CHAPTER 19

Psychological Sequelae to Rape
Assessment and Treatment Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

The scientific study of the effects of rape is in its infancy, as is the development and evaluation of intervention strategies for rape-related problems. This state of affairs poses certain problems for the writer charged with the task of reviewing virtually nonexistent treatment research and venturing evaluative judgments on the relative merits of behavioral versus more traditional approaches. Therefore, this chapter will of necessity be speculative in nature.

Although there are no well-controlled treatment outcome data to guide us, some information is beginning to emerge regarding the aftermath of a rape experience. These are informative as to the types of problems that develop and provide information about how rape-related problems change over time. Moreover, social behavioral learning theory formulations that attempt to predict and explain the development of rape-related problems have received empirical support from assessment research. Additionally, many rape-induced problems appear to be similar to problems that have
proven responsive to various behavioral treatment procedures. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the following areas. First, the scope of the sexual-assault problem and the results of existing research regarding the effects of rape on psychological functioning will be reviewed. Second, a social learning theory model that attempts to explain and predict the development of rape-induced problems will be presented. The advantages of this behavioral model over more traditional conceptualizations will also be discussed. The behavioral procedures that should prove effective in the treatment of rape-related problems will be described. Treatment recommendations will be offered for problems that occur immediately following the rape and for those that represent more long-term problems.

THE SCOPE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

One of the most difficult problems in sexual assault research is to obtain an accurate estimate of the incidence of the problem. There is considerable support for the contention that the number of reported rapes has increased considerably over the past few years. Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reports state that the number of rape offenses reported to law enforcement officials rose from 37,900 in 1970 to 63,020 in 1977, an increase of 166%.

Many rape offenses are never reported. Therefore, a major problem is obtaining some estimate of the number of nonreported rapes. Chappell (1976) has employed a victimization study model to obtain estimates of underreporting. A randomly selected sample of the population of interest was interviewed regarding the frequency of offenses perpetrated on them that were not reported. Chappell (1976) reports that a national victimization study conducted in 1967 found that the ratio of unreported to reported rapes was 3.5 to 1, whereas a more recent pilot study in two cities discovered a 2 to 1 ratio.

The results of these victimization studies have two major implications. First, victims who report a rape experience represent somewhere between 22% and 33% of all victims who are raped. Thus, some victims who seek services might be known to the treatment provider as having been victimized, but the treatment professional will see many clients whose rape experiences are unknown to him or her. Second, it is, therefore, recommended that all female clients should be asked if they have ever been victims of sexual assault. Because of the social stigma perceived by many victims, they might not volunteer the information unless it is requested.

Generally, forcible rape is legally defined as some type of penile-vaginal contact and/or penetration that is effected by force, threat of force, threat of retaliation, intoxication, or fraud. Obviously other types of unwanted sexual contact are equally disturbing, and many states have adopted new legal definitions that reflect this reality. In South Carolina, a