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Eradicating an Epidemic: How Universities Can Better Protect Women
from Sexual Assault

In recent years, the crime rates on university campuses have been falling steadily, yet one crime seems to persist despite of every effort to eradicate it. Sexual assault is still woefully common across most university campuses. In one study, published by *The Journal of American College Health*, in just a single two-month period 22.6% of college women reported being sexually assaulted and 7.9% reported being the victim of rape (Gidycz 12). This statistic becomes even more unnerving when considering the fact that the National Crime Survey found that only about 5% of sexual assaults will be reported to police (McMahon 361). A multitude of factors appear to contribute to this epidemic, yet universities have taken minimal efforts to stop these attacks. Universities have not done enough to stop the rising rates of sexual assault on campus and by ignoring contemporary research have even facilitated a prevalent rape culture.

Modern American society prides itself on being advanced and civilized, so it can be confusing as to why sexual assaults are so prevalent. "Rates of sexual assault...have not declined over the last five decades" (Armstrong 484). Many of the reasons for why sexual assault remains a problem in society are due to how society works and human psychology. Errors in thinking, societal norms, and gender differences in consent are all psychological contributors to the sexual assault epidemic that are compounded by the environmental factors provided by the campus setting. In order to reduce the rates of campus sexual assaults steps must be taken by universities

to mend environmental factors as well as psychological therapy. Unfortunately only six in ten publically funded universities offer programs addressing sexual assaults and even fewer address both environmental and psychological factors (Paul 99).

A major factor that contributes to the rates of sexual assaults on campus is the variance in how male and female students interpret consent. Most of the programs conducted by universities that address sexual assault focus on one aspect: the most important step in avoiding sexual assault is to gain consent. Problems arise, though, when these programs try to define consent. Most often, these programs stress that consent must be acquired verbally, as seen most recently in the “Yes Means Yes” campaign (Anderssen). However, in a study conducted by the University of Arkansas, it was found that there are “gender similarities in how men and women define sexual consent” but there are “gender differences in how college students indicate their consent and nonconsent to sex as well as in how students interpreted consent and nonconsent from partners” (Jozkowski 913). The study found that women use more indirect verbal signals of consent while men use more indirect nonverbal signals in order to indicate their consent to a sexual situation (Jozkowski 906). This is apparent in how American society stereotypes sexual situations. Social norms state that men are the go-getters in a sexual situation and that women act as gatekeeper. Therefore, in a sexual situation, it is widely accepted that men’s consent is implied while women will almost certainly deny any sexual advancements at first. Researchers at Arkansas hypothesize that “men who accept the stereotype of men as sexual initiators and women as sexual gatekeepers...assume that they are responsible for advancing the sexual interaction and women are responsible for clearly communicating nonconsent” (Jozkowski 913). This can lead to persistent pressure from men who believe that the woman is simply filling the role society expects of her, instead of sensing that he is making the woman uncomfortable or

afraid. Often times men may not even be aware that they have committed a sexual assault until much later because they believe they were acting in a way that is socially acceptable and expected.

A common place for interaction between undergraduate men and women in a party setting is the iconic fraternity party. Fraternity parties have become a common trope in movies, literature, and on television; the alcohol is free flowing, the women are scantily dressed, and the parties are massive. Sexual assaults do happen in fraternities, but they also can occur in bars and nightclubs. The reason these popular hangouts can be sexually dangerous is a combination of male control of a female's movement and alcohol. When partying, it is an accepted social norm that students drink to excess. In fact, "nearly half of all college students engage in binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more drinks in a row for women)" (Gidycz 6). And research has proven that when either a man or woman is under the influence of alcohol sexual assaults are more likely to occur. "A national sample of college students found...that approximately 55% of the women and 75% of the men were drinking at the time of assault" (Gidycz 6). When intoxicated, women are less likely to be able to coherently voice nonconsent to sexual situations and, as research has shown, women give consent verbally. Men have come to expect women to voice nonconsent and intoxicated women are less likely to do so, thus men are less likely to recognize that a woman is not consenting. Men who are in control of the situation are able to move these intoxicated women into an area that is more private and favorable for sexual situations. Indiana University professor Elizabeth Armstrong found in her research that "partiers are expected to like and trust party-mates. Norms of civil interaction curtail displays of unhappiness or tension among partygoers" (Armstrong 490). Women fear that if they voice their concerns or unhappiness in these social settings, they risk appearing unhappy

or ungrateful. Thus, when men control their movements to different parts of the gathering they are unlikely to dissent. Social pressures keep women from removing themselves from situations that make them uncomfortable, and when these situations become dangerous or sexually explicit it is often too late for the woman to escape. Unfortunately, universities have limited rule over fraternity parties as the chapters answer to the North-American Interfraternity Conference (Cornish). Though universities do have the power to put fraternities on probation or expel them from campus, it is rarely used. Bars and nightclubs are independently owned and in no way are expected to respond to university concern over sexual assaults that take place there.

No matter how hard a university might try, they will never be able to keep their students from drinking and partying. The focus must be brought on to men at these parties and the question of why some of them commit sexual assaults. Many of these men are morally respectable and upstanding citizens, yet they can be betrayed by their own psyche. Psychological fallacies can lead otherwise morally respectable men to misunderstand sexual situations. “The false consensus effect can lead to normative misperception, in that men may assume others think and act as they do, leading to an overestimation of the prevalence of a behavior” (Paul 103). This effect can lead men to believe that women are equally as interested in sex as they are. Coupling this with a man’s role in societal norms as the designated sexual go-getter leads to aggressive and persistent sexual pursuance. Compounding this, men “may display pluralistic ignorance, in which they make an absolute error in regards to estimating others’ behaviors; risk-taking or negative behavior is often overestimated” (Paul 103). When asked if they would initiate an aggressive sexual act most men would respond no. However, when asked if other men on campus would initiate an aggressive sexual act many men will say yes (Paul 103). Pluralistic ignorance leads to the normalization of morally unacceptable behavior. All of these factors lead

to a prevalence of men who believe that society expects them to pursue women and that women will deny at first when they are actually sexually interested. Add in the fact that “nearly half of all college students engage in binge drinking” (Gidycz 6) and there is the formula for an epidemic.

In fairness, universities have made attempts to curb the rates of sexual assaults on their campuses. “Prior to 1988 less than 4% of American colleges publicly reported on campus crimes” (McMahon 361). As a result of the rape and murder of Lehigh student Jeanne Clery, who was killed in her campus residence hall, the United States Congress passed the Jeanne Clery Act, which began as the 1990 Student Right-To-Know and Campus Security Act (McMahon 361). The act was amended in 1992 and 1998, eventually becoming the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics (McMahon 361). Now, universities are mandated to alert all students, staff, and faculty when a sexual assault occurs. Many universities have established intervention programs in order to decrease the rates of sexual assaults. Yet, as Lisa Paul explains: “unfortunately, although the majority of published interventions are face valid and intuitively appealing, they lack theoretical grounding and empirically supported components” (Paul 99). If universities want to make a difference in the rates of sexual assaults they must rethink the interventions and programs they have constructed in order to help campus women.

The epidemic rates of sexual assaults cannot be attributed to one particular source. “Processes at the individual, organizational, and interactional levels contribute to high rates of sexual assault” (Armstrong 494). To truly impact rates of sexual assault, universities must focus on ways to make a change in the individual behavior of men and how men and women on campus interact. A main fault of current sexual assault programming is that oftentimes

responsibility for sexual assault prevention falls on women. Common idioms such as “always watch your drink” and “do not wear anything too revealing” insinuate that when sexual assaults occur somehow the woman did something wrong, allowing the assault to happen. “Even a feminist focus group participant who explained that her friend who was raped said she ‘made every single mistake and almost all of them had to do with alcohol’” (Armstrong 493). It is evident here how this belief, that it is a woman’s responsibility to protect herself, has become so ingrained in our culture that even women believe that when a sexual assault occurs it is due to a mistake on the part of the victim. Assault prevention should focus on the need for men to be more aware of what constitutes sexual assault and when it is necessary to abstain from sex in order to assure that the woman’s rights are not being violated. In the broad perspective, drug-facilitated rape and aggressive acts of rape are not nearly as common as acquaintance rape. “For college students 83% to 90% of sexual assaults were committed by a perpetrator who was known to the victim prior to the assault as an acquaintance, friend, romantic interest, or dating partner” (Jozkowski 905). Society’s expectation is that rape is an act of aggression committed randomly by a stranger yet research indicates that most rapes are actually committed by perpetrators known to the victim and can oftentimes be attributed to something akin to a misunderstanding or miscommunication. The majority of the men committing these crimes are not necessarily bad men, they just lack the proper education on how their behavior can lead to a woman giving what they falsely believe is consent to an aggressive sexual situation.

There are many well-researched ways in which universities can improve their sexual assault prevention programs. A report from the National Crime Victim Research and Treatment Center stated that “research conceptualizing time as a continuous, and not categorical, variable...supports longer interventions” (Paul 100). They also reported “engaging men on

multiple levels is more likely to result in positive change” (Paul 100). This means that a longer intervention, between one and two hours, with multiple levels of engaging activities (writing activities, role-playing, and peer-facilitated discussions) are more likely to lead to a program that reduces rates of sexual assault. Contrary to common belief, it is actually more beneficial for interventions to be held in same-sex contexts- this suggests that men were more receptive to the information presented when with other men (Paul 100). This may be related to pluralistic ignorance; men find that their beliefs about the behaviors of other men are wrong when in this same-sex setting. When their beliefs are surprisingly challenged, men may become more receptive to new ideas. The number of participants in these interventions also has an effect on how successful the program may be. “Brecklin and Forde found a negative relationship between the number of participants and program effectiveness” (Paul 100). Smaller group settings were found to be more effective than larger, lecture-based, groups. These programs need to have multiple follow-up sessions. The most preferable would be an intervention program that lasts the entirety of a student’s freshman year and, finally, these programs need to focus on alcohol education. “Rape prevention programs aimed at educating women about factors associated with sexual assault typically do not highlight the important role alcohol plays in sexual assault” (Lawyer 459). Not only do interventions need to educate women about how alcohol facilitates sexual aggression, but men also need to understand that alcohol consumption statistically leads to increases in sexual assault.

Universities’ current sexual assault intervention programs do not seem to take current research into account. Most interventions are mixed gendered and typically last between 30 and 60 minutes. These interventions are usually in large group settings such as lectures and typically do not have any follow-up sessions (Paul 105). The most effective program would be for

universities to conduct many interventions with less than 30 participants. This program would present information that challenges commonly held beliefs about sexual assaults and encourages the participants to work through many activities in order to completely grasp these new and unusual concepts. Then these intervention groups would meet again often- perhaps monthly- for the entirety of the student's freshman year. As well as new intervention programming, universities must establish new avenues in which women can report sexual assaults. Many women today distrust the police and university officials and most sexual assaults go unreported (McMahon 361). It may be beneficial for universities to establish an organization of solely student volunteers where victims may come and discuss sexual assaults and are encouraged to report them to officials.

Truly, any steps universities take to modernize and improve their sexual assault intervention programming would be progress. Unfortunately, universities appear to be extremely hesitant to do so. Until universities take responsibility for the role they have played in the rising epidemic of sexual assault on campus nothing will improve. Universities must come down with harsher punishments for the men who commit sexual assaults and rape. The intervention programs that are offered must be modernized. Our universities have failed our women and, while they drag their feet, women will only continue to be assaulted and raped in epidemic numbers.

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