this claim.

### **3.3. Situational factors**

Situational factors are also seen as playing a role in sexual violence including MPR. These situational factors can be strong enough to overcome any inhibiting socio-cultural factors (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Zimbardo, 2007). Furthermore, Henry et al. (2004) considered that these situational factors included elements that could act as a trigger or a disinhibitor in a given situation. Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) suggested that some particular settings are more conducive to MPR; for example, settings where exaggerated sexuality is common (e.g., fraternities) or where hostile masculinity is acceptable (e.g., war). Other unique settings that were referred by them were residential schools, where issues of power and powerlessness are present and pedophile organizations where individuals seek out others with similar attitudes and belief systems.

#### ***3.3.1. Earlier exploratory theories of MPR***

In the earlier exploratory theories, situational factors in MPR were also identified. For example, Amir's (1971) theory includes situational elements, such as the atmosphere of aggression and sexuality, present in the group and the knowledge, planning, and availability of victims. These would allow the MPR to progress from a potential situation to a concrete one. Drawing from a feminist perspective, O'Sullivan (1991) referred to Sanday's (1981) anthropological study and how some of the correlations that she identified as unique to rape-prone cultures are also applicable to MPR contexts. For example, in the rape-prone societies that Sanday (1981) studied, men and women were not only separated physically, but also by rigid sex-roles, where the male role was more valued. O'Sullivan (1991) pointed out that MPR could, therefore, be expected to be more common among men, who are not only separated from women, but also perform roles exclusive to males, namely, fraternity members and football players.

### ***3.3.2. Contexts of MPR and empirical evidence***

Several contexts have been identified where MPR occurs against peers and adults, including: street gangs, war, college fraternities, sports teams, prisons and anti-gay/lesbian violence, or against children, which include pedophile organizations, child sex rings, day care centers and residential care settings (da Silva, Harkins, et al, 2013; Harkins & Dixon, 2010). In each one of these contexts, there are situational factors which are unique to that setting (e.g., fighting in war) or common to most of the settings (e.g., negative attitudes towards women). Literature related to the different contexts where MPR is committed is limited and most of the research does not differentiate between sexual violence committed by lone and multiple perpetrators (da Silva, Harkins, et al, 2013). In this article, MPR in fraternities and war are briefly examined (see da Silva, Harkins, et al. (2013) and Harkins and Dixon (2010) and for a more in depth description of the different contexts where MPR occurs).

Sexual violence, including MPR, on campus and in fraternity settings has been examined by a few authors (Ehrhart & Sandler, 1985; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000; Martin & Hummer; 1989; Sanday 2007). Most of these authors identified various conditions that they believed could facilitate sexual violence committed by fraternity men. Among these were attitudes supportive of violence, treating women as if they were prey, an obsession with competition, excessive use of alcohol, use of pornography, and lack of external monitoring by the college. Furthermore, Humphrey and Kahn (2000) found that in fraternities and sports teams where there was a high risk of sexual aggression (based on student perceptions about the atmosphere in the fraternity's or team's parties), the members scored higher on measures such as sexual aggression, hostility toward women and male peer support endorsing sexual violence, than teams deemed to be low risk.

War is commonly associated with MPR although there are very few studies that have focused exclusively on MPR. Wood (2013) highlighted that there is a great variation in war time rape, not only across wars but even in the same war across different armed forces. She found that sexual violence in wars can be a strategy of war where it is used by commanders against specific populations (e.g., as sexual torture of political prisoners, the public rape of members of specific groups, a form of collective punishment, or a form of compensation for the combatants). Sexual violence can also emerge as a practice where it is not ordered and occurs even when it does not have strategic benefits. Wood (2013) considered that when commanders tolerate rape that emerged as a practice, they do so because they believe that the costs of prohibition and punishing are too elevated. She concluded that MPR is likely to occur in war at a significant level both as a strategy and a practice. When used as a strategy, MPR will usually take place as a form of terror directed towards either individuals or members of a group (e.g., ethnic cleansing). When MPR occurs as a practice, it may have emerged in contexts where the group forcibly recruits new members (to achieve group

cohesion) or it is the result of small group dynamics also present in other contexts of MPR (e.g., street gangs, sports clubs, fraternities).

It can be concluded that there is some evidence of the existence of the role of situational factors in explaining MPR; however, more research is necessary to better understand the role that these factors play in MPR, especially in settings where research is practically non-existent. These would include contexts that involve children, such as residential schools and pedophile organizations.

### **3.4. Interactions between individual, sociocultural and situational factors**

Harkins and Dixon (2013) not only considered that the three factors described above (individual, socio-cultural and situational) played a role in the likelihood of a MPR occurring, but they also proposed that they interacted in various ways that further increased the likelihood of a MPR. These interactions could be between the individual and the socio-cultural context (internalization of socio-cultural factors), the individual and situational factors (group processes), and the situational context and socio-cultural factors (sub-cultural context) (see Figure 1).

#### ***3.4.1. Internalization of sociocultural factors***

The internalization of socio-cultural factors is related to the degree to which an individual internalizes socio-cultural norms and beliefs and how these influence his individual attitudes and cognitions (Harkins & Dixon, 2013). If individuals live in a socio-cultural context characterized by male dominance and hypermasculinity, some will internalize these factors (Henry et al., 2004). Harkins and Dixon (2013) considered that distorted attitudes, such as those where men believe that they are entitled to sex with women, could increase the likelihood of MPR. They also highlight the importance of cognitive

distortions, which are offense-supportive self-statements or beliefs (Gannon, Ward, & Collie, 2007) and implicit theories that are clusters of beliefs that form part of an underlying schema (Gannon & Polaschek, 2006). It was hypothesized by Harkins and Dixon (2013) that individuals who have offense supportive implicit theories are likely to be influenced by their socio-cultural context. Additionally, they suggested that individuals with offense supportive cognitions are not only likely to seek each other out, but could also influence others in a group, if relevant group processes are present.

Other authors have also considered the internalization of socio-cultural factors in MPR, for example, DeKeserdy and Schwartz (1993) viewed North American society as characterized by the dominance of men and the existence of patriarchal and pro-rape attitudes. In this society it is common to find male social groups where members possess a narrow concept of masculinity (e.g., sports teams, fraternities or friends in the neighborhood bar). In line with what Harkins and Dixon (2013) suggested, these men could be influenced by their socio-cultural context or actively seek out other men with similar attitudes to their own.

#### ***3.4.2. Group processes***

Group processes are related to the interaction between the individual and the situational context and play an important role in an individual's vulnerability to MPR (Harkins & Dixon, 2010, 2013; Henry et al., 2004). This is because they refer to the ways that individuals interact in a specific situation. Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) identified several theories of group behavior which they considered were pertinent to MPR. These are social comparison, social dominance, conformity, obedience to authority, social corroboration, deindividuation, and groupthink. These group processes will be examined in more detail below.

Some authors of the earlier explanatory theories also identified group processes in MPR and highlighted their importance (Amir, 1971; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979). Amir (1971) stated that feelings of uncertainty and internal inhibitions may impede an individual from getting involved in deviant behavior, even though he desires it, or is ready for it. However, he believed that in group situations it is possible for that individual to “deindividualize” himself. This happens because his personal inhibitions are reduced or even neutralized through group processes. Amir (1971) suggested that the principal factors in the group process that contribute to “deindividualization” are: group norms and goals, emotional group dynamics, and leadership phenomena. Additionally, Groth and Birnbaum (1979) stated that in MPR, issues such as status, group membership, dependency, affiliation, and peer recognition are prominent.

#### *3.4.2.1. Empirical evidence*

Group processes and dynamics are unique to sexual offending committed by multiple perpetrators and are recognized as a central factor in MPR. However, there is a lack of empirical research in this area and there are very few studies where perpetrators of MPR have been asked about their motives to participate in the offense. In the few studies where this did occur, there does seem to be some evidence of group processes (Blanchard, 1959; Etgar, 2013; Etgar & Ganot-Prager, 2009; Hooing, et al, 2010). Blanchard (1959) pointed out that it was possible to identify group processes in the MPRs committed by the two groups that he examined (i.e., the existence of a leader that was not only stimulated by the presence of the other group members, but was also able to direct those members’ attention to sexual matters). Furthermore, he noted that these processes were also evident when he evaluated the two groups using a “Group Process Rorschach” (he administered the Rorschach, a projective psychological test, to each group). Similarly, Etgar (2013) noted that group dynamics play a

central role not only in the offense but also in a group therapy setting. She concluded that it is possible to treat members of the same MPR in the same therapeutic group, but it is vital that group dynamics must be taken into account and not only identified, but also addressed in the group. Additionally, Hooing et al. (2010) found that the reasons given for participating in a MPR by young perpetrators were more frequently associated to group processes such as sociability (e.g., “having fun”) and social dominance (e.g., “feeling masculine in the offence”) than to sexual motives.

A brief description of each of the group processes identified by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) follows, and where possible, references are made to studies that either offer evidence to support the group process or are theoretically in accordance with it.

The need for an individual to meet certain interpersonal needs such as inclusion, control and affection is an explanation for the formation of groups (Schultz, 1967). In order to explain how the needs for inclusion and affection are met in groups, social comparison theory hypothesizes that individuals look to others for support of their beliefs. Harkins and Dixon (2013) suggested that social comparison theory could explain why, in some MPRs, individuals that do not want to participate in the sexual assault go along with it in an attempt to try to meet other needs from the group, such as inclusion and affection. Etgar and Ganot-Prager (2009) provide a quote from a perpetrator of MPR that clearly demonstrates this need for inclusion: “I did it to become like one of the group” (p. 311). Moreover, Groth and Birnbaum (1979) believed that the follower takes part in this type of assault as a way to be accepted by his co-offenders and maintain membership in the group.

Social dominance theory, on the other hand, is related to the interpersonal need for control described by Schultz (1967). This theory states that “stratification systems”, which are perceived social hierarchies (e.g., based on age, gender, ethnicity, social class, religion, and nation) play a central role in intergroup relations (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In

accordance with this theory, Harkins and Dixon (2013) suggested that some people may become involved in a MPR in an attempt to exercise or maintain control over others that they perceive as having a lower status in the hierarchy. They considered that these hierarchies could be based on age and would be relevant in MPRs against children, or on gender and be associated with perpetrators of MPR against women committed by fraternities and street gangs, or even on ethnicity and/or religion and be found in MPRs in war. Groth and Birnbaum (1979) associated MPR to control and power and they considered that a leader of a MPR has the need to feel in control, not only of the victim, but also of his co-offenders. Being the leader gives him a sense of power and mastery. Furthermore, Jewkes and Sikweyiya (2013) reported that factors such as dominance over women, gender hierarchy and male sexual entitlement contributed to MPR.

Conformity applies to individuals changing their attitudes, statements, or behavior in order to be consistent with group norms (Baron & Kerr, 2003). Rewards and punishments controlled by the group influence conformity; for example, conformity is likely to occur when a group has to come to a unanimous agreement and those who disagree are rejected or punished in some way. Harkins and Dixon (2013) stated that some individuals may participate in a MPR that they would not have started on their own so as not to lose rewards they believe they get from the group, or to avoid punishment or rejection if they decide not to participate. They suggested that conformity may be present in, for example, abuse in day care centers, street gangs and fraternities. One of the perpetrators of MPR in Etgar and Ganot-Prager's (2009) study clearly demonstrated his fear of rejection in the following quote: "If I don't join in with everyone, I will be rejected" (p. 311).

Milgram (2005) stated that obedience to authority describes behaviors of individuals when obeying orders from people they see as their superiors or leaders. He highlighted how individuals may, under orders, engage in behaviors that would be inconceivable if acting on



their own. In MPRs this could occur if there is a person in the group occupying an authority position, for example, in war, where soldiers were ordered to rape by their superiors (Harkins & Dixon, 2013). As noted above, there is evidence that in some wars, orders are given to commit a MPR (Wood, 2013).

Social corroboration is found in groups whose members offer support for shared attitudes or choices which results in an increase in the confidence of those attitudes or choices (Baron & Kerr, 2003). In MPR contexts, social corroboration could increase confidence in beliefs that support this type of sexual offense if such behavior were shared by the other members of a group. One example would be the acceptance of the sexual abuse of children amongst those who are members of pedophilic groups (Harkins & Dixon, 2013). There is a lack of research on MPR in settings with children; however, in some fraternities, there is evidence for social corroboration. Martin and Hummer (1989) considered that the characteristics of some fraternities, their members and practices create a sociocultural environment conducive to the use of coercion in sexual relations with women. For example, these fraternities value a certain type of masculinity which is defined by wealth, dominance, competition, sexual ability, and capacity to drink alcohol. Men who are seen as possessing these characteristics are sought out and selected to join these fraternities.

Goldstein (2002) considered that deindividuation is the process that takes place when a person loses their sense of individuality and becomes submerged in a group. Moreover, Baron and Kerr (2003) believed that by losing their sense of individuality, a person feels less self-conscious, which in turn facilitates their involvement in anti-social behavior.

Deindividuation also allows them to attribute responsibility to others and, in that way, absolve themselves of guilt. Additionally, Zimbardo (2007) stated that deindividuation contributes to a person feeling anonymous and therefore permits them to act without self-monitoring, accountability and responsibility. Deindividuation can therefore explain how a

perpetrator can lose his sense of individuality and responsibility and go along with the group in a MPR (Harkins & Dixon, 2013).

The process of groupthink is related to poor decision making in groups in which there is pressure to conform. This poor decision making results from an attempt to reduce conflict and a hesitation to critically assess other options and offer alternatives (Janis, 1982). It can be prompted by various factors which include a directive leader, excessive group cohesion, concordance of ideology, insistence on unanimity, insecure members, and group isolation. Harkins and Dixon (2013) believed that groupthink could be present in some MPRs and could be more relevant to contexts such as street gangs, fraternities, residential homes, and war.

O'Sullivan (1991) identified two other group processes in MPR that were not directly examined by Harkins and Dixon (2013): diffusion of responsibility and modeling. Diffusion of responsibility referred to situations where feelings of responsibility for the welfare of the victim are diminished by the presence of others that are acting in a similar way, since they are seen as sharing the blame. By watching peers sexually assault a woman, she described modeling occurring, since not only do observers learn that it is an appropriate behavior, but also how to do it.

As noted above, some of the earlier explanatory theories proposed that group processes played a role in MPR (Amir, 1971; Blanchard, 1959; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979).

Additionally, Harkins and Dixon (2013) not only identified group processes that they considered were present in MPR but they also emphasized their importance in this type of sexual offending. Although there are few empirical studies that examined the role of group processes in MPR, it is possible to conclude that there is some empirical evidence that supports the existence of these processes.

### **3.4.3. Subcultural context**

Finally, the subcultural context is related to the interaction between specific situational contexts and broader sociocultural factors. Harkins and Dixon (2013) considered that the presence of sociocultural and situational factors together may increase the likelihood of a MPR because certain cultural practices can lead men to sexually offend in groups in a situation favorable to this behavior. Baron and Kerr (2003) propose that groups establish group norms, which are approved attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors for that group, and that these greatly influence the thoughts and behaviors of the group members. Various contexts of MPR have established group norms that permit this type of sexual offending such as fraternities and war (Harkins & Dixon, 2013). Also, male bonding, the purpose of which is to unify men, can be achieved through activities that involve negativity towards females (Curry, 1991). Furthermore, Brownmiller (1975) suggested that sexual activity can facilitate male bonding and group solidarity. Harkins and Dixon (2013) stated that a subcultural context can exist in which group members normalize rape myths and where MPR is acceptable, either because the individuals entered the group with existing beliefs supportive of a rape culture, or they adopted those beliefs once they came into the situation. Related to the sub-cultural context, Jewkes and Sikweyiya (2013) stated that MPR in South Africa has cultural roots associated to gendered practices of adolescent males and may be viewed as legitimate by some adolescent sub-cultures. However, there is a lack of empirical research that directly examines the subcultural context, and further research is necessary for it to be possible to determine if there is empirical evidence for this level of the model.

## **4. Limitations of the existing theories of MPR**

Ward et al. (2006) suggested seven criteria that they considered important when appraising a theory. These are: predictive accuracy, empirical adequacy and scope; internal coherence;

external consistency; unifying power; fertility or heuristic value; simplicity and explanatory depth. In general the majority of the earlier explanatory theories of MPR (i.e., the psychodynamic theory, feminist theories and theories of power, control and male bonding) do not meet many of these criteria. They are too simplistic and lack explanatory depth; therefore, they are not able to provide a comprehensive explanation for some actual findings.

Furthermore, they have some contradictions and gaps and lack the capacity to generate new predictions. Amir's (1971) sociological theory of group rape considered more factors to be present in MPR than the earlier theories, but nevertheless it also fails to meet various criteria.

The most recent theory of MPR, the Multi-Factorial Theory of MPSO (Harkins & Dixon, 2010, 2013), on the other hand, meets a great number of the criteria proposed by Ward et al (2006). This theory is able to account for some existing empirical findings and adequately explain phenomena such as group processes. It is consistent with some of the earlier explanatory theories proposed for this type of sexual offending as well as with other theories of sexual offending, which propose that an interaction of various individual, socio-cultural and situational factors result in sexual abuse (Ward & Beech, 2006). It also unifies research related to group processes with research on sexual offending and allows for the generation of new predictions in the area of MPR. Nonetheless, it does have gaps and lacks explanatory depth in some of its factors and further research is necessary to address this.

## **5. Conclusions**

The explanations of MPR have ranged from individual to socio-cultural and situational factors and to combinations of these. The Multi-Factorial Theory of MPSO proposed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013) is the most comprehensive theory to date and not only includes these three factors but also the interaction between them, while emphasizing the effects of group processes. The purpose of this article was to survey the empirical research on

MPR to determine what empirical support there is for this model and where the knowledge gaps lie.

There is some evidence for the role of individual factors in MPR. However, the literature is marked by inconsistencies. A great number of the existing studies describe the typical perpetrator of MPR as a young, ethnic minority male, from a single parent household, with low education, poor employment prospects, an average non-deviant personality profile, and whose motives to participate in the assault were predominantly non-sexual (Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2003; Bijleveld et al., 2007; De Wree, 2004; 't Hart-Kerkhoffs, Vermeiren, Jansen, & Doreleijers, 2011; Hooing et al, 2010). However, there are a few studies that indicate that some of the perpetrators of MPR are from more privileged backgrounds (Franklin, 2013; Jewkes & Sikweyiya, 2013) and psychopathic traits were detected in their psychological characteristics (Jewkes & Sikweyiya, 2013). These inconsistencies could suggest that there are different types of perpetrators of MPR and further research is necessary to identify them. Distinguishing between adolescent and adult perpetrators is also necessary, as it is likely that they possess different characteristics and even motives to participate in a MPR. In addition, more studies conducted with community samples are needed to provide information about unconvicted perpetrators of MPR.

In relation to the socio-cultural and situational factors proposed as contributing to MPR, there is greater consensus in the studies conducted and evidence supports the importance of these factors (Amir , 1971; Groth & Birnbaum, 1979; Franklin 2004; Sanday, 2007; Wood, 2013). Nevertheless, further research is required, especially in relation to the situational factors, in order to gain a better understanding of the specific mechanisms that contribute to a MPR in different settings.

What appears to be unique to this type of sexual offending is the role played by group processes and dynamics and the possible presence and influence of a leader. There is clear

evidence supporting the presence and role of a leader in MPR (Porter & Alison, 2001; Woodhams et al., 2012). In relation to group processes, there is a lack of empirical studies, but the few that exist do show some evidence for the existence of these processes (Blanchard, 1959; Etgar, 2013; Etgar & Prager, 2009; Hooing, et al, 2010). For a better understanding of the role of group dynamics and leadership in MPR, it would be helpful to gather information from the perpetrators themselves (e.g., interviews with convicted perpetrators of MPR regarding their role and involvement in the offense).

In conclusion, within the limited research that exists on MPR, some empirical evidence can be found that supports the Multi-Factorial Theory of MPSO proposed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013); however, there are also clear evidence gaps. As it stands, this theory could be a useful guide to researchers and practitioners in the area of MPR who, in turn, can contribute to its testing and further development. Further research, where community samples are included, a distinction is made between adolescents and adults, and specific contexts are examined, would provide more information about individual, socio-cultural and situational factors and the possible existence of types of perpetrators of MPR. Additionally, more research using samples of convicted perpetrators of MPR, where group processes, sexual interests and personality traits are analyzed, could contribute to the further development of an effective theory of MPR.

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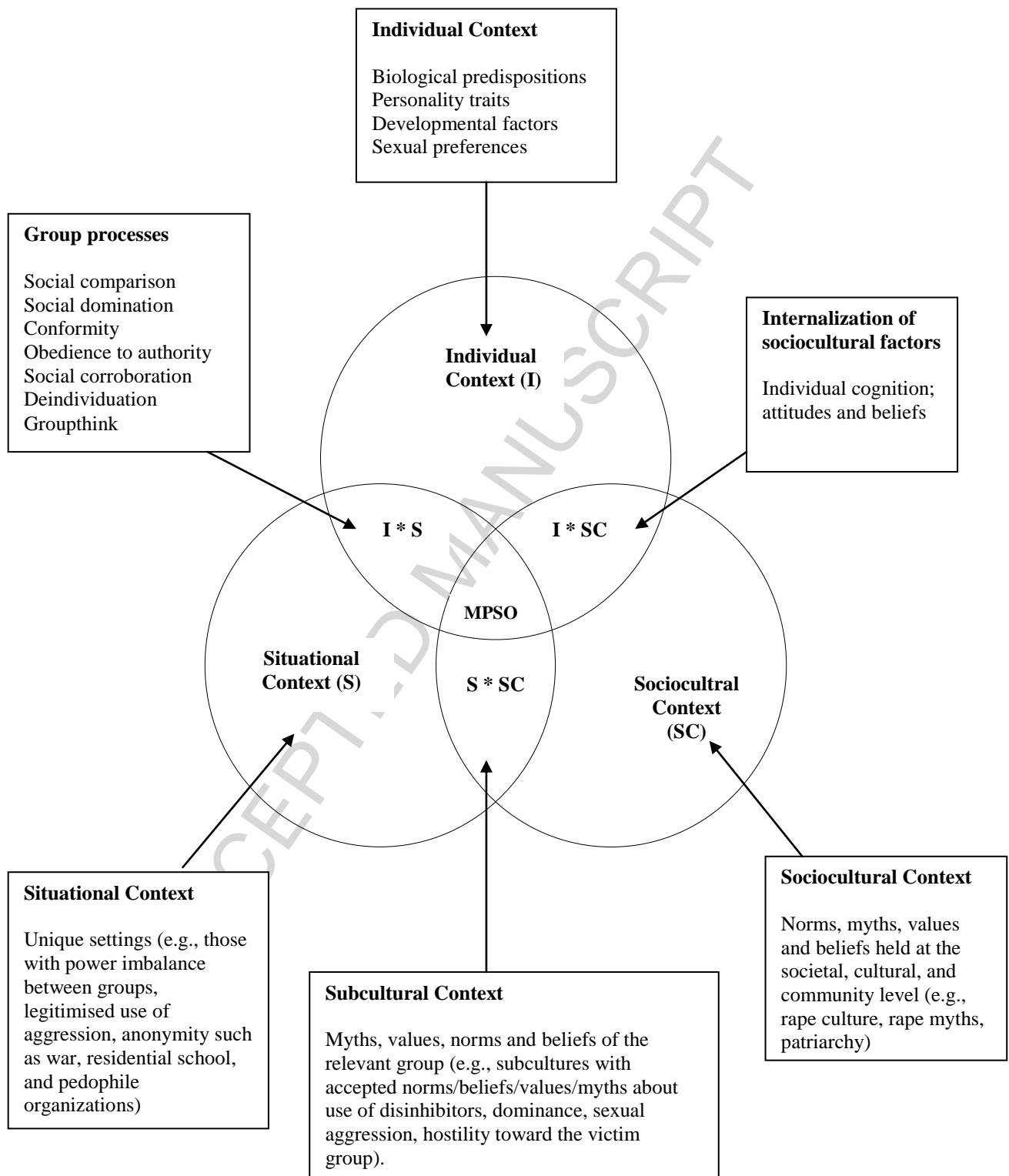


Figure 1: Multi-Factorial Model of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending. Adapted from “A multi-factorial approach to understanding multiple perpetrator sexual offending,” (p. 77) by L. Harkins & L. Dixon, 2013, in J. Wood & T. Gannon (Eds.), *Crime and crime reduction: The importance of group processes* (pp. 75-95). New York: Routledge. Copyright (2014) by Taylor & Francis. Adapted with permission.

### Highlights

- Explanatory theories of multiple perpetrator rape (MPR) are critically examined
- The most comprehensive theory of MPR was proposed by Harkins and Dixon (2010, 2013)
- Empirical research is surveyed that supports factors proposed by theories of MPR.
- Some evidence was found that supports Harkins and Dixon's (2010, 2013) theory of MPR