



**Introduction to Peggy Reeves Sanday's
"The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape.
A Cross-Cultural Study."
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The research and analysis conducted by Peggy Reeves Sanday in the 1980's, and the resulting 'social science argument' (Presley 2015) that she put forward to explain differences in the incidence of rape recorded in different cultures, marks a landmark that set an unequivocal standard for social science research and theory at that time. Through analysis of extensive ethnographic data collected from societies around the world, Sanday systematically compared the different conditions of life for women and men in order to identify cultural factors that might influence the varying incidence of violence, and in particular rape, in different societies. Writing at a time when theory, notably in the field of socio-biology, still drew from conjectural, reconstructed histories of behaviour that were argued to be an expression of our biological inheritance – that is, our 'human nature', the importance of her argument that learned cultural attitudes, behaviour and conditions influence the incidence of rape for all societies – including our own – cannot be overstated. Her study of the socio-cultural context of rape marks a turning point in the social science of violence and its place in the preservation of relationships of gender inequality around the world.

Sanday's approach to understanding factors that affect rape incidence, which she refers to as the etiology of rape, is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, by drawing on an extensive data set, her analysis was able to explore a multitude of practices and meanings of sex relationships, and in so doing, discern what does or does not constitute rape or non-consensual sex - heterosexual or homosexual, amongst adults or between adults and children within particular societies, a discussion that continues today (see Ananthaswamy and Douglas 2018). Contrary to other findings at this time, her research confirmed that as the incidence of rape varies cross-culturally, it is *not* a universal; with societies falling into rape free, intermediate and rape prone categories. A rape free society is one in which rape is infrequent or does not occur; and these societies constituted 47% of the societies studied. A rape prone society is one in which rape can be said to be "culturally allowable, or largely overlooked" (Sanday 1981 9), and in which "the incidence of rape is high, rape



is a ceremonial act, or rape is an act by which men punish or threaten women” (Sanday 1981 5). This type of society constituted 18% of the cultures in Sanday’s sample.

By studying the characteristics of societies described in numerous ethnographic cases, Sanday has been able to identify what similar conditions exist in different societies that are contributing to the lesser or higher occurrence of rape, differences that are statistically significant. Drawing from her own long-term anthropological research within the matrilineal society of the Minangkabau in Indonesia, she demonstrated that the socio-cultural contexts for rape free and rape prone societies are markedly different, and these findings are central to our current understanding of the bases for gender equality versus hierarchy. In rape free societies, men and women are valued equally, their roles are complementary, and women’s ceremonial importance is as high as that of men. In contrast, rape prone societies are characterized by interpersonal violence, sexual separation, aggressive sexual relations, and male dominance expressed through social control and the devaluing of women’s contributions, as well as in mythology that promotes a male-dominance ideology supporting and reflecting relations of inequality.

Sanday’s later studies (1996) of sexual violence have drawn analyses of rape in American society into her explanations of gender and power, holding up contemporary instances of the gang rape of female students on university campuses and perpetuated in fraternities to illustrate parallels between cultures of male violence and dominance in Western and non-Western contexts. This work has contributed significantly to the definition and understanding of what has come to be known as rape culture, as well as highlighting the need to develop those socializing strategies that must be employed in order to support gender respect and equality. In this last endeavour, Sanday’s work to develop the field of Public Interest Anthropology has been recognized (AAA 2015) recently for applying the insights gained from anthropological research towards furthering gender equality.

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