

RE-VISIONING THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE CONTINUUM

By Lydia Guy

con·tin·u·um (k n - t n y - m) *Pronunciation Key* n. pl.

A continuous extent, succession, or whole, no part of which can be distinguished from neighboring parts except by arbitrary division.

sex·u·al (s k sh - l) *Pronunciation Key* adj.

Of, relating to, involving, or characteristic of sex, sexuality, the sexes, or the sex organs and their functions.

vi·o·lence (v - l ns) *Pronunciation Key* n.

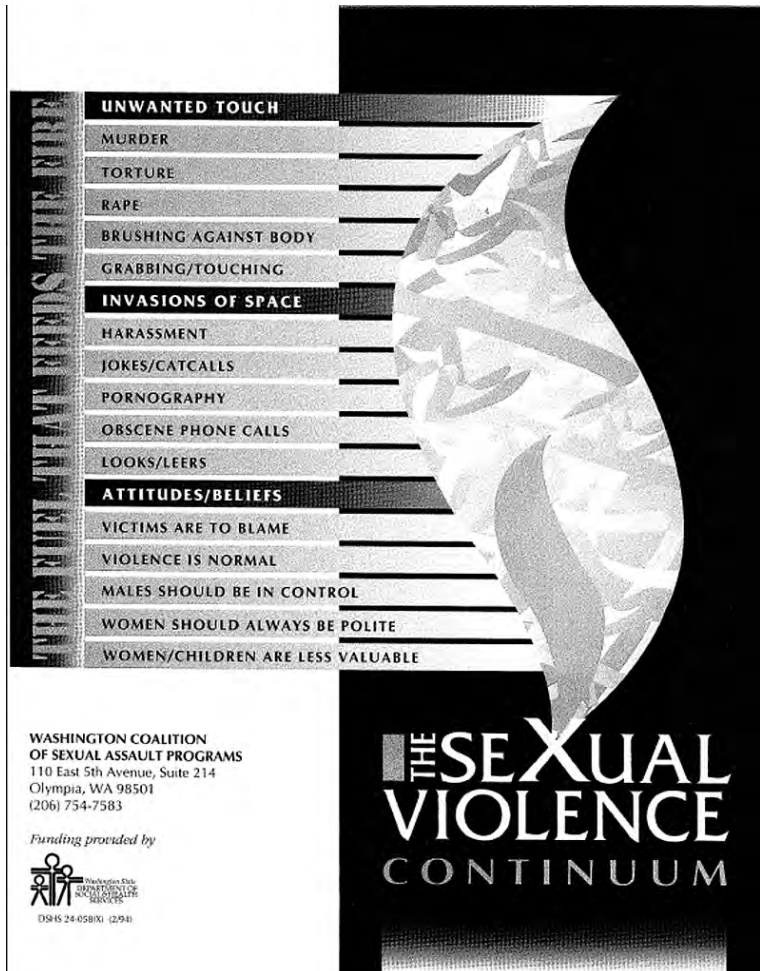
- 1. Physical force exerted for the purpose of violating, damaging, or abusing: crimes of violence.*
- 2. The act or an instance of violent action or behavior.*
- 3. Abusive or unjust exercise of power.*

Rape as a cultural phenomenon, or stated more simply, rape as a predictable consequence of the power differential between men and women has been a topic of discussion since the creation of the first rape crisis centers. Academics tended to use terms like patriarchy, misogyny and sexism and those words became integral parts of the lexicon used by the women who became the founding mothers of our current sexual assault service delivery system. The basic premise of this concept is that rape does not happen just because one individual chooses to rape another. Rape happens because there are attitudes, and norms that allow it to happen.

“WHAT IS RAPE CULTURE? It is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It occurs in a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the *norm*. In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. This violence, however, is neither biologically nor divinely ordained. Much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change.” Buchwald, E. et. al. (1993) *Transforming a Rape Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

The continuum was designed as a visual aid to illustrate the concept of rape culture. The objective was to provide a simple way to describe a complex phenomenon. The interesting thing about portraying something as a picture is that even though we draw the picture to represent how we see the issue, how we see the issue is affected by our experience of looking at the picture. In most visual conceptualizations the image not only reflects our belief system but also shapes our belief system. This is one of the things that make them so profound, and the main reason I choose to re-envision the sexual violence continuum.

There are many depictions of the sexual violence continuum. The most common shapes have been straight lines, spirals and circles. They all have a key factor in common, they depict sexual violence as a range or succession of related behaviors. Some sexual violence continua list individual acts of sexually violating behaviors while others tend toward less tangible items such as norms or attitudes. Some depictions are very careful not to present sexual violence as a progression from “minor” to “extreme,” this is usually done to respect the fact that we cannot quantify the experiences of survivors. As I reviewed different sexual violence continua I noticed another thing they all had in common: they all had strong linkages between sexism and sexual violence, the base underlying assumption that sexual violence is the inevitable result of sexism.



Sexual Assault Awareness Week - WCSAP 1994

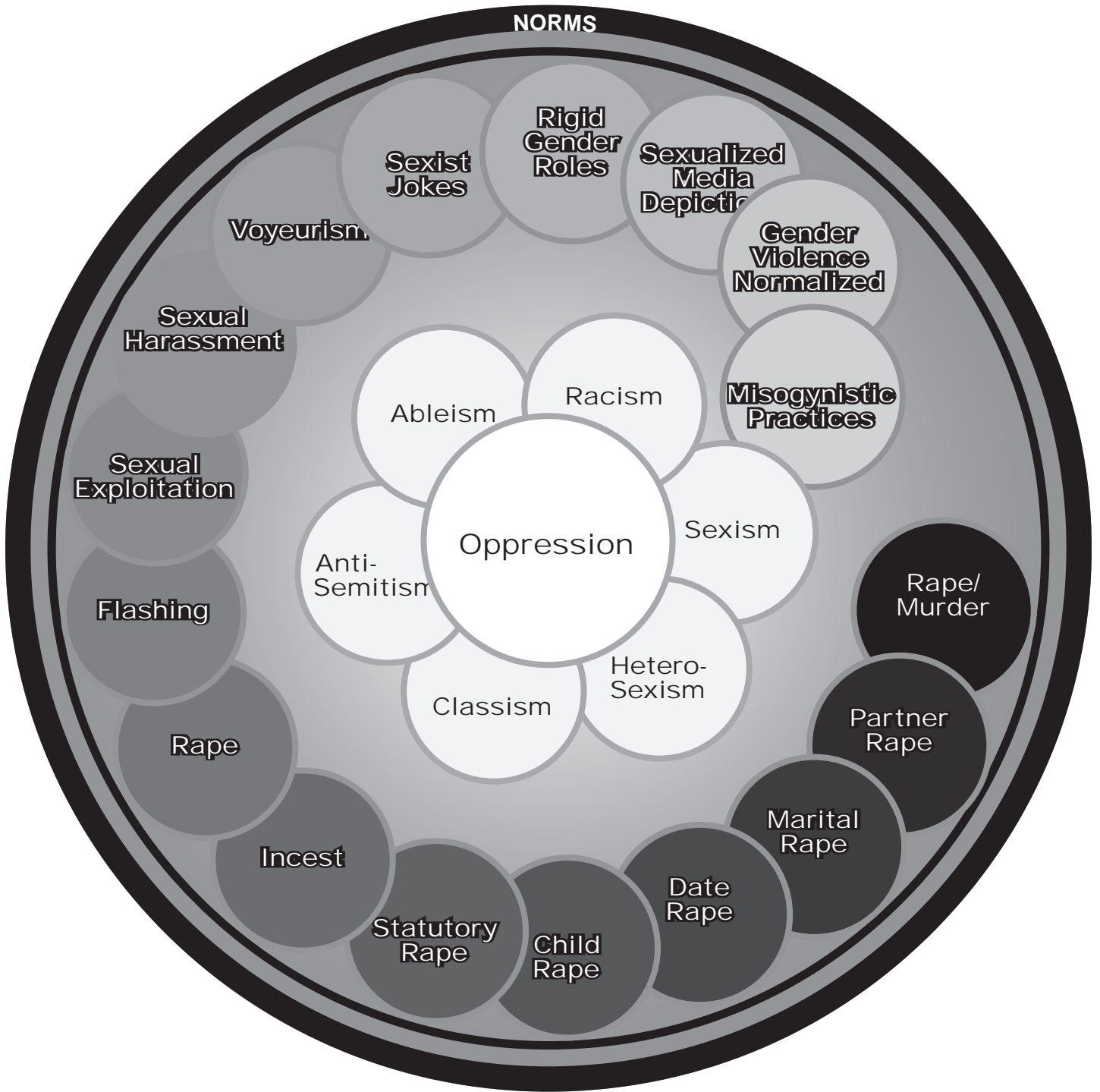
“Feminist thinkers engaged in radically provisioning central tenets of feminist thought must continually emphasize the importance of sex, race and class as factors which together determine the social construction of femaleness, as it has been so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of many women active in feminist movement that gender is the sole factor determining destiny.”

*bell hooks, 1989
Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*

The assumption that sexism and sexual violence are inextricably linked together seemed reasonable at first glance. The current depictions seem to imply that we can end sexual violence by ending sexism alone. It has been my belief that it is impossible to end a single oppression; to work to end one oppression requires us to work to end them all. It was then I realized my critique wasn't just about the continuum but about rape culture and feminist theory as a whole. I decided to try to create a more holistic depiction. My hope is that by providing a visual conception of the continuum that is more inclusive, of class, race, disability status, sexual orientation and anti-Semitism in addition to gender that it will remind and inspire us to develop a vision of comprehensive sexual violence prevention work which routinely encompasses all forms of oppression.

This version of the sexual violence continuum depicts a range of sexually violating behaviors in overlapping circles as grey circles on a grey background. The background is meant to represent society. The outer ring of the society circle includes the word "Norms": representing the reinforcing nature of norms. In the center is the word "Oppression," and overlapping white circles listing six specific forms of oppression. This is meant to convey the idea that all forms of oppression are linked and are often experienced in conjunction with one another. In the animated version the grey circles rearrange themselves into a non-ordered overlapping pattern which attempts to express the fact that sexual violence is very rarely experienced as a discreet event and one's experience of sexual violence is impacted by one's experience of oppression.

My goal was to create a continuum which clearly shows the connection between all forms of oppression and violence. One way to show a connection would be to make continua depicting different types of violence, for instance the "The Racist Violence Continuum" and "The Heterosexist/Homophobic Violence Continuum." Each continuum would have a similar range of behaviors but would be related to the specific type of violence. However, the center of the circle would remain the same. If we were to place several of the continua on top of one another it would show all forms of violence as a result of oppression and all forms of oppression contributing to all types of violence. Given this framework, we may choose to focus on one type of anti-violence work but understand the interconnectedness of the oppressions. Creating and utilizing frameworks that incorporate our knowledge, philosophy and experience is one way to help ensure the creation of innovative and relevant programming.



Sexual Violence Continuum

Lydia Guy - WCSAP 2006