What Would MacGyver Do? The Meaning(s) of Resistance and Survival

Jan Jordan

DOI: 10.1177/1077801204273299

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://vaw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/11/4/531

Additional services and information for Violence Against Women can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://vaw.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://vaw.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations (this article cites 11 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
http://vaw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/11/4/531
What Would MacGyver Do?

The Meaning(s) of Resistance and Survival

JAN JORDAN
Victoria University of Wellington

Drawing on interviews conducted with victims of New Zealand serial rapist, Malcolm Rewa, this article highlights the limitations of the terms resistance and survival as they are typically applied to women's responses to rape attacks. Although acknowledging that formulations that stress women's abilities to resist and their capacities to survive have been critically important in challenging popular notions of women as passive victims, the women's accounts presented here suggest a need to question whether such formulations are adequate to reflect the complexity and diversity of women's responses to sexual assaults. A preliminary attempt is also made to explore the implications associated with embracing expanded understandings of what resistance and survival might mean.

Keywords: rape; resistance; survival

[S]he who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.
—Nietzsche, quoted in Frankl, 1962, p. 76

Rape resistance is, at best, a thorny issue; at worst, an expectation by which victims of rape are assessed and judged. On one hand, women have been told that a little resistance is all it takes to fend off a rapist; it is only by submitting that a woman “gets herself” raped (Firth, 1975). Hence criminal justice system agencies have interpreted physical injuries to the woman as evidence of her resistance, construing these as necessary indicators of a lack of consent (Brereton, 1997; Gregory & Lees, 1999; Lees, 1997; Mack, 1998; McSherry, 1998; Reekie & Wilson, 1993). On the other hand, the prevention advice often given to women has been not to resist, that resistance may anger a rapist and provoke greater injury,
even death (Block & Skogan, 1986; Cohen, 1984). In the face of such contradictory advice, the message to women is chillingly clear—women are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. Although women are socialized against being aggressive and expected to be submissive in their relationships with men, “The irony is that when confronted with a rapist who is physically stronger and may be armed, a woman is suddenly expected to struggle, fight, and resist to a degree not otherwise expected” (Burgess, 1999, p. 8).

In recent years, feminist researchers have examined the resistance issue with greater sophistication. Research has been conducted to obtain the evidence necessary to assess the merits of the advice offered to women (Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Heyden, Anger, Jackson, & Ellner, 1999; Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Knight, 1992). Most accounts, however, have focused on physical resistance, with the emphasis being on the strategies that can be employed in the presence of an attacker to try to limit the physical damage inflicted. Although many feminists have vigorously acknowledged the importance of the woman’s wisdom and intuition in assessing whether physical resistance is a sensible choice, the debate has been largely centered still on physical means (Burton, 1998; Kelly, 1988).

Considerable discussion has also occurred regarding the issue of survival (Gregory & Lees, 1999; Kelly, 1988; Lamb, 1999). The concept of victims being survivors won popular acclaim from the 1970s onward. The passivity of the concept victim was rejected in favor of a term that more appropriately recognized and affirmed women’s abilities to manage, survive, and integrate their experience of sexual assault through the recovery process. “If you’re alive, you’ve survived” was the adage, with the word victim being used pejoratively to denote weakness and what we have, from the 1990s onward, termed a lack of agency. Accounts of women’s survival following a rape attack have tended to focus on the recovery process in the aftermath of rape (Herman, 1992; Kilpatrick, Saunders, Veronen, Best, & Von, 1987; Koss, 1990; Resick, 1993), rather than the strategies used to survive when the attacker was still present.

This article examines material from women’s own accounts of rape experiences that challenge such formulations of resistance and survival. Drawing on interviews conducted with victims of
New Zealand serial rapist, Malcolm Rewa, questions are raised regarding the limitations of the existing concepts of resistance and survival in relation to women’s responses to rape attacks.

Formulations that stressed women’s abilities to resist and their capacities to survive have been critically important in challenging popular notions of women as passive victims, lacking agency. However, the women’s accounts presented here suggest a need to question whether such concepts are adequate to reflect the complexity and diversity of women’s responses to rape attacks.

RESISTANCE

Historically, evidence of physical resistance was demanded as evidence of rape, a belief amazingly evident in the views expressed by a British detective sergeant in the 1970s:

> It should be borne in mind that except in the case of a very young child, the offense of rape is extremely unlikely to have been committed against a woman who does not immediately show signs of extreme violence. If a woman walks into a police station and complains of rape with no such signs of violence she must be closely interrogated. Allow her to make her statement to a policewoman and then drive a horse and cart through it. It is always advisable if there is any doubt of the truthfulness of her allegations to call her an outright liar. (Firth, 1975, p. 1507)

Traditional police advice often urged women, when attacked, not to resist. Police advice to women suggesting they submit to rape has been criticized on several grounds (Kelly, 1988; Stanko, 1990; Radford & Stanko, 1996). First, it reflects a view of rape as simply unwanted sex—give in and let him have his way with you, and you will be okay. As Stanko (1990) pointed out, the woman is not submitting to sex but to rape, a vast violation of her body and being. The very essence of rape makes it impossible to “submit” to; rape by definition implies being taken against one’s will. Second, there are times when women, when attacked, have decided not to resist physically; however, to portray this as submission ignores the mental component involved. Submitting to his will is a different prospect from evaluating the situation and determining that physical struggle may not be the best strategy with a particular offender. A lack of physical resistance, then, does not
denote a lack of mental resistance. Kelly (1988) was one of the few writers to have observed that “Women resist by refusing to be controlled, although they may not physically resist during an actual assault. Resistance, therefore, involves active opposition to abusive men’s behavior and/or the control they seek to exert” (p. 161).

Much of the literature on resistance has tended to equate resistance with rape avoidance. The sociologists Bart and O’Brien (1984, 1985) were among the first to publish material on effective rape avoidance, alleging that women who fought back were more likely to escape being raped than those who were passive. Their research, published in the 1980s, was the first to openly challenge police advice that women should not resist. Bart and O’Brien (1984, 1985) noted that the more strategies a woman used (such as yelling, running, and reasoning), the more likely she was to escape the attack with minimal physical injuries. Some strategies did tend to be more effective than others. Pleading with an attacker, for instance, seemed to increase the likelihood of a rape being completed—an unsurprising finding given the passivity and deference associated with a pleading or begging stance.

A later analysis of rape incidents in the United States by Kleck and Sayles (1990) confirmed Bart and O’Brien’s (1984, 1985) findings. They noted in their findings that victims who resist are much less likely to have the rape completed against them than non-resisting victims, and that most forms of resistance are not associated with higher rates of victim injury. According to their research, approximately 3% of rape incidents involve some additional serious physical injury, with the rape being clearly the most serious injury that most victims suffer. A study by Ullman (1998) similarly found that victim resistance to verbal or physical attacks did not escalate offender violence, nor result in increased physical injury to the victim.

As a result of such research findings, resistance and self-defense training are increasingly being advocated as a means to assist women in avoiding rape and the psychological effects it typically produces (Brison, 1998; Heyden et al., 1999; Kleck & Sayles, 1990; Warshaw, 1988). The emphasis on physical means of resistance is often paralleled by a discussion of surviving rape that equates it with physical survival.
SURVIVAL

Walking away from the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, or the Asian tsunami on December 26, 2004, was deemed sufficient to render one a survivor, and in physical terms that is true. However, we also know that people can physically survive an incident or trauma but be mentally and emotionally damaged, even incapacitated (Burgess & Hazelwood, 1999; Herman, 1992; Koss, 1990). The return of soldiers from Vietnam, for instance, was accompanied by serious addiction and mental health problems, giving rise to frequent analyses of post-traumatic stress disorder (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Herman, 1992).

It is important to affirm that surviving rape is significant in its own right. However, physical survival is often stressed as occurring at the time of the attack, with mental and psychological survival forming part of the post–rape recovery process. Linked to this are notions of resistance equating to physically being able to avoid rape. Thus, the goal or aim of resistance strategies is assumed to be rape avoidance. How can self-defense strategies protect a woman from being raped? What can potential victims do to deter an offender from raping them? What works?

These questions are clearly significant and have been rightly at the center of recent research and debate. The women I interviewed, however, seemed to operate with diverse and expanded notions of what resistance and survival mean. The sense that Rewa was seeking to control and dominate these women prompted many to respond with strategies of their own. In fact, every woman interviewed referred to ways in which she tried to take some measure of control back in the situation, ways in which she tried to limit his domination of her. Such strategies were evident in women who were raped and women who were not raped, because Rewa’s problems with erectile dysfunction meant that several rapes were not completed.

The women whose rapes were not completed seemed to be similarly affected by the attack as those who were raped. The knowledge that rape was his likely intent and the impact of the fear and terror he inflicted irrespective of the outcome meant that all the women were hugely affected, and in comparable ways. The judge’s reading of the Victim Impact Reports at sentencing made it abundantly clear that little distinction could be made in terms of the effects between those who were physically raped and those
who were not. The violation was mental as well, and knowing he was a rapist and wanted to rape her, and probably had raped her already in his mind, seemed to be just as damaging and humiliating.

What all of Rewa’s victims did was to choose the best way for each of them to respond to a situation to which no woman should ever have to respond, and the richness and diversity of their strategies deserves closer examination.

THE STUDY

PROFILE OF THE WOMEN

In 1998, Malcolm Rewa stood trial for a total of 45 counts involving 27 women whom he had attacked between 1987 and 1996. All but two of these attacks had occurred within suburbs of Auckland city and involved women ranging in age from 15 to 43 years. His trial lasted 3 months, at the end of which Rewa was convicted on a majority of counts, mostly for sexual violation by rape.

In the months after the trial, I was privileged indeed to be given the opportunity to meet with some of the women whom Rewa attacked. They were keen to tell their stories and to see some good come out of the ordeals to which they had been subjected. The result was that I interviewed 14 of these women, obtaining in-depth qualitative material relating to their experiences with the police and trial, the effects of the attack, and their recovery processes.

Seven of the women interviewed were attacked between 1989 and 1992, and seven were attacked between 1993 and 1996. Rewa stood trial on 20 different counts relating to these 14 women—10 counts of sexual violation by rape (in addition to which, he was charged with raping three of the women twice and one 3 times); two counts of attempted sexual violation by rape; two of assault with intent to commit sexual violation; and one of abduction.

METHOD

At a rape conference in 1996, a senior detective told me that he thought the women whom serial rapist Malcolm Rewa had
attacked would be excellent to interview for my research on rape. Unfortunately, the trial was still a long way off, so the women would not be free to speak until after that, even if they wanted to. Two years later this same detective phoned me. His message was brief and to the point: the trial’s over, the women are moving on with their lives, and some are keen to see something positive come out of this experience. Would I like to meet with them? He gave me one woman’s phone number to contact, having already obtained her permission to do so; and with her cooperation an initial meeting was held at her place between myself and five of the women. Together we decided to extend my research to include their input, with several of the women offering to review my existing interview schedule and adapt it to their own experiences. Also discussed at the meeting were practical issues concerning, for example, whether and how to contact women not at the meeting, and where and when to hold the interviews. The woman who was hosting the meeting that afternoon, Patricia, offered her place as an interview venue and sent a brief report of the meeting to others who had attended a posttrial lunch at her place. These women were asked if they were interested in hearing more about the research and, if so, their permission was sought for me to be given their contact details. A policewoman who had been extensively involved in supporting the women through the trial attempted to contact the remaining women to see if they were interested in hearing about the research. This was to ensure that, if possible, every woman was given the opportunity to participate if she wished.

From these contacts I had 18 names to follow up. The remainder, in most cases, had left the country, apart from one woman who wanted no further contact about the case and another whom the policewoman decided not to contact because of her disturbed mental state. Most of the women spoken to initially agreed to participate, apart from three women who changed their decision between the time of the initial contact and the time of the proposed interview. Fifteen women were interviewed in total; this number included 14 of the 27 women whose cases were heard in the 1998 trial of Malcolm Rewa, plus a woman whom Rewa had been convicted of raping in 1975 who was called to appear as a witness in the later trial.
My approach to conducting the interviews reflected my understanding of feminist research methodology. As Campbell and Wasco (2000) articulated it: “The overarching goal of feminist research is to capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge. In other words, the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome” (p. 783). Through my questions and the interview environment I established, I sought to put each woman at ease and minimize the power differences inherent in the interviewing dynamic. Key concepts arising from my previous involvement in rape research (Jordan, 1998, 2001b) were used to inform the initial interview schedule, which was adapted to reflect the issues emerging from the interviews. Epistemologically, I accepted the women’s accounts of their experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge in their own right. In interpreting and presenting their stories, however, I am aware of the possibilities of my influence in how these were framed and told, as well as the impact of time on how each woman articulated her experience. For none of those interviewed was this the first interview experience because all had been extensively questioned by the police as well as, to varying degrees, relaying details to friends, family, therapists, and so on. What impact do such retellings have on the rape survivor’s narrative? Research in this area suggests several possibilities. The responses of police agencies may be destructive in the way they reduce experiences to evidence and can convey suspicion and/or blame to the survivor. “In the aftermath of a sexual assault, a woman’s faith in the credibility of her own discourse and self-understanding is seriously shaken” (Hengehold, 1994, p. 98). Encountering cross-examination and social skepticism, survivors may falter in their recall and increasingly distrust themselves and their own testimonies (Madigan & Gamble, 1991). Alternately, in some contexts, survivors’ experiences of telling and retelling their stories may be empowering and transformative (Culbertson, 1995; Ford & Crabtree, 2002). The possibility must be countenanced that the accounts presented by the women whom I interviewed reflected the positive responses and interventions they had experienced from earlier retellings, and that these may have contributed to an increased sense of personal agency. These, after all, were women whose stories were believed, whose offender was convicted, and who themselves had been publicly
commended for their strength and courage. What is also salient, however, is that many made comments suggesting the interview to be the first occasion where they felt they were given the space to present their own version of events and to stress what was important to them, as opposed to satisfying police requirements or reassuring family members.

With the women’s permission, the interviews were all transcribed to facilitate analysis. A separate file was created for each of the women containing my interview notes, the transcript, and notes from her police file. This material I then analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify themes and issues in the women’s accounts and experiences. Each transcript was read and reviewed to identify key concepts, which were then compared with those identified in the other transcripts. From these, ideas were formulated and examined for their ability to elucidate patterns and uniformities in the women’s responses, while striving to protect more unique experiences from disappearing in the analysis.

The next section presents the results of one small segment of this data set: the women’s accounts of the ways they managed and survived the sexual attack. Although not specifically asked for this information, all the women talked at varying lengths about their responses when Rewa attacked them, and their stories made a huge impression on me. I hope this account does them justice.

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

Analysis of the strategies employed by the women attacked by Rewa yields interesting results. These women were all attacked by the same man, who used a similar approach and techniques in most of his attacks. He carefully observed and selected women whom he perceived to be physically vulnerable because they lived on their own or accompanied only by children. An experienced burglar, he typically entered the house undetected and woke the woman, subduing her if necessary with gags and bindings, threats against her children, or physical blows. In most cases he, a Maori man from an economically deprived and abusive background, selected successful, White, relatively affluent women as his victims. In short, Malcolm Rewa largely conformed
to the stereotype of the stranger rapist whom women are raised
to fear yet who, for most rape victims, bears little resemblance
to their actual, generally known attacker. For the women he
attacked, he was their worst nightmare come true.

Against this background, with all its potentially immobilizing
features, the resistance strategies employed by the women are
compelling. A diverse range of techniques was employed by the
different women, and sometimes by individual women, as they
endeavored to “suss” out their attacker. These included physical
resistance strategies, talking to the offender, efforts to alert others,
doing the unexpected, and mental and inner resistance.

Examples from each of these categories are presented to illus-
trate the variation and creativity in the women’s strategies of
resistance and survival. In the following examples, the women
are referred to by pseudonyms, selected, when she wished, by the
woman herself.

PHYSICAL RESISTANCE

Eight of the women referred to forms of struggle and physical
resistance, especially at the point of the initial attack. Shelley, for
instance, said she kicked Rewa hard, and Gabriel was pleased she
managed to kick him in the balls though obviously not hard
enough, she complained, because there was no cry of pain. Isabel
kept moving her legs around to make it difficult for him, while
Jennifer simply held her legs tight together. Several tried to fight
him off, struggle free, or reach for the phone or a panic button.

Rewa, however, was not the kind of attacker to be deterred by
such forms of resistance. He was, after all, a member of a gang
who nicknamed him “Hammer” because he had one attached to
his motorbike for use when encountering trouble (Williams, 1998,
p. 219). Thus, it is not surprising to note, the women’s efforts were
typically met with violence. Kathleen, for example, said her initial
struggles were met with punches to her face and jaw. When she
later kicked him and bit his hand, Rewa retaliated by grabbing her
hair and banging her head repeatedly on the floor. He then bound
and gagged her, rendering further physical resistance impossible.
Other women also said he punched them hard when they strug-
gled or tried to get a good look at him.
Patricia struggled and fought with him, trying every tactic she could think of until Rewa’s beanie hat fell off, throwing him into a panic. While he was distracted, hunting round on the floor for his beanie, she kicked the wall to the neighboring flat. No one responded, but it threw Rewa into an even bigger panic. He left the house without raping her. Patricia said she was still in survival and action mode: ‘I chased him up the road, and thought ‘what the hell are you going to do if you catch him?’ (laughs), and so that is why I came back and rang the police.’

Six women chose from the outset not to physically resist. Three said they were too scared to do anything; each felt she was going to die, that Rewa was going to kill her. Connie tried to understand her reaction and wondered if her passivity helped to save her:

Now what made me be submissive and quiet? Was it a survival thing, something saying we don’t try and kick out? I just thought, ‘Oh well, I’m going to die, that’s it, close your eyes.’ My father was going to come here in the morning, find me all twisted up and dead and he’s going to have a heart attack; my daughter’s going to come around and find two people dead. Great.

Other women said it was clear from the outset that physical resistance would be counterproductive and that with an attacker of Rewa’s ilk, physical resistance was never a viable option. Raquel, who was attacked while getting into her car, commented on how difficult it can be deciding how to react when confronted by such a situation:

You really just have to work it out at the time and that’s the hard part, whether to fight or not, whether someone has got a weapon or not.Honestly, no amount of self-defense would have ever stopped this happening to me either. I was attacked from behind, surprised. If someone comes up from behind you and if you’ve not seen them, not heard them, the first thing you feel is a hit, a whack to the back of the head—no amount of self-defense is going to save you. If you turn around and try and fight somebody who’s a bit taller than you, a bit heavier than you, who is stronger than you, and who has also got a weapon, you’re an idiot.

As the above examples show, strategies of physical resistance generally had little effect against the determination and tactics
employed by this offender. The women considered and employed alternative strategies, examples of which follow.

TALKING TO THE OFFENDER

The majority of the women (n = 11) talked to the offender, but from a range of perspectives. Some tried to reason, some to distract, some to deter, and some simply because they could do little else. However, Rewa usually made it clear he was not there to engage in conversation. He repeatedly told the women to stop talking, reinforcing this by hitting them across the mouth or gagging them.

Several of the women asked Rewa questions. Shelley, for instance, asked him if he had children and urged him to think of his whakapapa.2 Some asked if he was going to kill them, or asked him not to kill them. Several asked if he wanted money, which he often took while also making it clear that money was not all he wanted.

Others found that, if they were cooperating with him, he was at least a little responsive to their needs. Thus, several women spoke of how, when they asked Rewa to release the binds because they were hurting, or remove a pillow because they were suffocating, he did so. Kathleen said she asked where he had put her dog and requested that he let the dog in to be with her when he left; himself a dog lover, Rewa obliged. Connie asked him what she had done to deserve this. He asked her what she meant, to which she replied, “Well, normally if you hurt somebody they hurt you in return.” Rewa responded, “You haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just a bastard. I’m sorry.”

Several women tried saying things that they hoped might put him off. Ann, for instance, told him her boyfriend would be home soon, and that she was pregnant, adding, “I just made those things up to try and scare him and make him go away.” Lorna, a devout Christian, told Rewa she forgave him and said he began flicking through her bible and “he softened then.” However, it is difficult overall to tell whether the women’s questions and expressions of their fears made any difference to his treatment of them. What is apparent, however, is that for some of the women their efforts made them feel they were doing something active and positive. As Isabel commented,
I wanted him to treat me like a human being so I wanted to talk to him to make him aware of me as a human being, not some creature that he was using. And I sort of held on to the notion that this had influenced him, that my talking to him about what was happening had some influence on the fact that he stopped doing it. But, I don’t know really whether I did have any influence, I just wanted to feel that I had.

TRYING TO ALERT OTHERS

Some of the women tried to alert others to the fact that they were being attacked. This was difficult, given that in most cases Rewa attacked his victims knowing they were the only adult in the house. Six said they screamed initially, like Jennifer whose response, she said, was to “scream and scream and scream.” Rewa’s response to her and others who screamed was to cover their heads and subdue them quickly through punching or gagging them. The exception was Francis, who was attacked outside her home early one morning in a situation where Rewa knew her screams were very likely to be heard and responded to. Shelley tried to reach for a panic button beside her bed; however, Rewa forcefully stopped her; another woman said afterwards she forgot she even had a panic button, she felt so panicked at the time. Trying to alert others proved to be virtually impossible in most cases, a factor that rapists such as Rewa probably trade and rely on.

DOING THE UNEXPECTED

When struggling or screaming seemed impossible or ineffective, some of the women experimented with alternative strategies. One told him he was a gentle lover in an effort to calm him down; another said she kept asking “if he knew of any more successful ways of persuading women to have sexual intercourse with him.” Two women faked being unconscious, Gabriel for part of the time and Raquel for the duration of the attack. Rewa had hit Raquel on the back of the head as she went to get into her car, late one night in a city street. Her decision was a deliberate strategy that she adopted when nothing else seemed to be working, as the following excerpt from her interview explains:
The way I analyzed it was: He doesn’t want to communicate with me, he doesn’t want me to make any sound because he doesn’t want anyone to hear but I thought my instincts told me he doesn’t want to talk to me, he wants complete and total power over me. The way I was attacked was to completely have total domination and total power over my body. Basically, I’m an object, I’m not a person, I’m an object. I was tied up, it was like don’t try and fight back. The level of violence I suffered just for him to get me to that position, I’m thinking he’s not going to tolerate any kind of resistance, I’ll get too badly injured, that’s not an option. You don’t do that to somebody unless you’re absolutely dead serious about what you want; there’s no way that he would have attacked with that level of violence if he wasn’t absolutely, totally intent on raping me. I thought, this is not a guy that you mess with, what he wants he will get, talking to him is a waste of time.

I thought about it and I thought, he’s hit me really hard on the back of the head, I could quite conceivably be unconscious or half-unconscious. If he thinks I’m unconscious he won’t hurt me because there’s no reason to because I’m not going to fight back, so self-preservation. I can’t stop this happening. ... It worked, he was very, very careful with me and that’s what I found fascinating, the way he was really quite gentle with me, the way he really treated my body. I suffered no further injury after that, no further physical injury.

Raquel’s decision process is quoted at some length here to illustrate her commitment to survival and self-preservation. Her careful consideration of options following such a sudden and violent attack indicates a determination to find some way of resisting Rewa’s total domination of her. For Raquel, the very fact that she successfully fooled Rewa into thinking she was actually unconscious was hugely satisfying.

I fooled him, and that came out in court too—it was like, I won! ... It was like I had control over how he treated me, I felt like I had something, I had control over him mentally in the sense that I fooled him, I don’t know how to describe that but it’s like really amazing.

This example provides a good introduction to further consideration of the many different ways in which the women chose to mentally resist the attack.
MENTAL AND INNER RESISTANCE

Every woman interviewed described some form of mental or inner resistance, a means she adopted to help her manage and survive the attack. Their use of their minds, often in highly creative and ingenious ways, amazed and inspired me. The variation in the ways different women needed to perceive Rewa was also interesting. Several women, for example, tried hard not to see Rewa as a person. Thus, Shelley remarked,

I don’t see him as this dreadful person that I hate, in fact I find my ex-husband harder, you know, like I have difficulties more with him than with Rewa. Because Rewa was just this faceless person that came in, did something really awful to me and I didn’t know him. . . . He could have been an alien for all I know. It was a big black virus that affected me.

Similarly, Gabriel explained,

That’s why I never let him be a person to me because my way of forming meaning was to associate that person with extreme evil or extreme badness. . . . My way of forming meaning was fighting this bizarre made-up force. It was like that for me. Fighting a beast. Slaying the dragon.

Patricia, on the other hand, felt she needed to make Rewa a real person and was relieved when he became an identifiable human “flesh and blood” being rather than “a monster.”

At least four women dissociated as a way of managing the attack. Kathleen described well the way in which she dissociated and how mentally removing herself helped her to survive. She explained how she saw this process as a choice on her part, and how even at such a terrifying time she felt her sense of humor kicked in and helped her to survive:

I mean, even as it was happening, I remember being bound, my hands being tied back, and blindfolded and gagged with the duvet over me, and I was thinking: what would MacGyver do? I mean, right from then I even kept my sense of humor, even though at exactly the same time I was thinking I might die. Like some weird
things go through your mind and that is about the weirdest thing that went through my mind. How would MacGyver get out of this?

Some, such as Gabriel, used their detachment to enable them to observe and mentally record details which they hoped might prove useful in apprehending him later.

I was trying to take in as much as I could for evidence sake cause I knew I was going to report it... you kind of disassociate yourself, well I did. It’s like, OK, this isn’t personal, this is my body he is going to do this to, and I am going to take note basically. I am just going to take down every detail I can possibly remember. I didn’t want him wandering around thinking he was going to get away with it.

Several other women adopted a similar strategy. Patricia switched herself into work mode, because in her career she has developed an acute eye for detail. She believes her description and identification of the offender were vital to the police’s success in apprehending him.

The strategies the women employed indicated an inner strength, a capacity to resist and a will to survive. At times, the women’s accounts sounded like an inner dialogue, a battle between action and inaction, submission and empowerment. This is evident in Jennifer’s description of her mental responses when Rewa attacked her:

There were times when I lay there and I thought, “God, why doesn’t he just do it then and just get it over with it, maybe I should just lie here,” but there was just something, every time he came toward me to get on the bed, I thought, “You’re not going to do this!”... At times I was thinking, “This is probably really futile—how am I ever going to fight this guy off? This is ridiculous, I’ve got my hands tied behind my back,” but even so, you just sort of, I just very seldom give in. I think that’s just a personality thing as well, is that I’m a pain in the ass! I never stopped trying to untie my hands; I never stopped trying to do something.

Likewise, in the immediate aftermath of Rewa’s attack, Ann described clearly the way in which she made herself move beyond the “oh my God” sense of helplessness to taking action. Rewa had left her gagged and blindfolded with her hands tied
behind her back. She initially panicked, fearing Rewa would return to kill her. Then she remembered her brother telling her how one time, on a diving trip, he had become stuck in an underwater cave. He had to force himself to calm down sufficiently to be able to think how best to act to maximize his chances of surviving. This memory helped Ann to do the same, and she freed herself.

While Ann recalled her brother’s experience, Connie drew strength from her sense that the spirit of a woman who had been killed a week earlier was helping her through the attack. As she was to later find out, Susan Burdett had been raped and killed by the same attacker, Malcolm Rewa.

I really think she was watching over me. But somewhere along the line, I didn’t know her from a bar of soap, I just felt she must have been watching over me. Because physically I know whilst my heart was still inside my body, it was actually over the other side of the king size bed and I was trying to pull it back to survive, because I was thinking I was going to have a heart attack. The inner me was fighting, and I think she was there saying, “You can do it, calm down, do it.” That was sort of subconsciously there. People may think I’m wrong, but I really believe she was watching over me... that spiritually she was still around, that she was connected to him some way—probably through the horrible deed of killing her, he may in fact, unbeknown, have brought her with him.

You read all the time about terrible deeds, but her circumstances came straight to my head, it was the first thing, the very first thing. I’ve gone on thinking she was there watching over me, she was probably the one saying, “C’mon, you’re strong enough, you can do this.” Perhaps she was there, just giving me that little nudge along to get my head together, calm down, and start trying to handle the situation the best I could.

Many of these examples suggest that the choice between submission and empowerment is not necessarily best understood as a decision to act physically but occurs mentally, as a thought that activates a spirit of survival. Thus, even when they were bound and gagged, unable to move or resist at all physically, the women were often making clear choices and taking control of the situation mentally. This process is powerfully apparent also in Gabriel’s description of how she survived the attack, and how hard it was to talk about what actually happened for her. She said,
I mean, this guy had me strewn over a bed half naked, bound with blankets over my face, in position, just totally ready to rape me and he’s going through the knife drawer, coming back into the room. . . . I thought, “What can I do, what can I do to protect myself?” So I closed my eyes really hard, and I decided to just fill up the entire room with myself so that as much of that room had me in it, so that there was no room for him in there, and it was a really hard process because I didn’t have much time. Then I started praying, which is bizarre because I don’t pray very much at all, but anyway God sounded like a really good idea right about then. . . . (laughs)

I just closed my eyes and try and think about me and how big I could possibly make myself in this room without moving. Bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and not focusing on what he is doing out there, and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. And he comes back in and he tries to rape me and he can’t. . . . It really changed my life because I started to believe that if I asked for help I would get it, and it wouldn’t be from people. I could do it myself. . . . This is what it means, this is what it means. I’ve slayed the dragon, I’ve won, I’m off.

SUMMARY

It is in many ways not surprising that resistance and survival occur at such an inner, mental level. The effects of rape have been clearly and repeatedly shown to be mental and psychological, with comparatively few survivors having physical injuries to show for the ordeal they have experienced (Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993; Mack, 1998). As Connie observed: “It’s the inner you that’s affected. Broken bones, bruises, and that, they can heal, and they disappear or mend. It’s the inner you, I guess it’s your soul, that’s basically been destroyed.” Helen also commented: “For me, it’s your head or your mental state or whatever that’s affected more than what comes up physically. It’s not the physicality of what he did, it’s what’s happened to your brain to deal with it.” This awareness was apparent also in Helen’s approach to the court trial. The police provided information regarding the physical layout of the court; however, it was insufficient to assuage her fear that Rewa might come after her. With the help of a friend, Helen went into the courtroom the day she was to give evidence and sprinkled glitter in the box where she would stand, and in the box where Rewa would be. For her, she said, knowing the “glitter of courage” was there gave her strength:
This was my room, this was my space. . . . So I knew that when I was not feeling very strong in the courtroom, I had that glitter there. I knew it was there so it gave me strength, it was just the significance of what it meant.

Helen’s strategy helped her to find the mental strength to manage her fear of facing her attacker in the courtroom. The strategies she and the other women employed enabled them to harness some of their own power and agency in a situation where their attacker was intent on eroding it. The women’s mental resistance provided them with a means of withholding something of themselves from Rewa. He may have control of their bodies; however, he could not control their mind, their spirit. A part of them existed that he could never lay his hands on, could never penetrate.

In some ways, the mental processes described by some of the women mirror the voices of many sex workers when they describe how they manage their interactions with clients (Jordan, 1991; McLeod, 1982). Sex with a client becomes manageable for many only if they are able to dissociate from the interaction, telling themselves that while he may have bought temporary access to their body, he cannot reach beyond that to their mind or self. Hence Sarah, a sex worker, maintained,

I didn’t feel like the men were buying me, as such. I felt like they bought the use of my skills. They didn’t buy me because “me” is my head. That’s what is inside me, and nobody can ever buy that. (Jordan, 1991, p. 31)

For some sex workers, the job becomes less realistic when their ability to dissociate fades and sexual acts with clients can then begin to feel like rape (Jordan, 1991). Their ability to resist such a sense of invasion is clearly a mental process because the physical act is consented to in exchange for money.

The experiences recounted by the women attacked by Rewa similarly indicate a mental ability to resist victimization even while physically violating acts are occurring. This was evident in their determination to resist being “possessed,” their decisions to withhold consciously a part of themselves, and their resolve that, at the end of the day, they were not going to be beaten. This realization helps to explain Raquel’s delight in having been able to
fool Rewa, and Gabriel’s commitment to finding some way that she could “slay the dragon.”

SELF-DEFENSE, VICTIMS, AND SURVIVORS

Two related issues were commented on repeatedly by the women. The first of these related to self-defense options. Given the circumstances in which most of them had been attacked and the measures used, the women felt that any physical self-defense training was likely to be of limited effect. Raquel said her advice to women would be:

Go and do the self-defense courses, but there are still going to be a lot . . . like don’t expect a self-defense course to save you, don’t expect it to, you’ve still got to be prepared. Don’t ever think, “Okay, I’ve done this, I know what to do,” because if you don’t keep practicing . . . plus there will always be situations where no amount of self-defense is going to save you. That really upset me when I heard one woman make the comment to [Raquel’s boyfriend] about, “It makes me think that every woman should go and do a self-defense course.” That pissed me off a bit, to me it was like saying if I had done a self-defense course it wouldn’t have happened.

One woman, Lorna, felt that the emphasis on self-defense could be fear enhancing for some women, although the knowledge itself could be useful. As she said: “I think in some ways it can make you fearful, but it is definitely good knowing what to do, what can help you, you know—you don’t want to antagonize a psycho, do you?”

Several other women expressed annoyance at the trite way in which, after the rape, those around them proffered self-defense advice. Suzanne, for example, described her feelings of frustration at the sentiments expressed by those who talked as if it was her lack of self-defense knowledge that “got her raped.” She took heart from seeing a photo of Rewa that clearly showed his stature and physique, saying,

I was quite pleased when I saw that photo because he’s very, very muscular, a very fit man, and I was pleased in the respect that, people afterwards were saying, “Well, why didn’t you do this, why didn’t you knee him between the legs?” and things like that. I felt
better that I hadn’t been able to fight him off when I saw how muscular he was.

I got really ticked off actually. It was girls not guys that were saying . . . there were only two or three of them, but they were saying, “You should have done this, you should have done that,” but they don’t know the situation. . . . I mean, I was asleep for goodness sake, it’s not like you’re going to jump up and have full strength in the middle of the night. I did get pretty frustrated with that.

Self-defense courses can obviously be useful in teaching survival techniques and strategies (Heyden et al., 1999). Although many endeavor to promote attitudinal change as well and can be confidence building and empowering, the emphasis is often on acquiring physical skills and tactics. When others make comments about using self-defense knowledge, the examples given are typically of the eye-gouging, nose-breaking, ball-kicking variety. As the women in the current study demonstrated, in many situations the scope for physical resistance will be limited, possibly counterproductive, and even dangerous to attempt. In every attack situation, however, the ability to mentally resist and survive will be fundamental to the impact and also potentially to the outcome.

This leads into the second issue raised by some of the women, which relates to the debate over whether they see themselves as victims or survivors. I have personally wrestled with the limitations of both terms. One of the women, Gabriel, gave a very clear account of how she viewed the relationship between these two words:

You know what, that transition from victim to survivor, I think that the victim and the survivor can be parallel. That you are never, that you don’t switch from being victim to survivor. You choose to take the path of the survivor, which is still the path of the victim, but it is different. I used to think it was a big shift. I used to think that, ah what did I used to think? I used to think being a victim was when why did this happen to me, what have I done to deserve this, why is this always happening to me, what, you know? That is my classification of victim. It is like when something goes wrong in your life and you go, “Oh, this always happens to me, I always have this kind of problem, you know, my whole life has been like this,” do you know what I mean? And being a survivor is, “Okay, so this happened, what can I get out of it, where can I go with this, where am I going with this, where am I with this now?”
You still have to acknowledge that you have been victimized when you are a survivor, that you were a victim, that it was this random awful thing that happened to you and you were victimized. I don’t think there is a shift in what happens, I think there is a shift in consciousness. There is something that shifts, and all of a sudden you stop going, “Why did this happen to me, why can’t I get over this, why can’t I get on with my life, all these terrible things keep happening, I can’t sleep at night,” you know. It’s that self-blame kind of talk which isn’t useful. But I do think, I was a victim of sexual abuse, and I have survived it. I don’t think I can say any more.

Gabriel’s description is useful in highlighting the way in which using the terms victim and survivor in an oppositional manner may appeal to some strains of feminist political thinking yet not resonate fully with women’s lived experience. For her, there is no dichotomy. There is not even a strong sense of transition from one state to the other—she was a victim and a survivor, not one or the other. What her account and many of the other women’s accounts demonstrate is that, even at the very moment that they were being victimized, they were in survival mode. They were simultaneously victims and survivors.

Is removing the dichotomy and viewing women as victims and survivors sufficient, however, as a means for recognizing their own narrative agency? Both labels have been critiqued for the way in which they distort women’s perceptions of their experiences and force them to be viewed through a particular, and alien, lens. Thus, Spry (1995) observed,

> The pain and confusion following the assault is further complicated by having to structure and make sense of her experience within the assailant’s language. She is already and always held in relation to the phallus; she is victim to it or survivor of it. (p. 27)

Debates such as these also suggest the need for a more complex appreciation of issues related to empowerment and submission. Submitting need not denote powerlessness, for as these women’s accounts indicated, on some occasions submitting was an essential part of their survival and a means of retaining a degree of control in a situation oriented to its suppression. Again, however, language can constrain our abilities to understand, define, and present such narratives and limit their transformative potential.
CONCLUSION

This article presented the resistance and survival stories of women who were attacked by a stranger serial rapist. Besides being compelling and inspirational in their own right, the women’s accounts challenge conventional notions and understandings. They challenge our understanding of resistance strategies, suggesting that these should not be limited to physical ploys and techniques. It has often been pointed out that this emphasis can appear judgmental of those victims who do not physically resist, who find themselves unable to kick and scream, or fail to kick or bite their attacker in the genitals (Kelly, 1988).

Although a recent self-defense book affirmed that the key to effective self-defense was the accompanying mind-set, the mental side was described as using the mind to ascertain and “fully exploit the weakness of the offender” (Sanders, 2001, p. 195). In other words, the role of the mind is stressed only insofar as it can help potential victims to resist and avoid being raped. The very title of this book is itself somewhat of a giveaway: How Dangerous Men Think and How to Stay Safe for Life. The promise that the self-defense techniques contained within its covers will keep a woman “safe for life” virtually ensures that if you read this book and are later raped, you have only yourself to blame. It also implies that if you did not buy and read this book, you have only yourself to blame. Notions of mental resistance and survival feature little, with the emphasis on physicality obscuring and denying the realities described by many of the women interviewed in this study.

This is not to deny that stories of physical resistance, of women fighting back, and of women avoiding rape are hugely important and potentially highly empowering. We need strong clear accounts that counter images of passive victimhood and affirm women’s strengths and physical abilities. As Griffin (1971) noted more than 30 years ago,

Passivity itself prevents a woman from ever considering her own potential for self-defense and forces her to look to men for protection. . . . Moreover, the passive woman is taught to regard herself as impotent, unable to act, unable even to perceive, in no way self-sufficient. (p. 33)
However, much of the early feminist rhetoric in this area strove to make women’s seeming passivity understandable. If women do not resist, it is not because they want to be raped, but because they, in fact, cannot resist. Although such an emphasis was valuable in challenging fundamental rape myths, it was also damaging in elevating women’s fear in ways that could enhance its potentially immobilizing effects. Burton (1998) argued that the feminist challenge to the rape myths of the 1970s and 1980s was important; however, the newly emergent feminist discourse often fell into the trap of replacing one set of simplistic assertions with another, extreme and oppositional version. As she expressed it,

The myth that rape occurred only when women resisted was countered with the denial of women’s ability to resist in the face of terror. These new “truths” were part of a feminist political strategy to unsettle commonly accepted views of violence against women, yet the result was a new and equally rigid discursive world. (Burton, 1998, p. 183)

Men’s power, strength, and dominance were juxtaposed against women’s fear, weakness, and vulnerability. Although fear undoubtedly can rule women’s lives and be paralyzing in its effects, constant reminders in this vein may be not only affirming of women’s responses but serve to confirm and reinforce such thinking. Minimizing women’s capacities to resist has therefore been simultaneously empowering and disempowering: “The effect is to minimize and render marginal acts of resistance, thus privileging the link between rape and a powerless lack of agency in women, and reinforcing a fear/immobility relationship at the expense of a fear/resistance one” (Burton, 1998, p. 188).

In recent years, however, the emphasis has begun shifting in ways that acknowledge women’s capacities to act and resist, but in a way that typically emphasizes physical prowess (Heyden et al., 1999; Reekie & Wilson, 1993). Burton primarily advocates the importance of equipping women with self-defense and assault prevention skills, recognizing the potential of such training for enhancing women’s confidence and sense of agency. Such an emphasis is consistent with the recent proliferation of female fight-back role models (such as Xena Warrior princess, Eowyn in
The Lord of the Rings, and the heroine in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon) but fails to adequately reflect other dimensions of women’s survival experiences.

The women interviewed clearly attributed their survival to their inner and mental resistance. Physical resistance often seemed impossible, or something they realized would be no disincentive to a man of Rewa’s ilk. Their accounts raise questions regarding what resistance and survival mean, urging us to expand our often-narrow definitions of such concepts.

Such expansion is consistent with our increasing awareness of the nature and effects of rape. Rape, as we know, is not only a physical act. This is partly why the “rape is violent and not sexual” argument is limited. Rape is violent and sexual, using sexual means to express violence toward a woman or women. Rape is also physical and mental—the offender acts out what is in his mind, and the victim is more likely to be affected mentally than physically. He need not use physical force to subdue her, nor she employ physical means to resist him. Contrary to such understandings, however, physical realities continue to dominate criminal justice system perspectives and responses. Thus, as Kelly and Radford (1996) noted,

> Harm is defined in relation to whether the surface of the body has been “violated.” Violation of the person, of their will, of their ability to act through the use of intimidation and threat are not criminal (apart from the threat to kill) and therefore not “serious.” (p. 29)

Our understanding of what it means to survive rape has also shifted from an emphasis on physical survival to stressing the emotional and psychological recovery process. The notion that victims need to become survivors, however, implies that each is a distinct, oppositional state rather than acknowledging, as some of these women did, that these can be parallel and simultaneous positions. At the very time that she is being attacked, a woman can be understood as a victim in survivor mode, as she mentally struggles to find a way of resisting total domination by her attacker. Holding to an image of the passive victim can often, in fact, mask recognition of the active survivor. The latter emphasis resists the victim-blaming dimensions often implicit in self-
defense advice and affirms the so-called rightness of different women’s responses to being attacked. In such situations, every woman finds her own way to manage and survive, her own way to resist complete control by the rapist.

Survival processes coexist with victimization experiences. Every woman whom Rewa attacked was detrimentally affected in myriad ways by his acts of intimidation, physical, and/or sexual violence. The Victim Impact Statements chronicled an immensely moving and heartbreaking list of effects on these women: nightmares, depression, suicidal impulses, extreme anxiety, eating disorders, job losses, relationship stress or breakdown, loss of trust, impaired capacity for intimacy, and other such impacts. These are consistent with the effects of rape documented in research conducted elsewhere with the victims and survivors of rape and sexual assault (Burgess & Hazelwood, 1999; Herman, 1992; Koss, 1990; Resick, 1993). The emphasis on survival strategies here is not intended to detract from or minimize in any way acknowledgment of the extensive damage and trauma suffered by these women. Rather, the aim is to challenge the oppositional positioning of victim or survivor debates and promote a view that is expansive enough to embrace simultaneous recognition of victimization impacts alongside survival strategies.

To stress women’s agency and survival is in itself a form of resistance (Kelly, 1988). It not only challenges popular conceptions of women as victims but also is a means of rejecting the highly individualized and apolitical approaches to understanding and responding to rape that have emerged in recent years. As Lamb (1999) articulated it: “By focusing on pathology and ignoring resiliency, medical aspects of victimhood were emphasized, political aspects de-emphasized. . . . When victim advocacy became ‘victim-centered advocacy’ (Daly, 1994), offenders were demonized and crimes were individualized” (p. 131).

Acknowledging individual women’s stories of resistance and survival need not mean individualizing our understanding of women’s responses to sexual violence; rather, it denotes an affirming of the diversity of ways in which individual women respond to and survive the gendered, political, and violating crime of rape.
NOTES

1. A full account of this research process is contained in Jordan (2001a).
2. The Maori term for descent line or genealogy.
3. MacGyver was a fictional television hero in the 1980s, a secret agent famous for his ingenuity and resourcefulness in escaping from seemingly impossible situations.

REFERENCES


Jan Jordan, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She has recently completed a book based on her doctoral dissertation, titled *The Word of a Woman? Police, Rape and Belief* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).