Rape is a cruel expression of dominance, a method of destruction, a product of inequality and a form of irreversible identity theft that has damaged the lives of hundreds of thousands of victims around the world. Though it is so common, it is difficult to categorize rape and to accurately understand why it happens. Individual rapists can be analyzed psychologically and biologically, but without taking into account the effects of culture, religion, political stability and social standing, it is nearly impossible to portray the crime accurately. Because rape is not something a society wants to deal with, this concept has not been studied until recent years when mass rapes of women during times of war forced it onto the public agenda. These rapes are examples of some of the most brutal acts of humanity that, during times of war, take on a different form than those attacks during times of peace. In this paper, I will examine episodes of rape and argue that a society’s view on women, rape and soldiers during times of peace affects, and even encourages, the atrocities of mass rapes during times of war.

The main goal of rape during war is to completely destroy a society by terrorizing one family at a time. By destroying and humiliating women, the dynamics of the family crumble. This tactic is only effective because it acknowledges women as people who play a central role in the construction of a family, whether it is by rearing children or providing support for all family members. One would think that if men viewed women in this way then there would be no rape, especially during war when the emphasis is on protecting women and children. But the fact that mass rapes are so frequent shows that the value of women in families is overshadowed by deep-rooted feelings about gender roles. The problem of women being harmed is exploited to gain support for war, but it is barely addressed during peacetime. Does society truly care about the hurt women? In many ways, these women are nothing other than pawns of combat similar to land and homes.

This is a product of the perception in society that women are the property of men, which is a perception that has been maintained over hundreds of years. As Sharon Frederick points out in her book Rape: Terror of War, the first laws against rape stated that rape was actually a crime against the husband or father of the female victim (12). Without legal capacity, a woman was the property of her father or husband whose only roles of worth were to cook, clean and raise children (which were deemed to be easy tasks). As women finally began to gain certain rights, such as the right to own property and the right to vote, the issue of sexism was brought to the forefront of the public agenda. Issues of gender and sexuality finally became topics that people discussed openly, whereas in the past they were hidden because of society’s more conservative nature.

However, this perception of women as property has not yet disappeared. It is suppressed by the rise of feminism and gained respect for women, but by looking at rape during times of war one can see that the instinct to think this way is still there, “the subordination of women during times of war is an extension of the power relations between the sexes within society generally” (Colombini 4). Many soldiers believe that enemy women are their spoils of war that are owed to them as a reward for winning a battle, a prize they have gained. The fact that the vast majority of women raped during war are ‘enemy women’ shows that the more inferior the women, the more property-like they become. Inferior women are more likely to be thought of as “booty” because the soldiers cannot relate to them at all, whether it is because of their ethnicity or their religion or simply because they are the enemy. This de-emphasizes sex in rape because rape becomes a pure expression of victory over everything the enemy possesses.

Because women are portrayed by the media as sexual objects purely sexual crime. In her book, Aftermath, Susan Brison quotes a joke made by Howard Stern after the Columbine shootings which, in an extreme form, portrays the idea that women, regardless of the situation, can be thought of in a sexual light:

“there were some really good looking girls running out with their hands over their heads. Did those kids [the suspects] try to have sex with any of the good looking girls? They didn’t even do that? At least if you’re going to kill yourself and kill all the kids, why wouldn’t you have some sex?” (92)

Howard Stern, intentionally or not, encouraged rape as a last resort to dominate the school. This comment completely undermined the seriousness of the situation by finding a way to sexualize
women fearing for their lives. This provokes the idea that, during combat of any kind, women should be sexual companions for men. Sharon Frederick argues that many people believe that rape is an inevitable product of armed combat because the soldiers fear for their lives and are in the most need of companionship (especially sexual) at a time when none is available. However, Frederick also points out that rape of enemy women is a completely separate issue from the dearth of “willing women” (7). The violent nature of the rapes themselves is evidence enough that rape during wartime is not about sexuality or a man’s need for intimacy. If the rapes are not provoked by a need for sexual intimacy then they must be provoked by a different, more complex need that could have originated before combat began.

There are many different theories about how culture affects criminal behavior, but the overarching agreement among social scientists is that it does. Culture is, according to Parviz Saney in her book Crime and Culture in America, a “set of ideas, traditions, appropriate emotions and symbols” (31). Individuals are expected to obey certain social norms based on the specific ideals put forth by the culture of their birth. According to Saney, people are motivated to act by their desire to obtain what society thinks they should have and thus “every type of learned behavior is accompanied by a value judgment” (37). Evidence of this comes in the form of an individual’s actions, specifically interactions with others. Human beings learn through their interactions with the people around them what behaviors are deemed acceptable and unacceptable in their culture. Because breaking these rules will have serious social consequences for the offender, individuals’ behaviors are generally kept in check by their culture.

Does the continuing existence of criminal behavior suggest that most cultures do not do a good enough job of teaching people that violence is unacceptable? If people are truly motivated to act by how culture tells them they should, then this suggests that there is a part of our culture that promotes violence or certain types of violence. While many scientists would say that violent behavior is part of human nature, culture usually makes us hide our primal instincts in the hope of assimilation. There are by nature going to be some people who seek attention by breaking social rules or, for biological reasons, are unaware of social cues; however, the average citizen is not a rapist because our culture tells people not to act on certain instincts. This unfortunately suggests that if those social boundaries were not in existence, rape would not be condemned and would thus happen far more frequently. This can only be verified by studying how the variation between societies in their emphasis on cultural values affects the rate of crime.

Cultural variation is a product of differences in the expectations of the citizens in a society. In many cultures around the world, people are taught to accept their social status as their fate given to them by some form of higher power. For example, Indian culture follows a hierarchical caste system based on specific guidelines found in Hindu scripture. According to Saney, this sets a more rigid code of expectations and thus there is less of a chance of individuals breaking it. American culture, on the other hand, is based upon the fact that people can change their social status through hard work. Because this makes American culture more individualistic there is a greater chance that individuals will transgress the social norm (12). This is in accordance with the statistics given by Saney (15) that the United States has the highest rate of homicide, murder, assault and rape but the lowest rate of group violence and assassination.

The idea of group violence ranges from gang fights to civil or world wars, but there are fundamental differences regarding who fights them and how they are received by society. The most important distinction is that the members of a gang are considered criminals whereas soldiers are not to be associated with criminal behavior. Thus far I have discussed criminal behavior during times of peace, but during war the concept of a criminal is not well defined since soldiers are considered heroes to some and criminals to others. During peacetime, rape and murder are clearly criminal acts, but during war, they are at times accepted and even encouraged. Because of this, a soldier’s idea of criminal behavior is tainted; the enemy’s activities are criminal while their own activities are somehow for the greater good of the people they are protecting.

During war, soldiers transgress the social norm of not partaking in criminal behavior because it is deemed acceptable for them to do so. This causes a conjugating of enormous moral dilemmas for soldiers. It is accepted that during times of war, soldiers have to choose which morals of their normal lives they want to uphold and which ones to put aside and decide that ‘desperate times call for desperate measures.’ This could suggest that the soldiers who rape during war had suppressed tendencies towards criminal behavior during times of peace. While this may be true for some, war changes soldiers once they are in combat or go through something traumatic. Soldiers have an incredibly hard time dealing with their actions and being so far away from family and normal life that sometimes their normal, peacetime judgment is clouded.

The feeling of admiration towards soldiers partially comes from our recognition that they give up normal life to fight for the better of our country. U.S soldiers, for example, are portrayed as heroes and ideal all-American gentlemen that demand respect. We honor our veterans because they risked their lives to protect us and our country. Stories about war tell of its atrocities, so we admire the courage a soldier must invest in combat. If we have nothing but respect for soldiers without turning a critical eye to how victory is won, then the issue of mass rape is lost amongst the exciting stories of adventure, escape and terror. Somehow, we as citizens, justify this by feeling personally benefited when our soldiers destroy the enemy because the media tells us that the world will become a safer and more just place without them.

The media does this by reminding us that the world today is a far more dangerous place for civilians. Soldiers no longer fight other soldiers on a battlefield; they fight unmarked civilian soldiers in cities and villages. It is the civilians that are the most impacted by mass rape. This makes the issue of where fighting takes place more prevalent. America, for example, has not truly been a battle ground since the Civil War and thus its women have not experienced firsthand the atrocities of mass rape during war. War has also become more impersonal and cruel with the invention of new weapons and technology that distance the soldiers from their targets. When war becomes impersonal, total domination becomes the emphasis. Even though rape is an incredibly personal act with the intent of destroying certain people, the tone of war has made it easier to commit the crime of dehumanization (Frederick 7).

American culture explains the increasing amount of dehumanization during war by medicalizing all the unexplained problems of its soldiers and its citizens. Soldiers often suffer from various psychological disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder which,
according to some, explains the instances of grotesque rapes. A dominant theory among American psychologists as stated in the book, *Men Who Rape*, by Nicholas Groth is that rapists have a form of “psychological dysfunction and sexual deviation” (4) which separates them from the average human being. Groth believes that one of the fundamental reasons for why rape still continues on such a large scale is because it has not fully been accepted into the realm of psychological disorders. The assumption that this theory makes is that a rapist has a clinically diagnosable distorted view of reality and, more specifically, a distorted view of how others will react to their actions.

The major problem with labeling rapists as “ill” is that it takes the emphasis away from the victim and places it on the attacker. This is not to say that American culture promotes empathy towards rapists but it does, in a way, excuse them. When emphasis is taken away from the intense pain and suffering caused to the victim, it downplays the immensity of the crime and allows it to continue. When rape becomes “not such a big deal”, the media will not pay any attention to the issue and thus, the cycle continues; rape is kept out of the public agenda and the victim becomes unimportant. According to Brison, evidence of this can be found in most crime films and TV shows when the victim (of a crime other than murder) is only a part of the plot for initial few minutes while the rest is about the cop chasing the bad guy. Brison argues that this is an example of why the criminal justice system in the U.S. has little concern for victims of rape—after all, victims are not even the ones with the right to a speedy trial (10).

Women go through a ludicrous amount of strife to get their cases heard. The sheer amount of paperwork alone would discourage any woman from testifying against her opponent. Even though many psychologists agree that personal narrative in a court or outside is an extremely effective method of healing (Brison 14), it is nonetheless difficult to testify in a rape case where the burden of proof lies solely upon the woman’s capability to prove her validity. This is an important explanation for why rape still occurs and why so many rapes go unreported or unpunished. The fact that women have to prove that their rape was not somehow their fault shows the underlying inequality between men and women that influences culture. Women are taught at a very early age not to be alone at night (especially in a city) and that strangers are all harmful. They are also taught that if they are perfect, young women, nothing bad can happen to them. There is a commonly believed myth that if a girl is wearing a skirt that is too short or a top that is too low, she shouldn’t be surprised if a man takes advantage of her because she is giving off the impression that she is looking for sex. If men start to believe these myths then rape becomes less of an offense.

This issue is of crucial importance in places such as Afghanistan where women are already restricted in everyday life by the laws of their country. There are places where women are not allowed to go outside without being accompanied by male relative, to work outside of the house, to attend school and are certainly not allowed to go anywhere without every inch of their bodies being covered up. Islam puts extreme importance on the virginal woman and the faithful woman, so if a woman is raped, she is considered impure and even an adulteress. Because the Quran does not sanction rape specifically and it is, in fact, considered an extremely offensive religious crime, culture finds an excuse for why it must happen. There is a common belief that women who are raped must have been acting in a promiscuous manner by wearing jewelry or showing skin, in which case they are showing no respect for the Quran. This infers that every single rape is entirely a woman’s fault. Therefore a woman’s case is very hard to make and it is incredibly hard to indict someone for rape (Frederick 53).

In cases of rape during war, soldiers know that it is almost impossible for them to get in trouble for their actions. For one, there are so many victims and so many attackers that it would be impossible to try them all. Additionally, during war, when there are so many atrocities, soldiers can be assured that rape is on the bottom of the list of things to be charged for (if they are charged at all). Besides, would a court truly believe an enemy woman over a soldier who was willing to die for his country? This makes rape an effective tactic of war because it involves domination without killing and little chance of penalty.

This is many a time used as evidence in feminist theory that rape is not an act of pure sexual force, but an act of dominance fueled by the need for power. Feminist literature seems to agree that rape is an act of aggression, violence and dominance by sexual means but is not a product of uncontrollable lust. This would adequately describe the reason for the excessive vaginal mutilation that occurs during times of war. If sexual pleasure is the goal then soldiers would not, for their own purposes, destroy vaginas in such dehumanizing and demoralizing ways. Vaginal mutilation is purely an act of humiliation and that makes a woman feel “useless” and her attacker feel empowered.

Many scientists such as Thornhill in his novel, *The Natural History of Rape*, argue that this theory completely undermines the theory of evolution of species. Thornhill argues that this is feminist propaganda to make men seem more violent and completely undermine the “fact” that “biologically driven sexual motives play a role in the commitment of sexual assault” (125). Connel agrees when he says that “rape and combat- however regrettable- are part of the unchanging order of nature” (215). But even though Connel sites testosterone as a factor of aggression, he acknowledges that is not the “answer to rape.”

Because testosterone is not the answer, Connel and Thornhill agree that the problem is other men. According to Connel “most violence is not a matter of individual pathology” (215), so rape must be a collective idea. Though this does explain why rape during war is almost exclusively committed by groups of soldiers, it does not account for rapes during times of peace which are (for the most part) committed by individuals. Additionally, it does not provide an explanation for why a group would collectively decide to commit mass rape during war. It is possible that the cultural and political climate could explain both of these problems. Connel and Thornhill are suggesting that it is a violent society or community that makes rape a “collective idea” even if the rape is committed by an individual. During war, when violence is inevitable, it is the specific character of the war (which is greatly influenced by the specific cultural and political climate at the time) that dictates what kind of violence will be used.

Fighting begins in many countries because a large group initiates the overthrowing of a corrupt government or a forced removal of another ethnic group. In Haiti, for example, the goal of mass rape was to drive families out of the country who supposedly supported Aristide. Rape was specifically used to show the men of the community that their political activities would be punished...
in the form of rape of their wives and daughters (Frederick 27). Political instability, in general, causes large groups of people to rally together for a cause in a violent way. If the government emphasizes freedom of speech and peaceful dissent, people are more likely to break rules privately and alone because they fear being labeled an outcast. Most rapes that occurred during World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII) and civil wars in almost every country were rapes of 10,000 to 600,000 women and girls. This cannot possibly be the act of individuals acting alone.

There is some evidence that the rapes which occurred during WWII were an official tactic of the German army. There are some cases in which every single woman and girl in a village was documented to have been raped; this can only arise through planning and organization. Eventually, this worked against the German army when the war turned in favor of the Russians. The Russian soldiers decided to use the same tactic and rape German women as an act of revenge. This proves that the Russian soldiers had no real empathy towards the women who were raped since they were willing to commit the very same act against other women; to take ‘an eye for an eye’ was far more important than upholding the honor of women (17).

The media however portrayed the soldiers as people fighting solely for that honor. During WWI, the enemies of the Germans used the fact that the German army was mass raping women in France and Belgium as propaganda to gain support for the war by making people realize that the enemy was a danger that needed to be destroyed. Even though this was effective because the media successfully played off of society's empathy for victims of the enemy forces, there was not enough empathy to punish the offenders in a way other than attempting to kill them or rape their women. The fact that the rapes went unpunished during WWI proved that society chose to forget about them thus paving the way for even more brutal and blatant rapes (14).

The rapes during WWII had slightly different motives. The major difference was that the German army was attempting to create a “master race” by biologically cleansing the “dirty” people in Europe. This does not mean that the soldiers wanted to procreate with Russian women; they wanted to humiliate and destroy them enough so that they would never have children again. The evidence of this tactic of humiliation was that rape was usually done in front of family members (usually fathers and husbands) so that the soldiers could prove their dominance over them (16). This idea could not possibly have been concocted during times of war alone. Anti-Semitism and sexism were common in German society and war allowed the German army to act on the hatred which had been brewing since WWI.

Also during WWII in Nanking, the Japanese raped far over 40,000 Chinese women, children, pregnant women and even elderly women. These were some of the first documented vaginal mutilations. Rape was not enough; the vaginas of these women were ripped apart and mutilated until they were useless. When news of these rapes reached the West, the Japanese decided to save face by creating a movement called the “comfort system” which was, in essence, a legal form of forced prostitution for soldiers. In Manila, 500 women were imprisoned in a hotel for 8 days and raped repeatedly by soldiers rotating through.

It was because of this that General Tomoyuki Yamashita became the first general in history to be “held criminally liable for acts committed by his troops” (20). This was an enormous accomplishment in relation to the Nuremberg trials where the “Tribunal essentially ignored crimes against women…there was no prosecutions, nor was there any effort to at least publicly document sexual atrocities” (17).

Considering the history of women attempting to win court battles against their attackers, it was not surprising that it took until the late part of the 1900's to finally gain some justice for rapes during war. But the fact that it took 40,000 women to be raped in order to gain public acknowledgement of the issue speaks volumes to the importance (or unimportance) of women in society.

Today, one of the most prevalent cases of mass rape is going on in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In an article by Eve Ensler, she describes a hospital for women who are survivors of the atrocious rapes. These rapes are, like all the others, characterized by brutal vaginal mutilation. One case Ensler describes is of a woman whose attacker “unloaded his entire cartridge into her vagina.” She surprisingly survived and walked all the way to the Panzi hospital for treatment. She walked because she could not ask for help since she was afraid of what her culture would think of her if they knew she was raped.

In an interview, a doctor of the Panzi hospital mentions that many people come to the hospital, cry, and send some money, but do nothing further. Even though it is idealistic to expect that everyone who cares should drop what they are doing and go work at the Panzi hospital, it is surprising that so few alternatives to giving money have been exercised. Women may be able to convince themselves that it would never happen to them if they live in a ‘safe place’ but the fact that very few of them are willing to go out of their way to help those women in need just further proves society’s hushing influence on women. Without raising awareness about the subject, it will never reach the level of publicity that it needs for real help to be given. Women can’t be so afraid of disturbing the notion of a perfect soldier or bringing attention to themselves by speaking out against such atrocities as rape even if it has been deemed a “woman’s issue” that men supposedly won’t want to talk about. Even the fact that rape is considered a woman’s issue and not a national problem proves the underlying existence of sexism in many societies. While acknowledging that there are matters in the world (especially during war) which deserve equal if not greater attention, when the number of women raped reaches 80-100,000, it is time to act.

References
