

Mental Models

Our understanding of reality exists as an image (or representation) of the world in our minds. In other words, we have a **mental model** of the world.

This **mental model** is constructed by assimilating all the information we gain about reality on a daily basis.

Examples:

- 1. I understand water to be wet and transparent based on information I have gained through touch and sight.*
- 2. I understand flowers to be fragrant based on information I have gained through smell.*

Our access to information is not limited to sensory means (taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing). In fact, **we constantly have ideas and conceptions that we have no way of verifying through our own experiences.**

Examples:

- 3. I understand the sun to be fiery and hot based on information I have gained through scientific literature.*
- 4. I understand that the moon affects tides based on information I have gained through school textbooks.*

How Social Systems Construct Mental Models

In examples 3 and 4, the information that we used to base our understanding of the world on was gained through external sources such as scientific literature and school textbooks. There is no way to personally verify this information through individual experience or sensory means alone.

We often completely rely on the information given to us by **social systems** (such as the scientific authorities that did the research for example 3, the educational institutions that wrote the school textbooks for example 4) to construct our understanding of reality.

Thus social institutions negotiate our mental models. This basically means that social structures, systems and institutions influence our perception of the world and determine what we know to be the “truth”.

Any information that has been mediated by some sort of social institution is an example of how social systems affect our understanding of reality.

Some common ways include:

- Statistics
- News articles and reports
- TV and film
- Academic research papers
- Blogs and Magazines
- Educational textbooks

Q. So what does any of this have to do with rape?

The rape narrative: A brief introduction

When we think of rape, we already attach to it several preconceived notions.

We have certain assumptions of the *rapist figure* (the type of person most likely to rape) and the *victim figure* (the type of person most likely to be raped), along with assumptions about time (most likely night), circumstance, location, etc.

This is the *rape narrative* - what we think of as being the typical rape story or the situation in which rape is most likely to occur.

In other words, the *rape narrative* is our **mental model** of rape.

The rape narrative: Impact and implications

The way we respond to reality depends on our understanding of reality. If we confine our understanding of rape to the *rape narrative* then that is the only problem we will attempt to solve.

The *rape narrative* influences and determines how we respond to rape - be it on the personal, institutional, national or global level.

Example Rape Narrative: The rapist is always lower-class, rural and provoked by the victim's clothing choice; rapes only happen at night.

Example Personal Response: Girls dress a certain way, don't go out "too late" and treat men hailing from villages with mistrust and suspicion.

Example Institutional Response: Imposed strict dress codes for girls, colleges and hostels enforce earlier curfews for girls than boys.

Example National Response: Women are not allowed to work or be outside after a certain time (In March 2012, Gurgaon High Court banned women from working beyond 8 pm.)

How is the rape narrative constructed?

As with any mental model, **we construct the rape narrative by assimilating all the information we have about rape and gender-based violence, and using this to draw patterns and inferences.**

This information is a combination of everyday, personal experiences (which allow us to make microcosmic inferences - ie assumptions about daily occurrences) and socially provided knowledge (which allow us to make macrocosmic inferences - ie assumptions about the situation on a national level).

Two important ways in which we gain socially provided knowledge are through **media artefacts** and **statistics**.

Media Artefacts

The *frame*: choices and exclusions



Imagine a photo frame that contains an image. On first thought, it seems as though the the image and the frame don't have much to do with each other. However: what if the photo was originally rectangular and the frame was square-shaped? Or, what if the frame was too small to contain the entirety of the photo? Or, what if, to fit the frame better, the photo had to be cropped or edited or otherwise modified? **What would the frame include and what would be left out?**

It is easy to see that frames often determine content. The audience can only see what is contained within the frame, and content is often changed to fit a pre-existing frame.

The media “frame” is the underlying structure or *container* of the media artefact. The media frame controls what the audience sees.

Due to the confines of the frame, the media artefact is a combination of choices and exclusions. These choices and exclusions are dependent on numerous factors, such as political inclinations of the creator, agenda of the media distributor, limitations imposed by governmental authorities, etc.

Examples of media frames include:

- The limits of a newspaper article (eg: word limits, agendas - the political and corporate affiliation of the newspaper, etc)
 - For example, “The World Before Her” (a documentary about young girls in India that critiques beauty pageants) was not covered by the Times Of India as the Times Group sponsors Femina Miss India. **This is an example of erasure by exclusion.**

- The first and last shots of a documentary (eg: aesthetic considerations, narrative considerations, time limits, etc)
 - *The 'Left Of The Dial' segment of the BBC documentary "Seven Ages of Rock" falsely concludes that the influence of the British Indie scene remained strong even after the 90s. **This is an example of manipulation for aesthetic purposes.***

The choices and exclusions made due to the frame mean that media artefacts do not necessarily reflect reality.

To understand what choices and exclusions may have been made, one must ask the following questions: *Who created the media artefact? For whom is it intended? Who is distributing the media artefact? What is their political and social affiliation? How was the information acquired? etc.*

Manufacturing, processing and transforming reality

Media artefacts **transform** reality through **manufacturing** and **processing**.

For example: if you encounter a rape situation through an article in the newspaper, your thoughts and emotions are completely reliant on the language and information contained within that article. Thus the reality in your head is a result of the media's processing of the incident. The reality of the rape incident as you understand it is different from the reality of the rape incident as the agents directly involved understand it (the rapist, the victim, the bystanders, the medical authorities, etc). The reality in your head is completely determined by the media's interference and representation of the situation.

Language and Knowledge

Rape rhetorics

Examining the way in which rape is talked about in media artefacts sheds light on the problematic attitudes toward sexual assault within our society.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, Samajwadi Party chief: Boys will be boys...they sometimes make mistakes. Girls develop a friendship with boys first. When there are differences between them, the girls level rape charges. Boys commit mistakes. Should they be hanged for rape?

Asaram Bapu, godman, on the Delhi rape incident: “Only 5-6 people are not the culprits. The victim is as guilty as her rapists... She should have called the culprits brothers and begged before them to stop... This could have saved her dignity and life. Can one hand clap? I don’t think so.

Satyapal Singh, former Police Commissioner of Mumbai: “Should couples be allowed to kiss in public?...Should they be allowed to indulge in all obscene things?”

Linguistic Relativity of Thought

The **Linguistic Relativity of Thought** hypothesis suggests that language heavily influences thought. The *structure* and *lexicon* (choice of words) of one’s language influence how one *perceives* and *conceptualizes* the world. Thus language shapes our mental models.

For example: *While reading or listening to a story, you visualize it in your head. The mental images you conjure are completely dependent upon the description, word choice and grammatical structure of the story. You make judgments about characters and decisions about events, all based on the way in which the storyteller chooses to tell the story.*

When talking about sexual assault, it is important to realize how language affects the way we understand the situation and make judgments.

Common phrases and why they are harmful

“Boys will be boys”

It is not a coincidence that the phrase used for justifying seemingly innocent “naughty” behaviour (such as getting clothes muddy from playing football, coming home late and lying, persistently pursuing a girl, etc) is also used to provide an excuse for rape. While the contexts in which the phrase gets used range from seemingly innocuous to downright serious, the phrase itself always implies that destructive or violatory tendencies are an intrinsic part of a boy’s gender-identity and that boys are in fact expected to behave in such manners.

The phrase is used in the **future tense** to imply permanence and unchangeability, i.e. it is not “*boys are boys*” but “*boys will be boys*” and that this is immutable.

The implication becomes thus: “*girls can change their clothes*”; “*girls can go home early*”; “*girls can control XYZ*” BUT “*boys will be boys*” and cannot change their urge to rape.

This particular phrase is all the more dangerous of because how common and pervasive it is in daily life.

“She was out too late”

We often hear this to sanction the act of rape (the most famous example is the Delhi Rape Case of 2012). The phrase implies that the girl is violating some sort of boundary - that she is out “*too*” late. This in itself is problematic as it implies that women are not allowed to be present at certain times and places, whereas men are. In fact, in the Delhi Rape Case, it was repeatedly emphasized that “*she was out too late*” but never “*they were out too late*” despite the fact that she was with a boy and that they were both in the same time and place. Additionally, the six rapists themselves were not considered to be “*out too late*” - it was only the girl who was seen as crossing some sort of line.

Moreover, the boundary in question is arbitrary and undefined - it is never explicitly discussed what time is “*too late*”. Thus it is completely up to the rapists to decide whether a girl is out of place and use that as an excuse to pardon rape.

Passive Voice and Victim-Blaming

When passive voice is used, the performer of the action is removed from the picture.

In the article “*What Grammar Says About Rape*”, Tilothamma Shrinivasa discusses the use of passive voice in rape news reports:

“Saying “Draupadi stole Bheema’s apple” blames Draupadi for stealing, while saying “Bheema’s apple was stolen by Draupadi” focuses on the fact that the apple was stolen. Now if you drop Draupadi from the second sentence, “Bheema’s apple was stolen” conveys the idea that this terrible thing happened to Bheema but doesn’t blame anyone! Or if I use an even worse and a grammatically dodgy form of passive voice: “Bheema had his apple stolen” squarely dumps the responsibility of what happened on Bheema’s head!”

Case study

Version 1: She was out at a club with her friends at 11 pm. She was raped and her body was found stripped naked in the bathroom the next morning.

Version 2: The man raped a girl at 11 pm. He left her naked body in the bathroom of a club.

In version 1, we are only looking at the girl's story - the rapist is not even mentioned. Even though the act of rape was committed UPON her, we only link her actions to the act of rape. This framing leads to a process of thinking that leads to us thinking of the **rape incident as a consequence of her actions**.

This framing gives the impression of a causal relationship between her actions and the incident. At a subconscious level, we frame the information thus:

Piece of information 1: She was out at a club at 11 pm

Piece of information 2: She was raped and found naked

Inference: She was raped because she was out at a club at 11 pm

Thus use of the passive voice leads to victim-blaming.

In version 2, the rapist and the victim are both present in the frame. Due to **active voice**, the rapist's actions are linked to the act of rape. The blame is placed upon HIM, not her. This makes sense, because HE committed the act of rape, so the act should only be associated with HIM.

Passive voice and statistics:

The same piece of information paints a different picture depending when passive voice is used.

Version 1: A woman is raped every 21 minutes.

Version 2: A man rapes a woman every 21 minutes.

In version 1, we only conjure an image of a woman being raped by an abstract entity. Due to the formlessness of the rapist, we can only visualize the image of different women crying in pain every 21 minutes.

In version 2, we conjure a violent, clear image of a man forcing a woman to perform a sexual act. We not only visualize the women crying in pain every 21 minutes, but also the rapist and his brutal actions.

Passive voice and media:

Media articles often feature the passive voice. For example, they state that a woman was raped while going to a pub/riding a motorcycle instead of saying that a man raped a woman while he was in a pub/riding a motorcycle.

In the article "*What Grammar Says About Rape*", Tilothamma Shrinivasa discusses the effect that such headlines have on the reader:

1. *They blame the victim, or at least make the act the focus, but absolve the perpetrators from all blame*
2. *With many not-so-subtle references, bring in the "She was out late" bit.*
3. *Imply women are weak, although, in every single instance above, they are actually out-numbered! How many men do you know who can win a fight with 1:3 ratios? (also, increased rape reporting is fine but notice how it is always female victims (and male perpetrators) until it is completely drilled into your*

head that only women are raped (including girl-toddlers) and only men rape which is also NOT true. Other cases are just not reported in our media, is all)

4. *By stating completely irrelevant things like the victim's age or profession, they feed the "her life is finished – this is worse than death" bullshit. (Does this make sense: Man, 35, beaten up by four people)*

Rape as metaphor

A metaphor implies an association between two unrelated things by abstracting and likening their properties and attributes. When we use one term to explain another, we imply that there is a conceptual similarity between both terms. Therefore, when we use rape as a metaphor, we imply that the connotations that we attach to rape are also the connotations that we attach to the current act in question.

Example: "Germany raped Brazil 7-1 in the 2014 FIFA World Cup." <Source: Facebook feed>

Connotations: Rape as victory, power, dominion, annihilation

When we use rape as a metaphor for non-rape incidents, we also trivialize the issue and undermine the trauma associated with it.

Example: "That math exam was so bad. Got raped in the ass by it." <Source: Twitter feed>

As the article "Rape is Not a Metaphor" in "UpRoot: Digging Up The Roots of Gender-Based Violence" says:

"The problem is that when rape is used to describe situations that aren't actually rape (i.e. "That test totally raped me" or "I raped that video game this weekend") the word rape starts to become divorced from its true meaning. When you use "rape" inappropriately or outside of its proper context the perceptions of that act become distorted. Rape is a serious criminal act of violence and a violation of someone's humanity. Just the threat of rape affects the emotional, physical, and mental safety of survivors throughout their entire lives. Using the word out of context is harmful to survivors of sexual assault. If a rape is taken lightly, used metaphorically, or made into a joke it belittles and minimizes the truly painful and life altering experiences of survivors."

The same applies to using other acts of violence as metaphors too.

Example: I killed the talent show today! <Source: Personal conversation>