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CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY AT WORK: THE CASE OF “RAPE”

abstract

This paper examines the concept of rape through the lenses of epistemic injustice, social ontology, and conceptual engineering, arguing that entrenched rape myths and historically privileged meaning-making render the operative concept of rape systematically distorted. The authors propose diagnosing these distortions via conceptual and ontological analysis and outline an ameliorative agenda that (a) revises both manifest (legal) and operative (everyday) concepts and (b) enriches the surrounding conceptual vocabulary to better capture the diversity of experiences of sexual harm. The paper positions this framework as a novel bridge between recent meta-ontological work and feminist philosophy on hermeneutical injustice, aiming to guide future theoretical and practical improvements.

keywords

rape myths, hermeneutical injustice, conceptual engineering, ontological relativity

1. A new diagnosis of the problem

The concept of “rape” has been extensively explored across several fields, including analytic and moral philosophy, legal theory, feminist theory, sociology, criminology, and social psychology (Alcoff 2018, Ehrlich 2001). As a socially embedded term, it carries significant emotional and moral weight, invoking powerful imagery shaped by myths, misconceptions, historical processes, and legal and more generally normative issues.

In this paper, we will consider rape from a conceptual point of view, arguing that because of the myths that shape its use, and its origin as a concept, it ends up functioning as a hermeneutical obstacle to the recognition of the reality of rape. First, we are going to introduce the issue to briefly situate it socially, then we will introduce the framework we will employ in the analysis. The concept of rape has already been claimed to constitute a case of “hermeneutical injustice”, the kind of injustice that occurs when an individual or group is prevented from fully understanding or making sense of their own experiences because of a lack of available conceptual tools or categories (Fricker 2007, Mason 2021), and we will elaborate on this claim, locating it in relation to recent advancements in ontology and meta-ontology, and conceptual analysis. The aim of the paper is not to propose a revolutionary account of this matter, but to tie together different pieces of literature, and to propose a framework that might be used for future developments as well. In addition, in this paper we will refer to the Western context in a broad sense, and we acknowledge the limitations of this approach. Even within Western countries, we can find different manifestations of the concept, especially at the legal level, as the juridical definition of rape can change significantly depending on the country. However, we find that there can be some similarities across the different contexts which allow us to develop some tools that we think can be useful in different societal settings.

There is a large body of literature, including experimental studies, that relates to people experiencing difficulties in labeling their experience as rape, even when it falls under the legal definition of rape (Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2004). The difficulty in defining one’s experience as rape can stem from several factors. As Reitan (2001) observes, when we label a sexual act as rape, we “attach to it the harshest sort of condemnation” (Reitan, 2001, p. 43); hence, labeling one’s experience as such involves a strong emotional burden. A person may find it challenging to label themselves as a “rape victim” because this label is often associated with stigma, and identifying with the victim role can be a complex process (Lamb, 1999); conversely, it may be emotionally difficult to view a partner, or someone one knows, as a rapist. Additionally, as we mentioned, the

strong presence of different rape myths that define rape in a narrow script or blame victims (Burt, 1980; Jenkins, 2021) makes it difficult to use the term because of all the incorrectly associated inferences. Hence, because the term itself is so loaded with different meanings, it often fails to fully achieve its theoretical objectives. Despite the richness of the literature on rape, the way the concept is currently framed fails to achieve its theoretical objectives and, paradoxically, often turns into an obstacle. For instance, Reitan (2001) suggests that “rape” is an essentially contested concept, making a clear definition elusive. Nonetheless, we do not believe we should simply abandon the notion, judging it too compromised. We argue that dismissing the notion altogether could have severe repercussions for an already silenced phenomenon.

While different issues regarding the concept of rape are already acknowledged within the domain of epistemic injustice, our analysis introduces an innovative diagnosis. We identify a lack of connection between the notion of “rape” and recent advancements in ontology and meta-ontology. Specifically, conceptual analysis applied to alternative ordering strategies in our classification helps to reveal that the challenges pertaining to the concept of “rape” are not merely about power imbalances in epistemology but also involve alternative categorizations and background presuppositions in our ontological taxonomies (Valore, 2024).

Ontology, as utilized in this paper, refers to a formal framework or model that captures essential concepts, entities, and relationships within a specific domain. By analyzing taxonomies, we can identify relevant categories, their properties, and interconnections, providing a structured representation of knowledge (for an overview of some systems of ontological flux diagrams, see Valore, 2016). Mapping our taxonomies provides a better understanding, scrutiny, communication, and reasoning within the domain and enables the classification, organization, and navigation of objects, thus providing a comprehensive framework for knowledge evaluation.

However, it is crucial to recognize that ontological categorizations are not fixed or absolute: they are subject to change, revision, and viewpoint-dependence, a concept known as conceptual relativity. Recent advances in contemporary ontology emphasize the importance of accounting for the general categories used in framing our understanding of reality. This includes uncovering the often-hidden metaphysical and background presuppositions in our taxonomies and categorizations, facilitated by tools like conceptual engineering and conceptual analysis (Chalmers & Jackson 2001; Valore 2018). These tools highlight the dynamic nature of categories and the need to critically examine the assumptions and biases underlying our conceptualizations. This acknowledges that different conceptual perspectives – arising from philosophical, cultural, historical, and contextual factors – can be employed to understand and classify the same phenomena. Ontological relativity thus accepts the existence of alternative maps and classifications based on different background assumptions and can help us identify and manage cases of epistemic injustice through the lens of the properties we consider relevant (Valore, 2024). This has been applied to the natural sciences (Valore, Dainotti, and Kopczyński 2020) and to biomedical research and practices (Valore, 2017; Valore & Witzel, 2024). However, our ontology-based approach applies recent advancements in theoretical research, specifically ontological relativity and formal conceptual analysis, to the ethical and practical implications of epistemic injustice. This perspective appears to be novel and, with the exception of a few cases (Valore 2024), remains largely unexplored in the existing literature.

We will proceed as follows. In Sections 2 and 3 we will develop the discussion of rape myths, explaining how they obscure the current conceptualization of rape. In Section 4, we will discuss how this constitutes a case of hermeneutical injustice, elaborating on accounts that revise Fricker’s original account from 2007. In Section 5, we will clarify how and why

a conceptual engineering project could be a useful tool for revising such a concept and its definition.

2. Dominant working understanding of rape, and rape myths

The delineation of rape in strictly binary terms—as either “rape” or “not rape”—can often be conceptually and socially challenging (Alcoff, 2018; Gavey, 2005). Rape can be seen as an extreme point on a continuum (Mackinnon, 1989) between ethical sex and morally and legally impermissible sex (Cahill, 2016; Garcia, 2022). This continuum approach reveals the term’s broad and loaded nature, which simultaneously fails to capture the diversity of related experiences. Misconceptions further complicate the issue. When a speaker uses the term “rape”, the problematic nature of the concept can distort or diminish the intended performative power of their speech.

The term “rape” has been in use for some time, but its meaning has evolved significantly. Evidence of violence associated with the modern notion of rape can be found in popular narratives, such as Greek and Roman mythology, suggesting a wide range of acts falling under this term. Historically, when these acts began to be punished by law, they were not seen as crimes against the person—particularly against women—but rather as offenses against male possession, as women were regarded as men’s property (Brownmiller, 1975). In the 1970s, feminists engaged in consciousness-raising groups, sharing their experiences and recognizing that rape was not an isolated crime, but part of a wider systemic pattern of violence against women. This led to the understanding of rape as a structural and endemic issue, which could occur also within relationships or marriages. Despite this significant reframing, patriarchal ideologies and myths concerning rape persist in societal perceptions. Rape is stereotypically pictured as a crime perpetrated by a stranger in a dark alley, a narrative that constrains the broader realities of how such violence more commonly takes place (Hänel, 2018). Consequently, experiences that do not align with this stereotypical image are often not acknowledged as “real rape” (Estrich, 1987).

Several philosophers have scrutinized prevalent beliefs and distorted schemas about rape, known as “rape myths”, and have attempted to provide systematic categorizations of these misconceptions (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974; Burt, 1980; Jenkins, 2021, among others). Rape myths can be defined as widely held beliefs and distorted schemas about rape, victims, or perpetrators that often result in denying that many instances of unwanted and coercive sexual intercourse constitute actual rape. Reflecting society’s attitudes toward sexual violence, rape myths are widely accepted (Edwards & Bradshaw & Hinsz, 2014), and numerous examples of these myths are evident in media discourses and courtrooms (Volta, 2024; Volta & Grassi, 2024).

Jenkins (2021) categorizes rape myths into three primary types: dishonesty myths, blame myths, and consent myths. Dishonesty myths involve the belief that women frequently lie about being raped, often accusing men of assault due to regret over consensual sex or as a means of revenge. Consent myths misinterpret what constitutes consensual sex and what constitutes rape. These include beliefs such as the following: consent cannot be withdrawn during a sexual act, prior sexual activity implies automatic consent, non-consensual sex always involves overwhelming physical force, and consent to one activity implies consent to others (Jenkins, 2021). For instance, a forced sexual act within marriage was historically not considered “real rape” because societal norms equated marriage with perpetual sexual consent (Payne & Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999). Furthermore, consent myths can lead to the erroneous assumption of consent based on actions that do not signify actual permission, such as going to someone’s place after a date (Garcia, 2022). Blame myths attribute responsibility to the victim, suggesting that factors like clothing choices or intoxication can lead to sexual assault. These myths can also involve judgments about behavior, appearance, or social

interactions, reinforcing the false notion that victims provoke or invite sexual violence. Additionally, two more myth categories could be considered: the “perfect victim” and the “perfect rapist” (Tilton 2022; Tuerkheimer 2021), shaping the properties victims and rapists should have to be categorized as such and exonerating people we cannot conceive of as “monstrous.”

Widely accepted rape myths significantly influence victims’ perceptions of their experiences, their ability to recognize and conceptualize instances of the crime, and their willingness to report the violence they have endured, both within the legal system and among their community. For instance, Jenkins (2017) characterizes this phenomenon as hermeneutical injustice, where inadequate collective interpretive resources prevent victims from understanding and articulating their experiences. Evidence shows that jurors in rape cases are influenced by these myths, which affect their decision-making regarding guilty verdicts, and that individuals with stereotypical attitudes toward rape are more likely to acquit defendants (Dinos & Burrowes & Hammond & Cunliffe, 2015). Similar biases have been documented among police officers. Research by Amy Dellinger Page (2011) found that 22% of police officers agreed that “any victim can resist if he or she really wants to”. Furthermore, Dellinger Page reported that, when asked about victim credibility, “19% of the police officers were unlikely to believe a married woman who claimed she was raped by her husband and 44% were unlikely to believe a prostitute” (Dellinger Page, 2011, p. 11). These myths thus influence legal outcomes and the likelihood of victims feeling safe and believed when reporting a rape crime.

Moreover, there is a correlation between women’s acceptance of rape myths and their reluctance to define their experiences as rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Martini, 2022). Peterson and Muehlenhard’s study revealed that some women who experienced events matching the legal definition of rape did not label their experiences as such, particularly when they accepted specific myths. This mismatch is also evident in well-known experiments on rape prevalence. In the 1980s, Mary Koss’s study demonstrated the presence of “hidden rape”. When asked if they had ever felt forced to have sexual intercourse, many respondents said yes, but fewer identified these experiences as rape (Koss & Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987). These findings challenge the effectiveness of the term “rape” in providing a suitable word to express these experiences, highlighting a gap between common usage and the reality it aims to represent.

The conceptualization of rape heavily involves a categorization of both the victim and the rapist. As we mentioned before, rape myths include idealized notions of the “perfect victim” and the “perfect rapist”, affecting the properties relevant for the proper conceptualization of such notions. The term “rapist” is relatively modern, and it was apparently first used in 1883 (Bourke, 2009). A rapist is often depicted as a stranger, a mentally ill person who attacks randomly, leading to the stereotype that a “nice guy” cannot be a rapist, as rapists are imagined as monsters: “real rapists will appear on our radars either as devils, decked out with horns and pitchforks, or else as monsters – that is, as creepy and ghoulish creatures” (Manne, 2018, p. 199). A migration background or being a racialized man can also contribute to the false identification of an individual as a potential and more likely perpetrator of rape (Srinivasan, 2021, Tilton, 2024). Due to these assumptions, privileged perpetrators often receive absolution. Kate Manne (2018) proposed the term “himpathy” to describe the excessive sympathy shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence, especially when they are white, non-disabled, and otherwise privileged “golden boys” in the United States. This contrasts with the racial prejudice against black perpetrators, as the old prejudice of the black rapist (Davis, 1978) is often reiterated. In this case, Falbo (2022) proposes the idea of a hermeneutical clash,

3. Victims and perpetrators

illustrated through the public and legal response to Brock Turner, a Stanford athlete convicted of rape in 2015, a famous example which Kate Manne used in her book *Down Girl* (2018). Despite the legal and conceptual availability of the term rapist, many—including the judge and the media—resisted applying it to Turner due to his alignment with the culturally idealized image of the “golden boy”: white, male, athletic, and socially privileged. This conflict between an accurate, justice-oriented concept and a valorized social stereotype exemplifies how dominant conceptual frameworks can override proper moral and legal classification. Falbo explains that while “rapist” and “golden boy” are not logically incompatible, they become socially opposed through cultural encoding. This dynamic can also be understood within Manne’s framework of misogyny (2018), which emphasizes how patriarchal norms grant men a sense of “entitlement” to sex. In this context, men who align with dominant social ideals—dictated by patriarchal standards as well—typically white, able-bodied—are often excused for sexual aggression. At the same time, marginalized men, particularly black men, are disproportionately blamed, reflecting the intersectional application of rape myths (Jenkins, 2021).

Victims, on the other hand, must prove their victimhood by demonstrating that they tried to escape, that they were not intoxicated, and sometimes even that they were “pretty enough” to be raped (Fiore, 2022). These standards affect women’s credibility in legal proceedings, “ensuring that it can be concluded that they had truly experienced rape” (Fiore, 2022, p. 34). Deviations from stereotypical rape scenarios or from the “perfect victim” posture reduce the likelihood of being believed in court, but also in the eyes of people around them. Racial stereotypes further complicate this scenario, as black women have historically been viewed as “promiscuous”, leading to their claims being dismissed (Davis, 1983, Srinivasan, 2021). The racist nature of these stereotypes further reinforces the marginalization of certain victims and the selective recognition of their claims.

The whole concept of the “victim” of gender-based and sexual violence is highly nuanced and debated; it has been, and still is, extensively discussed, as many feminists and women who have suffered abuse prefer to label themselves and others as “survivors”. In both cases, there still are many fixed scripts and assumptions, which can still hinder one’s will or ability to attribute to oneself an experience that would cause one to fall under that category. For example, Sharon Lamb (1999) criticizes the dominant portrayal of victims as irreparably damaged, arguing that this narrative often reduces them to passive figures, trapped by their suffering. While terms like “victim” and “survivor” aim to define these experiences, they can oversimplify the complexity of individual responses to trauma, alienating those who do not fit these rigid labels. The expectation that true victims must endure extreme, prolonged suffering further narrows this narrative, ignoring diverse paths to resilience and recovery, and excluding people who do not recognize themselves in those narratives.

Addressing victim and perpetrator stereotypes requires analyzing several interrelated concepts and, more broadly, promoting cultural change. The fact that victims of sexual violence may suffer, among other things, from hermeneutical injustice and that rape myths distort a collective concept may also affect perpetrators: they may also lack the resources to properly interpret their harmful actions. It is more difficult to give an account of this matter, since, of course, not admitting one’s guilt can be a self-defense strategy, in a trial but also outside the courtroom. In the courtroom, this manifests through legal defenses that leverage rape myths to undermine victim credibility or reframe violence as “rough sex” (Ehrlich, 2001; Matoesian, 1993). Outside the courtroom, perpetrators often utilize psychological mechanisms to protect their self-concept from the stigma of being a “rapist.” These include Bandura’s (1999) mechanisms of moral disengagement and Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization, such as the denial of injury or the attribution of blame to the victim. At the same time, it seems that there are cases in which the perpetrator genuinely does not

understand – or does not want to understand – that what he did was rape, being unable to perceive the victim’s perspective. Of course, perpetrators’ resistance to labeling their actions as rape is not an injustice against them, as they often benefit from this misperception. Rather, the resulting injustice affects the victims/survivors and distorts broader social understanding.

Hänel (2021) gives an account of this issue, developing the idea of hermeneutical misfire, explained as “having one’s significant experience obscured from the collective understanding without being hermeneutically marginalized oneself” (Hänel, 2021, p. 176). This distinction is crucial when analyzing the epistemic conditions of perpetrators of sexual violence, whose misunderstanding of their actions does not arise from structural exclusion but rather from epistemic ignorance tied to privilege.

In 2013, Medina also introduced the concept of meta-blindness, defined as the “inability to recognize one’s limitations and epistemic inabilities, influencing one’s understanding of privilege and social injustices” (Medina, 2013, p. 76). This further illuminates why such perpetrators fail to perceive their actions as unjust. For instance, Elinor Mason (2021) considers cases where someone engages in violent sex in the mistaken belief that the other person consents, and she evaluates whether the perpetrator is culpable under this scenario. Meta-blindness stems from a privileged social position, which shields perpetrators from critically engaging with perspectives that challenge dominant sexist ideologies. This ideological ignorance distorts their moral reasoning and reinforces rape myths, ultimately shaping their inability to recognize harm. By linking hermeneutical misfire with meta-blindness, we gain insight into how privilege perpetuates cognitive distortions, without absolving perpetrators of moral accountability.

In addition, meta-blindness maintains a social reality where the perpetrator’s privilege remains intact, while the victim’s reality is denied. This is not merely an issue of knowledge (epistemology) but of existence (ontology), as these epistemic failures actively shape the social identities of those involved. The relationship between these epistemic gaps and the construction of social reality provides the necessary bridge to understanding the depth of the harm. The conceptualization of cases of rape, and the cases that can be considered in the vicinity of it, is deeply embedded in individuals’ social identities. Katharine Jenkins explores “ontic injustice,” defined as the injustice an individual suffers when they are “socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind” and their belonging to that social kind makes them fall “under a set of social constraints and enablements that is wrongful to them” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 191). While hermeneutical injustice concerns the inability to understand or communicate an experience, ontic injustice concerns the very being of the subject within that social framework. For instance, marital rape was not recognized until 1991 because being a wife implied a lack of entitlement to refuse sex with one’s husband. According to Jenkins, on account of social ontology, this means that “what it was to be a wife in England before 1991” was to be “someone who was not entitled to control fully sexual access to their own body” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 191).

This exemplifies how social constructions and kinds impact individuals’ moral, legal, as well as personal entitlements. Labeling oneself as a rapist or a victim has profound psychological consequences and impacts one’s self-perception. Addressing these issues through the lens of both ontic injustice and ontological relativity offers meaningful insights into the complexities of describing and understanding experiences of rape.

In the two previous sections we analyzed some rape myths and how they work in our everyday conceptualization of rape. The limitation of the concept as such has also been examined within the broader framework of epistemic injustices. The concept of epistemic injustice was introduced by Miranda Fricker in 2007, in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of*

4. The concept of “rape” as hermeneutical injustice

Knowing, and it refers to forms of injustice that harm individuals specifically in “their capacity as knowers” (Fricker, 2007). Fricker identifies two distinct types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. We will focus on the latter to clarify our theoretical starting point. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). She uses as an example the case of Carmita Wood, who, in 1975, was forced to quit her job because she was a victim of what we would now call “sexual harassment”. At that time, however, the concept of sexual harassment did not yet exist¹. For this reason, according to Fricker, Carmita Wood couldn’t properly address and communicate her experience or understand its nature because the concept was missing from the collective hermeneutical resources.

In the cases presented by Fricker, a hermeneutical injustice occurs when a subject is unable to understand the nature or normative significance of their social experience or to describe it in a comprehensible way to others, because the collective hermeneutical resources are deficient and the concept is lacking.

In 2021, Rebecca Mason proposed a revision of this definition, expanding it to include cases where concepts are available but are significantly distorted. She illustrates this point using an example from Edmund White’s novel *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982). In White’s novel, the protagonist fails to recognize his homosexuality as such, not due to a lack of the concept of homosexuality, but because societal descriptions of homosexuality as a “sickness” or as a “stage” deter him from applying the concept to himself. This negative framing makes him reluctant to apply the concept to his emotions, preventing him from fully understanding them. The same injustice, Mason argues, happens with the concept of rape. The existence of rape myths hinders the possibility for rape victims to label their experience as such. For example, the myth according to which rape is committed by strangers and cannot be committed inside a relationship or a marriage makes it difficult, or impossible, for victims of rape inside a relationship to recognize and articulate their experience. According to Mason, the case of rape, because of the defective conceptualization that we have at our disposal, functions as a hermeneutical injustice, as the collective hermeneutical resource is distorted. The concept exists, but because of its distortions, it may not be accessible to victims (Jenkins, 2017) who still struggle to make their experience intelligible.

However, as Jenkins underlines, it is important to remember that the distribution of hermeneutical resources can vary across social contexts, offering different concepts to differently positioned individuals. Therefore, the degree of intelligibility may vary across contexts (Mason 2021). There might be cases in which the victims are able to conceptualize their experience but still experience injustice by possessing and using an inherently flawed concept (Deans, 2024). Danni Deans argues that when concepts emerge from hermeneutical marginalization and originate from hermeneutically privileged groups, they tend to be oppressive and distorted. As a result, the concepts available to those excluded from their creation often misrepresent or obscure their experiences. In their paper, Deans presents the following example to clarify their theory: Abi has been married for a year and has had consensual sex with her husband in the past. One day, her husband forces her to have sex against her will. Although she feels deeply upset by the experience, she does not recognize it as rape because her idea of marriage does not allow her to apply that label when the act is

¹ The concept of sexual harassment developed during the 1970s, as it began circulating in women’s groups in Massachusetts. Through a joint work of legal and social activists it started to be widely recognized.

committed by a spouse. This belief – shared by the people around her – makes it hard for her to even talk about what happened or understand why she feels so violated. Deans claims that her understanding of the concept of marriage is so dominant that it prevents her from seeing the experience as rape. Hence, it is the concept of marriage in this case that is inherently oppressive. Deans argues that this does not constitute a case of application failure, in which *Abi* fails to apply a correct concept of marriage. According to them, the concept application is correct, but the concept is flawed due to hermeneutical marginalization.

We argue that this might be the case of rape as well. As a concept, it has mostly been shaped collectively by hermeneutically privileged groups, resulting in harmful myths and oppressive misconceptions. As Jenkins (2021) has compellingly shown, legal concepts of rape have been historically problematic. For instance, marital rape was excluded from the legal definition in England and Wales until 1991, resulting in a “faulty explicit concept” that obscured certain experiences from collective understanding (p. 44). Building on Jenkins’s analysis, we contend that rape as a concept has mostly been shaped collectively by hermeneutically privileged groups, resulting in harmful and oppressive misconceptions that extend beyond legal definitions. There might be cases of correct concept application, depending on the kind of concept we are applying—for example, if we are using a legal definition, which changes from country to country, there might be places in which an act that should be recognized as rape is not included in the legal and formally shared definition. Thus, the application of the concept is correct, but the concept is inherently flawed.

Framing the issue within the debate on epistemic injustices is therefore useful for understanding why a reconsideration and conceptual analysis of how rape is conceptualized are necessary. Where distorting inferences, such as rape myths, persist and lead to gaps in the usability of the concept of rape, it becomes essential to propose an effective method for correcting these inferences.

As we have seen, the issues related to the current use of the term “rape” are manifold. Firstly, they create difficulties for victims, both for those who decide to report and for those who choose not to, as they may find themselves unable to define their own experience. However, this also generates problems at the political and social levels for society as a whole, as the complexity of understanding what constitutes sexual violence is both caused and fuelled by various overarching issues. Myths surrounding the conceptualization of rape are part of the so-called “rape culture”, defined as “casual, pervasive commodification of women’s bodies and relentless normalizing of a masculinity steeped in conquest and control” (Nicholls, 2021, p. 67).

From this perspective, it becomes evident that there is a need for analytical work capable of addressing and disentangling the critical aspects of the term “rape”, and a conceptual engineering project can be positioned within this framework. Conceptual engineering aims to examine whether our linguistic devices are useful and, if they are not, whether an attempt to modify them through revision, replacement, or, in some cases, elimination may be necessary (Burgess & Plunkett, 2020).

The legitimacy of these projects may sometimes be questioned, as trying to modify a concept in common use may entail losing something the term signifies or modifying it in a way that worsens the epistemic context. According to Simion (2017), we should not engage in conceptual engineering when this involves “epistemic loss”; however, Podosky (2018) suggests that epistemic loss can be justified when the term helps perpetuate oppression, “no matter the epistemic cost”. In this sense, Podosky underscores that when it comes to concepts that are socially and politically dysfunctional, revising them is often “about an epistemic loss”, as ideology serves to create social reality. Ideological concepts are accurate because they describe social reality, but that ideology might be oppressive.

5. Would a conceptual engineering project be applicable?

The term “rape” does indeed represent a social reality but not necessarily an actual state of affairs. From a descriptive standpoint, it reflects a social reality in which rape is conceived in a limited way due to sexist ideology (Hänel, 2018). From a normative perspective, it is crucial to understand what the term should actually refer to and how it can be modified so that it accurately describes the complexity of factual reality.

To help us with this task, conceptual engineering can take various forms. We may aim to eliminate a concept and replace it with another, following the suggestion of the eliminativist approach, or we may try to improve the existing concept by revising and modifying its implications, which takes the form of a revisionary proposal. In the case of “rape”, eliminating the label and seeking a substitute could pose challenges in terms of its moral and ethical implications.

At the same time, retaining the current concept could risk not achieving the desired effects, as sometimes the concept can be too “damaged”.

An alternative proposal could be of the type suggested by Scharp (2013), which, rather than proposing one-to-one revisions for concepts, challenges the concept of truth used within semantic theories and recommends replacing the ordinary concept of truth with two distinct concepts that he labels “ascending truth” and “descending truth”. In principle, it is possible to propose replacing any number of representational devices with any other number in order to introduce new concepts, moving from one to many (Cappelen & Plunkett, 2019). In the case of rape, a feasible example would be the term “date rape,” first used by Brownmiller (1975), which refers to a situation in which there is initial potential for romantic or sexual interaction between two people, but then, when things do not go as expected or do not progress fast enough, one person rapes the other. Having this terminology may help capture a wider range of experiences that are usually not considered “real rape”, as they do not fall within stereotypical understandings, simply because the victim was at some point romantically or sexually interested in the rapist. Something similar happens with “marital rape”. These terms are examples of how richer terminology can capture different experiences. Furthermore, in the recent debate, the need for an improved vocabulary to describe sexual violence has been raised. In popular culture, for instance, the expression “gray area” has emerged to describe sexual experiences that exist in the space between clear instances of rape and ethical, freely chosen sex — encounters that cannot be defined as rape and are, rightfully, not punishable by law, but are nonetheless distressing and raise significant moral and political questions. This cultural discourse has been reflected in media discussions (Thompson, 2018) and fictional narratives like Roupenian’s viral story “Cat Person” (2017), while academic scholarship has theorized these experiences as revealing deeper structural issues of power and agency (Gavey, 2005; Gunnarsson, 2025; Kogl, 2025).

Both of these solutions raise some concerns. The concept of rape is certainly flawed; however, it is still useful in describing a certain type of experience that corresponds to a more stereotypical idea. Therefore, eliminating it may require an even more significant normative effort. On the other hand, introducing new terminology runs the risk of suggesting that some experiences are less harmful than others. Additionally, new terms may be creatively repurposed to excuse perpetrators (Alcoff, 2018, p. 123). In discussions of rape and sexual violence, the introduction of new concepts may raise concerns about their potential to function as instruments of minimization, while simultaneously proving effective in articulating nuanced and previously unrecognized experiences of sexual harm. Terms such as the “gray area” we introduced before might risk reframing acts of sexual violence as ambiguous or misinterpreted rather than clearly non-consensual, subtly suggesting that the incident does not qualify as “real rape”. This highlights the need for particular caution when

formulating or reformulating concepts that operate so closely within the social and sexual sphere.

Before deciding on the best way to revise the term “rape”, significant work must be done to better understand how the term is entrenched in social practice, how it is used by speakers, and how to understand the injustices and issues raised by the term. By doing this, we would already be operating along the lines of what Sally Haslanger called “ameliorative analysis” (introduced in Haslanger, 2000), which can be seen as a preliminary instance of conceptual engineering.

Ameliorative analysis consists of examining the purpose of a concept and identifying the practical or cognitive functions it performs or ought to perform. The goal is to refine the concept in order to enhance its effectiveness within the social world and to clarify the normative role it should fulfill, producing a target concept that achieves the normative role it is meant to have. Sally Haslanger (1995) also articulates another distinction that is valuable for this analysis. She divides concepts into two components: the manifest and the operative. The manifest concept refers to the formal and official definition, while the operative concept refers to the implicit, informal, and practical understanding of a term as it is applied and understood within everyday practices and cultural contexts. If we apply this distinction to the concept of rape, we can consider the legal definition in each country as the manifest concept, while the implicit conceptions people hold constitute the operative concept. The two concepts may diverge significantly. In particular, myths, biases, and misconceptions can alter and distort the operative one. However, focusing solely on correcting distortions at the level of the operative concept is insufficient; the problem might also lie in the manifest concept’s own substantive inadequacy. When the manifest concept is itself flawed, even a “correct” application simply reproduces those deficiencies. Thus, both levels of the concept require critical scrutiny.

An ameliorative analysis should therefore start by addressing these two concepts and by diagnosing the biases and prejudices associated with the notion of rape that obscure our understanding of the phenomenon.

To do this, it is fundamental to start by dismantling the wrongful associations we make when thinking about rape. This involves not only proving them wrong but also unraveling them: understanding their historical origins and their place within social reality, and exposing the injustices they create.

This analysis should then take two directions. The first aims to change the existing concept and its associations in light of the flaws pointed out in the diagnostic phase. The second direction focuses on enriching the vocabulary and the theoretical toolkit used to conceptualize sexual violence. This involves creating a richer set of concepts (and corresponding vocabulary) to better capture the range of experiences of rape and those in its vicinity and to enable people to have the right lexicon at their disposal to label certain phenomena.

We judge these two directions for an ameliorative analysis to be attempts worth making to improve the notion of rape. A final warning should be raised about the linguistic aspect. By examining the term “rape”, one might question whether it holds the same cultural significance and elicits the same associations when translated into other languages. Amie L. Thomasson (2021) suggests that, in conceptual engineering, we primarily refer to the concepts behind words, and we could aim to shift our conclusions from one language to another. However, if we come up with good conclusions, we may still wonder if we are entitled to abstract from linguistic formulations in English and apply “the same analysis and results to appropriate translations” (Thomasson, 2021, p. 11) in other languages.

What we believe is important to highlight is the process of meaning-making and concept formation. As previously discussed, conceptual frameworks — such as that of rape — have historically been developed by the hermeneutically privileged, and often imposed on the

hermeneutically marginalized. As a result, the concepts available to marginalized groups tend to be inadequate, oppressive, or obscuring.

This is why, in this analysis, it is crucial to emphasize that meaning-making must be a bottom-up and collective process. In the 1970s, for instance, feminist consciousness-raising groups succeeded in challenging dominant understandings of rape by sharing their lived experiences of systemic oppression. A similar dynamic occurred during the #MeToo movement, which sparked widespread discussion and knowledge production around the social meaning of rape.

Our project proposes an approach grounded in the existing analytical tools we have already identified and begun to develop. These tools can be collectively refined and used to better understand different experiences and genuinely reflect the voices of those who have been historically silenced. In addition to fostering a better understanding of the phenomenon, we hope that our approach can contribute to transforming power dynamics, violence, and imbalances in sexual interactions.

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