

ARE PER-INCIDENT RAPE-PREGNANCY RATES HIGHER THAN PER-INCIDENT CONSENSUAL PREGNANCY RATES?

Jonathan A. Gottschall and Tiffani A. Gottschall
St. Lawrence University

Is a given instance of rape more likely to result in pregnancy than a given instance of consensual sex? This paper undertakes a review and critique of the literature on rape-pregnancy. Next, it presents our own estimation, from U.S. government data, of pregnancy rates for reproductive age victims of penile-vaginal rape. Using data on birth control usage from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, we then form an estimate of rape-pregnancy rates adjusted for the substantial number of women in our sample who would likely have been protected by oral contraception or an IUD. Our analysis suggests that per-incident rape-pregnancy rates exceed per-incident consensual pregnancy rates by a sizable margin, even before adjusting for the use of relevant forms of birth control. Possible explanations for this phenomenon are discussed, as are its implications to ongoing debates over the ultimate causes of rape.

KEY WORDS: Evolution; Pregnancy; Rape

Critics of evolutionary theories of human rape, especially those theories that invoke the possibility of rape-specific adaptation, often deem rape-pregnancy statistics critically important. These critics correctly argue that for rape adaptation to develop the reproductive benefits that accrued to ancestral rapists must have outweighed the reproductive costs. They often

Received May 29, 2002; accepted July 11, 2002; revised version received September 20, 2002.

Address all correspondence to Dr. Jonathan A. Gottschall, First Year Program, c/o English Department, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 13617. Email: jgottschall@stlawu.edu

Copyright 2003 by Walter de Gruyter, Inc., New York
Human Nature, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 1–20.

1045-6767/03/\$1.00+.10

cite low reckonings of rape-pregnancy in American women, relative to rates of consensual pregnancy, as evidence that the meager reproductive benefits of rape could never have outweighed the potentially staggering costs (see Baron 1985; Coyne 2000; Dusek 1984; Harding 1985; Stanford 2000; Sunday 1985). This conclusion is suspect on both theoretical and practical grounds. On theoretical grounds it is suspect because it overlooks some basic facts about how evolution works. On practical grounds it is suspect because it is based on a literature of rape-pregnancy rates that is maladapted to the question at hand. The literature on rape-pregnancy rates was not produced with an eye toward estimating the reproductive benefits of rape in ancestral times: it was produced mainly by medical researchers and public health professionals whose primary interest was—quite properly—the physical and psychological health of rape victims. For methodological reasons that will be addressed here, these studies cannot be meaningfully compared with studies of consensual pregnancy rates, and they cannot serve as a basis for estimating rape-pregnancy rates in ancestral populations. The purpose of this study is to provide an estimate of rape-pregnancy rates that can be meaningfully compared with studies of consensual pregnancy rates while establishing a better basis for estimating what the relationship between rape-pregnancy rates and consensual pregnancy rates might have been in the environments of our ancestors. Our analysis suggests that per-incident rape-pregnancy rates exceed per-incident consensual pregnancy rates by a sizable margin. Possible explanations for this phenomenon are discussed, as are its implications to ongoing debates over the ultimate causes of rape.

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF RAPE-PREGNANCY

There have been many attempts to estimate per-incident rape-pregnancy rates, the frequency with which a single act of forced intercourse results in pregnancy. Researchers' findings range from 1% to 5% (Beebe 1991; Burgess and Holstrom 1973; Harding 1985; Hayman et al. 1973; Holmes et al. 1995; Koss and Harvey 1991; MacDonald 1971; NARAL Foundation 1979; Warner 1980) with a high estimate of 10% (Bode 1978). The problems in studies of rape-pregnancy, as indicated by their fluctuating conclusions, are numerous. For example, comparison between studies is complicated by enormous methodological inconsistency on what factors constitute the act of rape. That is, should rape-pregnancy statistics only consider instances of penile-vaginal intercourse or should they include forms of sexual assault that cannot result in pregnancy? There is also methodological inconsistency in the ages of victims studied. Should researchers focus only on reproductive age women or should they include pre-menarche and post-reproductive age victims as well? Moreover, many studies of rape-