

CULTURE, *et cetera*

Professor says sex motivates some rapists

By Rick Karlin
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ALBANY, N.Y. Soft-spoken and almost mild-mannered, Richard Felson describes himself as a conventional '60s-era liberal who was once suspended from high school for his role in a civil rights sit-in. But that was then, and now is now.

Today, this State University of New York at Albany sociology professor has, by his own admission, gained a reputation as a politically incorrect academic bad boy, thanks to his views on the crime of rape.

Students argue with him in class. Fellow sociologists write scathing peer reviews of his scholarly papers. Course evaluations from students fluctuate wildly depending on whether they agree or disagree. He is certain that some students purposefully avoid his classes, thanks to his controversial views.

Mr. Felson, 44, has gained enough notoriety that he was interviewed late last year by Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes." Mr. Wallace came to his class, but the segment never aired. (A spokeswoman for CBS News, which produces "60 Minutes," says the show doesn't

Non-PC theory makes him a pariah

discuss segments that have not aired. Mr. Felson, though, believes the piece died when the producer who was working on the segment changed jobs.)

The controversy surrounding Mr. Felson stems from his theory that rapists often commit their abominable deeds in order to obtain sex.

While that may sound simple, it flies in the face of the widely held view by feminists that rape is a violent expression of anger and is driven by a desire for power and control more than sex.

"It's sort of funny," says Mr. Felson. "I'm from this old left-wing family. I heard I was called sexist and racist."

Mr. Felson has written several articles on his view that rape is driven by sex. And his ideas were aired in "Violence, Aggression and Coercive Actions," a book he co-authored with James Tedeschi, a psychologist at the Albany university. The book was published late last year by the American Psychological Association.

The idea that rape is an act of violence and power emerged in the 1970s, after the publication of books such as "Men Who Rape," by

Nicholas Groth, and "Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape," by Susan Brownmiller.

Since then, Mr. Felson says, the idea that rape is primarily a crime of violence, power and control has been the accepted wisdom among rape counselors, feminists and others.

But Mr. Felson questions this assumption because, he says, there hasn't been a lot of rigorous, quantitative scientific research about why men commit rapes. Such research is key to understanding criminal behavior, he says.

Mr. Felson's thinking goes like this: Most violent crimes are committed by young men who have limited internal controls. "Some people's decisions are impulsive. They do the first thing that comes to mind," he says.

In that context, rape could be seen as an impulsive way of obtaining sex. "You harm people because you get something you want," he says.

Feminists, though, say rape is more than simply using violence to obtain sex.

"Our sense is that rape is about power, violence and sex," says

Maud Easter, executive director of the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

Debra Schramek, deputy director of the Albany County Rape Crisis Center, says one needs to differentiate between the kinds of rape involved.

"You can't deny that sex is a factor. I think where we disagree is on the motivation," she says.

Interviews with rape victims at the crisis center, Ms. Schramek says, reveal different scenarios in different kinds of sex.

Date-rape victims, for instance, describe how their assailants grew furious when they were denied sex.

"What we often hear from victims is 'He was real nice and sweet and all of the sudden he became more demanding and angry,'" Ms. Schramek says.

Rapes by strangers, Ms. Schramek says, seem to be motivated largely by a lust for power rather than sex, "the need to control another person and to discharge your own emotions."

Mr. Felson maintains that the rape-as-power idea has simply been adopted, in knee-jerk fashion, as a feminist slogan.

"They've made a claim. They've stated in no uncertain terms and they are committed to it," he says.