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RAPE OF OLDER PEOPLE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: CHALLENGING THE ‘REAL-RAPE’ STEREOTYPE

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Despite extensive research on rape and sexual violence, there exists an important gap in knowledge around older victims. This gap exists in relation to national statistics (the Crime Survey for England and Wales has an upper age limit of 59 for intimate violence), and by both criminologists and gerontologists. This research used an under-utilized method by criminologists—freedom of information requests to police forces. Data were obtained from 45 forces relating to 655 cases of rape and sexual assault by penetration over a five-year period and were analysed in relation to victim and perpetrator age, relationship, location of crime and type of offence. The findings challenge the dominant real-rape stereotypes and have implications for future research, policy and practice.

Keywords: rape, sexual assault, victims, older victims, age, ageing

Introduction

There has been a global explosion of literature examining the prevalence, impacts and experiences of sexual violence over the last four decades. However, there is a notable gap in relation to research investigating, or even including, sexual violence against people in mid and later life. This article reports on the quantitative findings of a national mixed-method exploring sexual violence against people aged 60 and over—starting at the age where the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) stops asking. It examines the similarities and differences between these findings and the knowledge around rape of younger people and considers these findings in relation to the dominant ‘real-rape’ myths and stereotypes.

Despite the growing research and policy interest in preventing and addressing sexual violence and an equally growing interest in abuse of older women (often referred to as ‘elder abuse’), the intersection of sexual violence against older women has been largely ignored. This is increasingly important as the world population is rapidly ageing. Current predictions estimate that by 2030 over a billion people worldwide are forecast to be over 65. In the United Kingdom, 10.3 million people are aged 65 or over and this number is projected to increase to over 16 million in the next 20 years (Minocha *et al.* 2013).

In England and Wales, there are two main sources of national data on rape. The first is police-recorded data, which collects information on crimes that are reported and properly recorded by the police. The second is the national self-report victimization survey—the CSEW (previously the British Crime Survey). The CSEW collects data on victimization of most types of crimes and since 2004–05 has periodically included a computer-assisted self-completion ‘intimate violence’ module that collects data specifically on domestic and sexual violence (Thompson 2010). As Smith (2006) notes, both

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the CSEW and police-recorded crime statistics contribute to building up the national picture of crime trends and each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. There has never been a national-level academic-led study of rape victimization rates.

The limitations of police statistics in this area are well versed—particularly in relation to the under-reporting of rape to the police (see, e.g. [Brown et al. 2010](#)). However, there are also serious limitations to the CSEW. Of most importance for the purposes of this paper is that it has an upper limit of 59 years old on the intimate violence module—rendering invisible any rape occurring over the age of 60 (also under the age of 16). This is in contrast to the other questions in the CSEW that have no upper age limit. [Walby and Allen \(2004\)](#) suggest that the upper age limit may be because older people may be resistant to using a computer (it uses computer-assisted interviewing) or that they may feel confused about violence from intimate partners. This is problematic as it suggests older people are a homogenous group that cannot use a computer and that there is a distinction between sexual abuse as ‘elder abuse’ and sexual abuse as ‘partner abuse’.

Existing Research on Rape of Older Women

Globally, only a small number of studies have specifically explored rape and sexual assault against older women. In the United Kingdom, only three studies have been published in the last decade ([Jeary 2005](#); [Ball and Fowler 2008](#); [Lea et al. 2011](#)). All of these studies have used police data ([Ball and Fowler 2008](#); [Lea et al. 2011](#)) or other criminal justice agency data ([Jeary 2005](#)). The only study to look specifically at the extent of recorded sexual violence against older people was conducted by [Ball and Fowler’s \(2008\)](#) who focused on the number of recorded offences and characteristics of those offences of sexual violence against older women. The study was based on all recorded offences within a semi-rural English county with a population of approximately 800,000. They analysed all recorded sexual offences over a five-year period ($n = 1,061$) and found 3.1 per cent involved victims aged 55 years or more. [Jeary \(2005\)](#) is the only study to date in the United Kingdom to consider the impacts of experiencing sexual violence on older female survivors. Her study considered case files drawn from HM Prison, probation and the Adult Protection Unit within social services. Using notes from the records held by these services, Jeary reports that the majority of the victim sample had a range of long-term physical and health problems following their experience, including being unable to sleep at night, having nightmares or flashbacks, requiring painkillers as a result of injuries, suffering incontinence since the assault, anxieties and fears about leaving their home or, if the attack happened in their home, fear of living in the property resulting in some moving house or into residential care settings. However, this study is limited in its sampling frame and size, and relies on notes about impacts and long-term effects made by third parties. Furthermore, the majority (two-thirds) of perpetrators in this study were strangers. Only seven cases were perpetrated by a relative, acquaintance or care worker and further data on the type of sexual violence perpetrated by these men are not provided.

The study by [Lea et al. \(2011\)](#) looked specifically at the characteristics of stranger rape cases involving a female victim aged 60 or older. Relevant cases were drawn from the Serious Crime Analysis section of the National Policing Improvement Agency. The researchers compared characteristics of offences, offenders and victims with a

younger control group and found a number of differences. In particular, they report older women were more likely to be raped by a White, male stranger who had a significantly more previous convictions and assaults typically took place in the victim's home. However, no significant differences were found in terms of the age of offender or the level of physical violence used between the two groups. This study echoes previous research findings (Jeary 2005; Ball and Fowler 2008); however, it is limited to stranger cases only and therefore the findings may not be generalizable to cases involving offenders with an existing relationship with the victim.

In summary, a paucity of research has been conducted into sexual violence against older women, with the result that our knowledge and understanding of the prevalence, characteristics and impacts is extremely limited. The existing academic literature suffers from conceptual, operational and methodological weaknesses that have been recognized by a number of researchers (Ball 2005; Jeary 2005; Jones and Powell 2006; Lea *et al.* 2011).

'Real Rape'

The term 'real-rape' was introduced by Estrich (1987) to describe the dominant stereotype around what constitutes rape. Estrich argues this stereotype involves a white, young victim who is attacked at night by a stranger who is motivated by sexual gratification. Since the 1980s a plethora of research has emerged, which has challenged the accuracy of this stereotype; for example in the United Kingdom, national data suggest that only 15 per cent of rapes involve a stranger (Office of National Statistics [ONS] 2015) and research has observed that women are most likely to be assaulted by a partner or acquaintance, often in social situations that involve alcohol (Kelly *et al.* 2005). Despite this, the 'real-rape' stereotype persists in society and is perpetuated by the media who tend to report cases of rape that are in keeping with this stereotype (Korn and Efrat 2004; Franiuk *et al.* 2008; Mahria 2008).

Many police campaigns continue to reflect (and possibly reinforce) the real-rape stereotype involving young women, strangers and acquaintances, alcohol and sexual desirability. The damaging effects of this dominant belief have been well documented: victims are aware they have to convince the police of the legitimacy of their experience (McMillan and Thomas 2009) and cases that confirm to the 'real-rape' stereotype are more likely to result in prosecution (Brown *et al.* 2007; Ellison and Munro 2009). Furthermore, victims who experience rape that does not fit into the real-rape mould are often disbelieved or discredited and may be reluctant to report the rape to the police or other agencies. Women's voluntary sector anti-rape campaigns and activism generally do not perpetuate the real-rape stereotype, but they do typically focus on young women. The notable exception here is the Zero Tolerance 'From 3 to 93—Women are Raped' poster in the 1990s, which showed an older woman, sat watching over a child (assumed to be her great/granddaughter) playing with toys on the floor.

Older rape victims do not fit the 'real-rape' stereotype of a young attractive woman who is attacked because of her sexual desirability. Society tends to view older people as asexual, largely based on ageist attitudes, which view old age as a process of decay, decline and deterioration (Jones and Powell 2006). Sexuality in old age continues to be a taboo subject in society, and the existing academic literature has predominantly focused on sexual health and physiological issues in older age (Kleinplatz 2008) giving

the impression that sex in later life is either non-existent or associated with negative issues. As several researchers have noted, older people are routinely viewed as asexual and undesirable (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Gott and Hinchliff 2003) despite research demonstrating sexual activity continues into later life (Lindau *et al.* 2007; Beckman *et al.* 2008). Women, in particular, are depicted as either unsexy, ‘frigid’ or as ‘cougars’: a term used as a ‘pejorative that reinforces age and gender stereotypes’ (Montemurro and Siefken 2014: 35).

Furthermore, the real-rape stereotype posits that rape occurs late at night in public, a time when older people are less likely to be in public spaces. Thus, the lack of research and the common myths and stereotypes surrounding rape, and societal assumptions about age and ageist attitudes may lead to disbelief or discrediting of the older person’s complaint. Generally, society does not identify older people as being at risk from sexual assault and thus family, friends and professionals may miss the signs (Lea *et al.* 2011: 2304).

Despite the feminist effort to challenge these dominant myths, there has very little research or activism challenging the myth around victim age. As Jones and Powell (2006) point out, feminists have largely distanced themselves from issues relating to older women. Whilst this lack of attention has been pointed out by a number of scholars (Whittaker 1995; Aitken and Griffin 1996; Jones and Powell 2006), there remains a lack of feminist research exploring sexual violence against older women, which may further re-enforce the belief that rape is a young persons’ problem.

Building a Picture of the ‘Real-Rape’ Stereotype for Older People

Despite older victims not fitting the classic ‘real-rape’ stereotype, it would appear from the existing literature and media reports that a specific ‘real-rape’ stereotype for older people has emerged. There are a number of shared similarities between both models, including the gender of the victim and perpetrator (typically female and male, respectively), the relationship to the perpetrator (typically a stranger) and the time of the offence (night). However, there are a number of key differences: instead of the sexual desirability of the victim being the primary reason they are targeted, the real rape of older people stereotype depicts ‘fragility’ and ‘vulnerability’ as the main reason they are victimized. Furthermore, in many cases reported in the media, the rape is often the ‘secondary offence’ to a different principal crime, typically a burglary or other theft.

This real-rape older victim stereotype is illustrated in a number of cases that have been reported in the media over the last few years. Probably the most well-known case of rape involving older victims in the United Kingdom is Delroy Grant, dubbed the ‘Night Stalker’, who was responsible for burgling and raping or sexually assaulting more than 200 elderly women and men over two decades. In the vast majority of cases, the elderly victims did not know Grant, thus fitting the stranger model which underpins the dominant real-rape myth. Victims were depicted as being particularly frail and vulnerable and several newspaper reports of the Delroy case referred to the ‘shocking’ nature of the case; no one could understand why he would choose elderly victims. This links in to the dominant ‘real-rape’ myth that rape is based on sexual desire and gratification, thus attacks on older people are seen as particularly shocking because they are not generally viewed as sexually desirable (Montemurro and Siefken 2014).

Instead, what makes older people victims of ‘real rape’ seems to be their fragility. The inherent vulnerability of the older victim is particularly important in the media coverage

of cases of elderly rape. The recent case of Lee-Joseph Dixon, who forced his way into the home of a woman in her 90s before raping her, was described by the senior crown prosecutor as a ‘particularly brutal and abhorrent attack on an elderly and extremely vulnerable victim’ (The Guardian 2014). This is despite a lack of any independent evidence suggesting the victim was any more ‘vulnerable’ to sexual assault than any woman; rather, her age is central to the framing of this inherent vulnerability. Similarly, a recent case involving an 80-year-old woman who was raped by a stranger in her home was described by the investigating officer in the media as a horrific assault by a sexual predator who ‘targeted one of the most vulnerable members of our community’. This case was described as particularly ‘distressing’ because ‘the offence occurred in her home, where she should have felt safe’ (Hedges-Stocks 2015). Again, there is nothing other than the age of the victim to suggest a higher level of vulnerability. Moreover, this statement arguably implies that the home is generally a safe place and rapes typically occur outside of the home—despite research consistently observing the majority of rapes take place in the victim’s home.

Perpetrators are routinely argued to be gerontophilic (Ball 1998), a psychological term used to describe younger people with a sexual preference for the elderly; they are pathologized and seen as particularly sick or depraved to attack someone who is older (and therefore not sexually attractive) and ‘frail’ or ‘vulnerable’ because of their age. In this context, rape against older women is seen as different from, and worse than, that of younger women, less easy to understand and inherently more humiliating for the older victim who is no longer sexually active (Montemurro and Siefken 2014). The lack of research in this area and the limited current knowledge, some of which appears to support the media coverage, has made it difficult to challenge the ‘real rape of older people’ myth, which has come to dominate media discourses. The emerging real rape of older women myth is more akin to the child sexual abuse model, which focuses on the inability of the victim to protect themselves and pathologizes the offender as sick and corrupt.

Research Methods

The aim of this research was to investigate the nature and extent of serious sexual offences reported to the police by older victims. ‘Serious sexual violence’ was defined as sections one (rape) and two (assault by penetration) of the 2003 Sexual Offences Act. ‘Older victims’ was defined as aged 60 or over. Hence, the research is not one on ‘elderly victims’ or of ‘elder abuse’—but rather fills a gap by starting where the CSEW ends.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and the Freedom of Information Act 2002 (Scotland) (‘the FOI Acts’) were used to issue requests for data held by all of the police forces in the United Kingdom. The FOI Acts came into force in 2005 and provides citizens with the right to access data held by public authorities including police forces, government departments, NHS, universities and the armed forces. The use of FOI requests is an emerging research tool, and one that is arguably under-utilized by social scientists generally, including criminologists. FOI requests provide opportunities for researchers to access data held by public authorities, which may be otherwise difficult to access. As Murray (2012) points out, using FOI requests avoids challenges such as negotiating access to research sites or data. Given police forces have staff employed to respond to FOI requests and the tight framework of an FOI request, we argue that using FOI requests can be time and cost effective both for researchers and for police. We did initially have concerns about making such a ‘formally’

worded request for data when we already had good links within many force areas in this field. However, when we piloted our request for data and approached rape leads within our pilot force areas, we were reassured that the most straightforward route from their perspective was for us to make a FOI request. This made us more likely to consider this route in future research on the police and to recommend it to other researchers.

The FOI request was piloted and then sent to all 46 UK police forces. They were submitted by email using designated freedom of information requests available on the FOI directory website.¹ The requests comprised of two parts: the first part consisted of two questions, which asked about (1) the total number of recorded rape and sexual assault by penetration offences recorded by the force between 1 January 2009 and 31 December 2013, broken down by year and offence type; and (2) the number of rape and sexual assault offences involving a victim aged 60 or older at the time of the offence, recorded between the same period and again broken down by year and offence type. The second part requested data on each of the cases identified in question two. Specifically, the request asked for data on the year of the offence, the type of offence, the gender of the victim, the gender of the perpetrator, the age of the victim at the time of the offence, the age of the offender at the time of the offence, the victim-perpetrator relationship (categories such as stranger, acquaintance, partner, friend, family member, carer), the location where the assault took place (categories such as victim home, perpetrator home, other residential, public place), whether the offence linked to any other offence and whether the perpetrator a known serial sex offender. All of the data were pseudonymized and approval for the research was given by the (anonymized for peer review) Durham University ethics committee.

Out of the 46 forces invited to take part, an initial response rate of 43 was obtained. One force (Scotland) did not comply on the basis of the size of their recently integrated force and their previous recording methods. Two forces did not comply with the FOI request, but follow-up emails via personal contacts with senior officers resulted in the data being provided directly rather than via the FOI route. Most of the replies were full, though a small number only responded to the aggregate (part one) request sections. Overall, our total response rate was 45 out of 46 forces (98 per cent).

There are a number of limitations in using police data. First, police data are limited to recorded offences only and, given the current research estimates only 15 per cent of sexual offences are reported (Home Office 2013), this reveals a very narrow picture and cannot be relied on as any measure of prevalence. Furthermore, the way police record data and the systems used are not consistent across forces, therefore comparing statistics across forces is not reliable. Crimes, which were reported but were subsequently ‘no crimed’ are not included in the data. Moreover, accessing this data through FOI requests can be problematic as you are relying on the FOI officer understanding the request and accurately collecting the data. This can be an issue where terms are not given clear definitions.

Research Findings

Around 130 reports are made to the police annually for rape and sexual assault of older victims

The overall number of reported offences involving an older victim was low when compared with younger age groups. Table 1 shows the overall number of recorded rape and sexual assault by penetration forces and the proportion involving an older victim.

¹<http://www.foi.directory>.

TABLE 1 *Proportion of cases involving an older victim*

	Rape	Assault by penetration	Total
All ages	74,036	13,194	87,230
Victims 60+	474	181	655
Proportion	0.6%	1.4%	0.75%

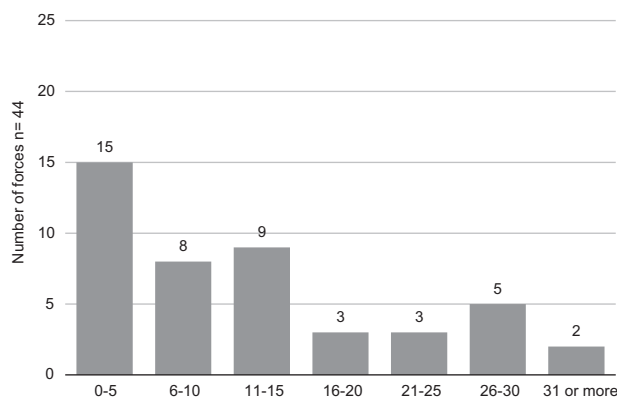


FIG. 1 Number of offences involving an older victim.

The total number of recorded rape and sexual assault offences between 1st January 2009 and 31st December 2013 by the forty-five forces that responded to the request was 87,230. The number involving a victim aged 60 or older at the time the offence was committed was 655, representing 0.75% of the total recorded number.

Rape was the more common offence to be recorded, both for all ages and specifically for cases involving older age groups. However, it is interesting that the total proportion of cases of sexual assault by penetration involving a victim aged 60 or over was more than double (1.4 per cent) than rape cases (0.6 per cent).

The number of recorded offences involving an older victim varied significantly by the force area. Figure 1 shows the distribution of offences. As the graph shows, the majority of forces ($n = 18$) recorded between one and nine rapes or sexual assault by penetration offences involving a victim aged 60 or over at the time of the offence between 1 January 2009 and 31 December 2013. Four forces recorded thirty or more offences (Greater Manchester Police, West Midlands, Essex and the Metropolitan Police).

The lowest number of offences were recorded by the City of London, which is unsurprising given that, at just over one square mile, it is the smallest territorial force area in the country. Bedfordshire also had no recorded rapes involving an older victim in the research period, although they did record one sexual assault by penetration.

Most victims were female and most perpetrators were male

Reflecting the existing knowledge on younger populations, sexual violence against older people is similarly gendered. The vast majority of victims were female (92 per cent),

TABLE 2 *Gender of perpetrators*

Gender	<i>N</i>	%
Male	485	85
Female	12	2
Total	497	87

which reflects the national statistics. Men were victims in 7 per cent of cases, a slightly lower figure than reported in national police-recorded figures on rape and sexual assault (11.5 per cent). Table 2 provides a breakdown of the gender of the recorded offences.

Data on the gender of the perpetrator were available from 41 forces, relating to 570 offences. In 73 cases, the gender of the perpetrator was unknown. The main reason for this was that the crime was still undetected and no suspect had yet been found. For the remaining 497 cases, the vast majority of perpetrators were male. Overall, just 12 cases (2 per cent) involved a female perpetrator. At least four of those cases also involved a male perpetrator.

Most perpetrators were younger than the victims

Perpetrators were most likely to be younger than their victims. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of both victim and perpetrator age groups and the corresponding number of offences.

There was more available data on the victim characteristics than offender characteristics as in some of the cases the crime had not yet been detected or the age of the offender had not been recorded in the police file. However, the available data show that victims were most likely to be raped or sexually assaulted by someone younger than them. The vast majority of offenders were aged under 60 (66 per cent) and offenders

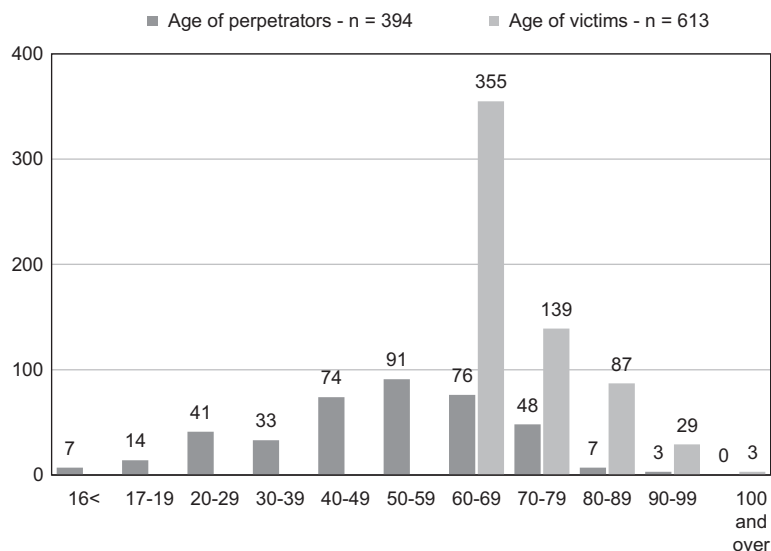


FIG. 2 Breakdown of victim and perpetrator age groups.

aged between 40 and 59 accounted for 42 per cent of cases. Victims by contrast were aged between 60 and 98, with the majority in their 60s and 70s.

Most perpetrators were known to the victim

The most common relationship was acquaintance (26 per cent), followed by partner or husband (20 per cent) and stranger (20 per cent). Table 3 provides a breakdown of the relationship types emerging from the data.

Hence, the majority of victims knew the perpetrator, consistent with national data that estimated that 80 per cent of victims know their perpetrator. However, whereas national statistics (ONS 2015) report the majority of perpetrators are partners or ex-partners (47 per cent), followed by other family members (33 per cent), the present study found that the broader category of ‘acquaintance’ was the most common relationship, followed by partner.

Most of the assaults were perpetrated in the victim’s home

The majority of offences were committed in the victim’s home. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the location of offences.

Unsurprisingly, the most common perpetrator of offences that occurred in a care home was an unrelated carer.

TABLE 3 *Relationship of victims and perpetrators*

Relationship	N	%
Partner or husband	108	20
Child	4	1
Grandchild	2	>1
Other family member	18	3
Unrelated carer	67	12
Friend	20	4
Neighbour	16	3
Acquaintance	143	26
Stranger	103	20
Other	10	2
Unknown	50	9
Total	541	100

TABLE 4 *Location of assaults*

Location	N	%
Victim home	299	54
Perpetrator home	38	7
Victim and perpetrator home	36	6
Care home, hospital or nursing home	117	21
Public outside	26	4
Public indoor	9	2
Other	16	3
Unknown	15	3
Total	556	100

TABLE 5 *Relationship and location of assaults*

	Victim home	Perpetrator home	Victim and perpetrator home	Care home	Public outdoor	Public indoor
Partner/husband	46	2	20	6	1	0
Acquaintance	59	10	0	16	0	4
Unrelated carer	26	3	0	25	1	0
Child or grandchild	3	0	0	0	0	0
Neighbour	8	1	0	3	0	0
Stranger	35	2	0	14	11	3
Friend	5	2	0	0	0	0
Other	11	3	0	3	0	0
Not provided	43	2	1	18	1	0
Total	236	25	21	85	14	7

Table 5 provides a breakdown of victim and perpetrator relationship and location of the offence in the available cases.

The type of relationship had obvious links to the location of the assault. Where the offence took place in the victims' or perpetrators' home, the perpetrator was most likely to be an acquaintance or partner to the victim, whereas where the offence occurred in a care home, the most likely perpetrator was an unrelated carer. However, it is interesting to note that despite care homes being the second most common location, in the overall sample unrelated carers were the fourth most common relationship group, suggesting a significant proportion of the rapes in care homes are perpetrated by people other than carers—possibly by other residents or by visitors to the care home.

Discussion

These findings share some similarities and differences with the existing understandings of sexual violence against younger age groups, as well as the existing pool of research that has specifically looked at sexual violence against older women, and the broader research situated within elder abuse. In line with existing knowledge of rape against younger populations, the majority of victims in the present research findings were female, whilst the vast majority of perpetrators were male. This also mirrors the previous UK research on sexual violence against older people (Jeary 2005; Ball and Fowler 2008; Lea *et al.* 2011) and literature from the elder abuse field (Gorbien and Eisenstein 2005; O'Keefe *et al.* 2007; Naughton *et al.* 2010).

The overall proportion of rapes and sexual assault by penetration offences involving a victim aged 60 or over were low compared with those aged under 60—just 0.6 per cent and 1.4 per cent, respectively, of all of these offence types recorded by the police. The numbers reported in this study are slightly lower than those reported in the only other similar study conducted in the United Kingdom (Ball and Fowler 2008). However, the present study had a much narrower focus on the two most serious forms of sexual violence, whereas Ball and Fowler's study looked at all sexual offences committed within a five-year period at a single police force in a semi-rural English county and thus it is likely if all sexual assault were looked at the numbers would have been much higher than reported in the present study. This is supported by Ball and Fowler's study, which found that less than half of the reported sexual offences in their data were

rape or sexual assault by penetration. Furthermore, existing research from domestic violence and elder abuse fields suggest older people are even less likely to report sexual and domestic victimization than younger populations (Pillemer and Finkelhor 1988; Rennison and Rand 2003).

It is widely accepted that victims of rape and sexual violence are disproportionately female, whilst the majority of perpetrators, regardless of the victim's gender, are male (Home Office 2013). For example, the latest national statistics estimate that 20 per cent of women experience some form of sexual assault at some point in their life, compared with less than 5 per cent of men. Furthermore, the majority of victims of both genders reported their offenders were men (99 per cent). The present study mirrors these national findings, and the specific sexual violence against older people literature in finding that the vast majority of victims were female and the vast majority of perpetrators were male. In the small number of cases involving a male victim, perpetrators were also male in the majority of cases.

Similar to the rape literature on younger populations (Home Office 2013), the majority of victims and perpetrators in reported cases involving a victim aged 60 or over in the last five years were self-defined as 'White', with very few victims or perpetrators from black or other minority ethnic groups. Again this is echoed in the existing older sexual violence research (Ball and Fowler 2008; Lea *et al.* 2011; Scriver *et al.* 2013) and elder abuse literature (O'Keefe *et al.* 2007; Naughton *et al.* 2010). This is likely to reflect barriers that make it even more difficult for minority ethnic groups to report to the police.

However, there are a number of differences that have emerged in the present study from the existing fields of literature on sexual violence against older people and existing media reports. These findings challenge the 'real-rape' stereotype of older women that has developed in some existing research and in the media reporting of cases. According to this model, older rape victims are usually female and attacked by a stranger, considerably younger than they are, usually in the victim's home (or a care home) or in an outdoor public location. This model exhibits similarities with the prominent 'real-rape' myth of younger women, which also centres around a stranger rape on a female victim, usually in an outdoor location but sometimes in the victim's home or elsewhere. Research and policy has focused efforts on challenging this myth in relation to younger women and statistics have debunked the main components of this stereotype by revealing the majority of victims are raped by someone they know, typically a husband or partner, or acquaintance, and usually the rape takes place in the victim's home. This research does the same for older victims.

In contrast to the 'real-rape' stereotype, the present study found that women aged 60 and over were most likely to be raped by an acquaintance, a partner or husband, or someone else known to them. This is contrary to the dominant media reports and research findings, which have primarily concentrated on stranger rape cases. In particular, there is a notable gap in the existing research and media reports in relation to cases involving a partner or husband. Despite research around younger rape victims revealing partners or ex-partners being one of the most common categories of perpetrators (Home Office 2013), in relation to older people there is a clear absence of these cases in existing research and virtually no reported cases in the media. This similarity with younger age groups is particularly important as it challenges the existing

depictions of rape of older people, which has positioned it as a distinct form of abuse, different to sexual violence against younger women and to some extent has justified the absence of older people in feminist sexual violence research and discourses (Whittaker 1995; Jones and Powell 2006). However, as Whittaker (1995) argues, the dynamics that characterizes sexual violence in younger populations are likely to be the same in older populations and therefore a distinct analysis of sexual violence based on an age model is unnecessary and depicts abuse to be, at least partly, the victim's fault for being 'old' (Whittaker 1995).

In a significant minority of cases, the perpetrator was known to the victim as their carer, a relationship that has unique dynamics and warrants further investigation in future research, particularly in light of the fact that other research in this area has not reported on carers as perpetrators (Jeary 2005; Ball and Fowler 2008; Lea *et al.* 2011). Whilst this has been considered to a larger extent in the elder abuse literature, the focus has generally been on financial and emotional abuse perpetrated by carers; sexual abuse perpetrated by carers is a neglected area across all disciplines.

The number of stranger rapes in the present study was similar to the statistics around younger rapes. In the present study, 20 per cent of reported cases to the police involved a stranger, compared to 15 per cent of cases reported in the CSEW (Home Office 2013). This is contrary to the research findings of a number of studies exploring sexual violence against older people. A number of early studies emerging from the United States suggested older women were most likely to be raped by a stranger, typically much younger than them in their own home (Hicks 1978; Davis and Brody 1979; Groth 1978; Pollack 1988; Muram *et al.* 1992; Burgess *et al.* 2007). In the United Kingdom, research by Jeary (2005) also found that, in around two-thirds of their sample, the offender was not known to the victim. Ball (2005) in reviewing the existing research thus concluded that older women were most likely to be raped by a stranger. The media, both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, perpetuates the myth that a stranger typically rapes older women. For example, headline stories in 2015 included the gang rape of a 70-year-old nun in India (The Guardian 2015; The Independent 2015) and the rape of an 87-year-old woman in California (Murphy 2015; Towner, 2015) and the rape of an 84-year-old woman in Manchester (Osuh 2015; Dean 2015). All of these examples involved perpetrators who were strangers to the victim, and all were young men (the majority teenagers).

It is therefore interesting that the present study found significant differences to the early work in both of these areas. However, it does reflect the emerging domestic violence against older women literature that has found sexual violence to be key form of abuse continuing into old age for many women (Ferreira-Alves and Santos 2011; Stöckl *et al.* 2012; United Nations 2013). Furthermore, more recent elder abuse studies have reported that interpersonal violence (which includes physical and sexual violence) is most likely to be perpetrated by a partner or spouse (O'Keefe *et al.* 2007).

Similar to what we know about cases involving younger victims, the present study found older women were most likely to be raped in their own home. This mirrors previous research in this area (Ball and Fowler 2008; Lea *et al.* 2011) and is supportive of the finding that perpetrators were generally known to victims. Interestingly, even in stranger cases, the majority of rapes were perpetrated in the victim's home. However, a significant number of rapes were perpetrated in care homes, by strangers, carers and acquaintances, which poses unique considerations for care providers and nursing homes, as well as safeguarding policy and practices.

One of the key differences in relation to older rape cases compared to younger cases that emerged in the present study was the age of the perpetrator. National statistics over the last decade, along with smaller research reports, have revealed that the majority of perpetrators are older than victims. However, in the present study, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators were younger than victims. The most common age group for victims in reported cases was 60–69, whereas offenders were aged under 60, with those aged between 40 and 49 accounting for 42 per cent of cases. However, despite being overall younger than victims, offenders were not as young as in other research (Groth 1978; Pollack 1988; Jeary 2005) and the speculations driven by earlier research and widespread media reports that perpetrators are usually significantly younger than their victims is not born out in this research.

Conclusions

Despite the efforts by feminists over the last four decades, the ‘typical’ rape victim is still positioned as a young attractive female who is attacked by a stranger, motivated by sexual desire (Lea *et al.* 2011). This is compounded by the lack of feminist attention towards, and inclusion of, older women in research, campaigns and policies (Whittaker 1995; Lea *et al.* 2011). Some scholars in this area have gone so far as arguing this exclusion of older women equates to a form of rape denial (Jones and Powell 2006). Although there has been an increased focus in feminist research on the intersections between different characteristics with gender, such as class and race, there is a notable gap in relation to gender and age in the intersectional research around sexual violence. As Whittaker (1995) points out, the ageing society is a primarily female society, and sexual violence is an overwhelmingly female experience. An analysis of sexual violence against older women must therefore take into account the social structural position of older women in society and consider a range of factors, including age and gender, when exploring sexual violence against older people.

Although feminist gerontology has emerged as a distinct area of research in social gerontology, exploring issues relating to both gender and age, they too have largely neglected the area of sexual violence. Moreover, the existing research exploring sexual violence against older people has tended to group all women over a certain age together as an homogenous groups and has not been sensitive to the differences, something which has been noted by researchers examining violence against older women more broadly (Zink *et al.* 2005). The prevailing ideology that views rape as a biological reaction by men to attractive young women may make it difficult for older women to conceptualize their experience as rape or to seek support from organizations that predominantly focus their attention on the younger victim.

More recently, there has been some acceptance that older people can experience sexual violence; however, it has been redefined as a form of ‘elder abuse’, which is problematic as it removes the gendered element of sexual violence that has been at the core of the developments in understanding, preventing and responding to sexual violence. This reflects current societal and cultural attitudes towards age and sexuality, which typically depicts women over the age of 40 to be frigid and asexual (Montemurro and Siefken 2014) and sexually undesirable. Furthermore, this re-conceptualization makes ‘age’ the primary factor that has impacts on the support provided (family therapy or age-related support) and the way abuse of older women is viewed by society. The focus

solely on one characteristic (in this case, age) is problematic and there is a need for research that is sensitive to the intersections between gender, age and other characteristics including disability and sexuality.

This study makes an original contribution to three existing fields: ageing, domestic violence and sexual violence research. The findings differ from the elder abuse literature in a number of ways. First, unlike some of the elder abuse literature, the present study found sexual violence was gendered; females were overwhelmingly victims of sexual violence, whilst the vast majority of perpetrators were male. Second, the elder abuse literature has found carers and family members to be the main perpetrators of sexual violence, with some studies suggesting adult children or grandchildren to be the most common perpetrators (Lundy and Grossman 2005; Naughton *et al.* 2010), whereas this study found the most common perpetrators were acquaintances or partners/husbands. That said, the second most common location of the assaults was care homes, which shows a significant proportion of offences are being committed in these institutions. Importantly, this research addresses a gap in much of the existing elder abuse literature, which has excluded sexual violence from their studies, or definitions of elder abuse.

In terms of the existing sexual violence research, the present study sheds light on a previously invisible group and shows many of the characteristics present in younger populations are the same for older populations, i.e. victims usually know the perpetrator, and victims are usually female and perpetrators male. However, some notable differences were also observed, in particular the age range of offenders, the vast majority of which were younger than victims.

The present study builds on the important domestic violence literature specifically exploring older populations over the last decade. Many of the cases in this study would come under the definition of domestic violence as the perpetrator was a partner/husband or other family member. However, people outside of familial relationships perpetrated a significant number of cases and this highlights the need for research that looks at specific forms of abuse and includes all relationships, something the sexual violence research should address.

Finally, the findings of this study challenge the ‘real-rape’ stereotype that portrays rape to be perpetrated by a male stranger attacking a young attractive female, usually at night in a public place. Furthermore, the findings do not support the common media depictions of rape involving an older victim, which narrowly focus on cases involving ‘opportunistic’ rape, which is perpetrated in the context of another primary offence such as burglary and where the perpetrator is significantly younger than the victim. In fact, what the present study shows is that rape against older people is similar to what we already know about younger populations, but with some important differences that require further attention such as the incidence of sexual violence in care homes and the difference in age between victims and perpetrators.

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