

Violence Against Women

<http://vaw.sagepub.com/>

Exploring Rape Myths, Gendered Norms, Group Processing, and the Social Context of Rape Among College Women : A Qualitative Analysis

Michelle E. Deming, Eleanor Krassen Covan, Suzanne C. Swan and Deborah L. Billings

Violence Against Women 2013 19: 465 originally published online 1 May 2013

DOI: 10.1177/1077801213487044

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/19/4/465>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

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>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jun 3, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - May 1, 2013

[What is This?](#)

Exploring Rape Myths, Gendered Norms, Group Processing, and the Social Context of Rape Among College Women: A Qualitative Analysis

Violence Against Women

19(4) 465–485

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1077801213487044

vaw.sagepub.com



**Michelle E. Deming¹, Eleanor Krassen Covan²,
Suzanne C. Swan³, and Deborah L. Billings⁴**

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the negotiation strategies of college women as they interpret ambiguous rape scenarios. In focus groups, 1st- and 4th-year college women were presented with a series of three vignettes depicting incidents that meet the legal criteria for rape yet are ambiguous due to the presence of cultural rape myths, contexts involving alcohol consumption, varying degrees of consent, and a known perpetrator. These contexts are critical in understanding how college women define rape. Key findings indicated many of these college women utilized rape myths and norms within their peer groups to interpret rape scenarios.

Keywords

college women, qualitative methods, rape myths, sexual victimization

Introduction

In the United States, one in six women will be raped in her lifetime; 29% are between the ages of 18 to 24 when they are raped, and rape is a persistent problem on college

¹Sociology Department, University of South Carolina, Sloan College Columbia, SC, USA

²School of Health and Applied Human Sciences, University of North Carolina at Wilmington

³Psychology Department and Women's and Gender Studies, University of South Carolina

⁴Arnold School of Public Health and Women's and Gender Studies, Health Promotion, Education and Behavior, University of South Carolina

Corresponding Author:

Michelle E. Deming, Sociology Department, University of South Carolina, Sloan College Columbia, SC 29208, USA.

Email: demingm@mailbox.sc.edu

campuses (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Findings indicate that acquaintance rape is more common than stranger rape (Clay-Warner & Burt, 2005; Fisher, Cullen, & Daigle, 2005). While the vast amount of literature focuses on prevalence rates of sexual assault, most of the research fails to differentiate women's experiences of rape. Women's assumptions and individual interpretations of rape and sexual assault vary (Chasteen, 2001), and their experiences are complicated by racism, sexism, culturally held ideologies, and myths (Donovan, 2007).

Women exist in cultural atmospheres that explain their social realities. One woman's experience may not explain another, yet these experiences may lead to an understanding within the body of a culture that perpetuates the phenomenon of violence against women. It is within this construct that we understand violence within cultural norms and beliefs (e.g., rape myths). Common patriarchal views perceive sexual assault as nothing more than "a lie" or a "woman's attempt to get back a man" (Pineau, 1989). The central theme "that the natural aggression of men and the natural reluctance of women somehow make [acquaintance] rape understandable underlies a number of prevalent myths about rape and human sexuality" (Pineau, 1989, p. 226). These myths are not just popular, but also often emerge in the everyday understanding of sexual violence towards women through rape mythology, religious tenets, political views, and the criminal justice system, and they can even be found in the American cultural value system (Pineau, 1989).

Legal definitions of rape include physical force as well as verbal coercion (Kilpatrick, 2004), yet these descriptions vary among federal, state, and individual definitions (Cook, Gidycz, Koss, & Murphy, 2011). For the purpose of this study, the researchers define rape as unwanted penetration, which is consistent with federal and state definitions of rape. This definition contrasts with some previous studies, in which researchers assessed the rates of rape by asking women specifically if they had been "raped" in their lifetime. Unfortunately, these questions only capture incidents in which the woman herself labeled the incident as rape. Realizing that previous methods were inadequate at capturing rape experiences, Koss and Oros (1982) developed the Sexual Experiences Survey, which introduced the method of asking behavior-specific questions to determine rape prevalence rates.

Often women experience rape in an ambiguous way or with someone known to them that makes identifying and labeling experiences of rape difficult. These subjective experiences do not fit neatly into the contextual framework of the cultural "rape script" (e.g., stranger rape, at night, alone). Therefore, women have a difficult time identifying themselves as victims of rape. Those who identify their experiences as rape may still be reluctant to report the act because of embarrassment or because of the stigma attached to rape victims (Fisher et al., 2005). Furthermore, the more normative these situations become among college women, the less likely they are to label them as rape and sexual assault. Frequent and repeated displays of violence towards women through gendered aggression, mass media, and adherence to rape myths produce a tolerance whereby acts of violence are deemed less offensive due to repeated exposure (Belknap, 2010; Ellis, 1989). As a result, rape is defined by many people only when behaviors fall within the narrow confines of the traditional rape script. Although many college women are aware of acquaintance rape, people tend to doubt the validity of a rape unless it falls within this context (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004).

Researchers have uncovered cultural norms associated with rape mythology (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Rape myths are defined as culturally situated and socially learned ideologies that excuse sexual violence against women and advocate that women should accept responsibility for their sexual victimization (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Rape myths suggest that women provoke their own sexual assault by the types of clothing they wear, their demeanor, by being alone, drinking, and being out at night. Additional rape myths include “she asked for it,” “it wasn’t really rape,” “he didn’t mean to do it,” “she wanted it,” or “she lied” (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Although men are more likely than women to endorse rape myths (Littleton & Axson, 2003), women also believe them. In a study of college students, Johnson, Kuck, and Schander (1997) found that 16.7% of women believed a man has a right to assume sexual intercourse if a woman allows him to touch her in a sexual way; 24.7% believed that if a woman touches a man in a sexual way, he has a right to assume sex; and 33.7% believed a man has a right to assume intercourse if a woman has had an oral sexual encounter with him.

Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, and Halvorsen (2003) sampled 504 college women at a southeastern university. They found that 85% of women who had experiences that met the legal definition of sexual assault but did not label their experiences as rape identified reasons such as “alcohol impairment,” “boyfriend’s persistence,” the “man used physical force to obtain sex,” “the man was much older or larger,” and “used threats even when these women tried to resist.” Women who have had previous sexual relationships or knew their assailant well are also less likely to label their experiences as rape (Kahn et al., 2003).

However, victims often do tell someone close to them, such as family members or friends, about instances of such violence (Burt & Albin, 1981; Lee, Pomeroy, Yoo, & Rheinboldt, 2005). Research suggests 70% of these women tell a friend (Banyard et al., 2005). Third parties, such as close friends or acquaintances are more likely to know of rape incidents because they may be present in the context in which they occur or are present for the aftermath (Chen & Ullman, 2010). By sharing personal experiences or incidents of sexual assault, women may come to define their own experiences within the norms of their social groups, including self-blame and personal responsibility. These college women may be influenced by rape myths and stereotypical gendered norms (Weiss, 2009); and these norms may be transmitted within their friendship groups.

Current cultural myths of blaming the victim are embedded in our understanding of rape and sexual assault, and in the reluctance of women to label and report sexual assault experiences (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). If women experience sexual victimization and do not label the event as rape, then understanding how women interpret these events is necessary to make sense of the responses that women have to sexual assault, as well as the responses of peers to whom they may turn for support. Rape cannot be examined unless it is within a social and cultural context to understand differences among women in labeling and reporting their experiences of rape (Mardorossian, 2002; Pazzani, 2007).

Previous researchers of rape mythology (Burt, 1980; Johnson et al., 1997; Payne et al., 1999) used survey methodology and determined that adherence to these myths

are culturally widespread. Yet previous survey methodology fails to capture rape myths as they may occur in social contexts and when several rape myths occur simultaneously. College women's definitions of rape and sexual assault vary (Banyard et al., 2005). Findings suggest that employing rape myths to understand complex and confusing situations that exist in the reality of the rape experience is a common mechanism utilized by college women (Burt, 1980; Madriz, 1997; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Thus determining how women label and negotiate incidents of unwanted sexual contact are critical in understanding why women do not report and do not label incidents as rape (Banyard et al., 2005).

This research addresses how women label rape scenarios when presented with vignettes; how they view the women and men involved in the scenarios; how women may advise friends who disclose such an incident to them; whether or not they would offer support and recommend reporting; and the extent to which they hold the perpetrator accountable for rape. It also explores college women's interpretations of rape scenarios that they and their peers commonly face. Employing qualitative methods as a mechanism to understand how women negotiate and label rape and sexual assault is necessary to develop an understanding of how women define and explain rape (Cook et al., 2011; Harned, 2005). This study has two exploratory aims: (a) to determine if women endorse common rape myths found within previous literature to interpret realistic, ambiguous rape scenarios (Johnson et al., 1997, pp. 696-697); and (b) to explore how 1st- and 4th-year college women as groups negotiate and discuss the content of these scenarios.

Method

Participants

First- and 4th-year college women from a small southeastern university were recruited to participate in research titled, "College Women's Beliefs About Dating." Both 1st- and 4th-year women were selected to participate in this study because 1st-year women are new to the college atmosphere, while 4th-year students are more familiar with the norms and expectations of college social life.

The first author visited classrooms, posted flyers in the Criminology and Sociology department, and purposively sampled the university email directory for 1st- and 4th-year undergraduate women to recruit for adequate participation in this study. Those students who were between the ages of 18 to 24 years and agreed to participate in the study were assigned to prearranged focus group sessions. First- and 4th-year students participated in separate focus groups. All volunteers who met the inclusion criteria were included. Students received US\$10 gift cards as incentives for participation. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university approved this study.

Group Characteristics

Of the 33 students who participated in this study, 16 were 1st-year students between the ages of 18 to 19 years. Of those, there were 14 White/non-Latino students, 1

African American, and 1 Asian/Pacific Islander. Of the 17 fourth-year students, between the ages of 20 to 24 years, there were 16 White/non-Latino students and 1 African American. Each group of 1st- and 4th-year students had 5–8 members. The data reflect those who contributed to the focus group sessions; in the 1st-year groups, 11 (69%) members contributed to the discussion, and 15 (88%) 4th-year students contributed to the focus group. Those who remained silent throughout the focus group sessions are excluded from analyses.

Procedure

The first author conducted a pilot focus group to test the focus group guide. The pilot test demonstrated that the focus group guide was effective in eliciting the responses from the research questions. Five focus groups were conducted in October 2008. Two groups were comprised of 1st-year students and three groups were comprised of 4th-year students. Each focus group session was tape recorded and lasted approximately one hour.

Three vignettes were presented to each focus group. Each vignette was displayed on an overhead projector and remained visible throughout the discussion. Vignettes were read aloud by the researcher to control for affect and tone. A note taker was present, along with a university sexual assault and rape counselor, in each of the focus groups. Each focus group began with the researcher asking the participants, (a) “What’s going on in this vignette?” In addition, participants were asked, (b) if they were familiar with an incident similar to the one depicted in the vignette, or knew if it was common among their peers. Students were also asked, (c) how they would respond to a friend who disclosed an incident similar to the one depicted in the vignette; (d) whether they would label the incident as rape or sexual assault; and (e) whether alcohol affected either the behavior of the individuals involved or the outcome. In addition, participants were asked questions regarding the (f) woman’s consent and (g) if they would report the incident to an outside party such as police or university counselors. Although each scenario was consistent with the legal definition of rape, the researchers specifically included the term sexual assault in question (d) because individual definitions of rape and sexual assault vary. Both terms were utilized to uncover varying labeling strategies employed by the college women in this study. At the end of each focus group, participants were debriefed and provided information regarding campus and community services available to them. If a participant left the focus group early, the counselor was instructed to follow the student out of the discussion room and debrief her in a private setting. None of the participants left the focus groups early.

Creation of Vignettes

Vignettes were created by the researcher to portray realistic rape scenarios that include the presence of alcohol, varying degrees of consent, and a familiar perpetrator. These factors were chosen because the researcher predicted they might lead to situational ambiguity, ranging from more ambiguous (first vignette) to less

ambiguous (third vignette). Each vignette was designed to realistically represent rape in a college setting, complete with familiar places and circumstances. The vignettes depict several rape myths occurring simultaneously to reflect how they may occur in a real context.

The alcohol consumed by each of the individuals is intentionally unquantifiable because often it is unclear from an observer perspective how much alcohol was consumed. By creating ambiguous alcohol contexts, the participants are then able to negotiate the "drunkenness" of the individuals involved, including their assumptions and perceptions of the events depicted in the vignettes. To offer contrast, the last (and least ambiguous) vignette includes the presence of a 6-pack of beer, yet consumption is still ambiguous.

Consent varies in each of the vignettes to understand the participants' perceptions and ideologies regarding consent. The type of consent given and the timing of consent vary to understand how women attribute fault in these rape scenarios. The third vignette introduces the concept of disclosing sexual boundaries to a potential sexual partner to understand how these college women negotiate consent in the absence of those conversations.

The presence or absence of an existing relationship between a man and a woman also varies across vignettes to determine how these college women negotiate rape within the context of the kind of relationship the woman has with the perpetrator. All of the scenarios presented in the vignettes include penetration and are consistent with the legal definition of rape at the university and the state in which this study took place.

Each vignette was devised to represent common rape myths found in previous literature; thus, the first vignette is titled, "Excusing the Man." This vignette captures the rape myths that "most men are capable of rape" and "men have sexual urges they can't control" (Johnson et al. 1997, pp. 696-697). The vignette depicts a scenario in which the man might be excused for his behavior (e.g., persistence, being "drunk," or a miscommunication). In this vignette, the woman is dressed in a bikini (yet appropriately for the beach, the location of the scenario).

Vignette 1:

Right before the fall semester starts, Heather meets a guy at a beach volleyball party. She is with a few acquaintances she knows from school who are not close friends. Some of the guys have rented a house with a keg on the porch and offer her and her friends some beer. Heather starts talking to this guy that she thinks she has met before but can't remember where. They start talking and they seem to have a lot in common. She needs to go to the bathroom and asks if she can use theirs. He shows her where it is and he waits for her outside the bathroom. When she comes out, he grabs her and kisses her hard and although it was a bit sudden, she doesn't pull away. They start kissing for a little bit and it starts to go further, she is a bit uncomfortable, but she doesn't want to make a big deal out of it. He starts to untie her bikini and she pushes him away, but he keeps going. He isn't really forceful, just persistent. Then he puts his hand down her bikini bottoms and puts his finger in her and she pushes his hand away. They are still kissing and he keeps trying to put his hand back in her bikini bottoms. She keeps pushing him away. She finally breaks free, fixes

her bathing suit and runs back down the stairs to the party. She doesn't want to make a big deal out of it. And as it turns out, she remembered where she knew him from; he was in one of her sophomore classes last semester.

The second vignette is titled, "Justification for Acquaintance Rape" and illustrates the rape myths: "rapists are almost always strangers" and "if a woman has had previous sex with a man, she cannot claim she was raped if the same man has sex with her again" (Johnson et al., 1997, pp. 696-697). Again, the quantity of alcohol consumed is ambiguous. This vignette includes a previous sexual relationship with the perpetrator.

Vignette 2:

Samantha and Joe had been a couple for most of freshman year after meeting at a dorm orientation. Joe broke up with Samantha during spring break right after they had sex for the first time. Samantha was devastated when she found out he broke up with her because he liked another girl. A few weeks later, she sees Joe at a friend's party. They hang out for a little bit, and Samantha is glad to hear he dumped that other girl. They keep talking and drinking; finally, they realize that most of the people had gone home and it was getting close to 3 a.m. Joe starts kissing Samantha and she is happy and kisses him back. He starts undressing her and she responds. They keep kissing and touching each other and they are naked. Joe gets a condom out of his wallet and starts to put it on. They are kissing heavily now and they start having sex. Samantha doesn't feel right about it; she interrupts and says that maybe they should wait until they are sober. He said, "Come on, we have done it before, what's the big deal?" She protests and he keeps going. Even though they are having sex, Samantha doesn't want to anymore. She tells him that they should wait and tells him that she is uncomfortable. But Joe keeps going; they had sex before, so he didn't see what the big deal was. Finally he finishes and rolls over. Samantha is upset; her friends left hours ago and her ride left as well. She has to stay there for the night.

The third and final vignette is titled, "Blaming the Woman." This vignette is more characteristic of the traditional rape script; thus, it is seen as less ambiguous than the previous two vignettes. This vignette illustrates the rape myths: "women provoke rapes," "women secretly want to be raped," "women can't be raped without a weapon," and "healthy women can resist rape" (Johnson et al., 1997, pp. 696-697).

Vignette 3:

Mark asked Jennifer out on date; they knew each other from Psychology class. He took her out for sushi and they had a great time. They talked about their class that they had together and they ended up having a lot in common. Towards the end of dinner they talk about what they want to do next. Mark suggests going to the pier to look at the stars and Jennifer thinks it sounds like fun. When they left the restaurant Mark gently kissed Jennifer and she was happy and was having a great time. They start heading towards the beach and Mark suggests getting some beer. He has a great fake ID and they stop for a 6-pack. They get to the pier and the sky is so clear; they keep talking and laughing and drinking beer. He starts kissing her again and taking off her shirt. Jennifer tells him to stop, but he keeps going. She pushes him off, but he is stronger than she is. They start having sex and Jennifer is clearly upset. After they finish, she asked him to take her home. He takes her home and she gets out of the car.

She didn't want to have sex with Mark, but she didn't tell him before the date that she was okay kissing, but didn't want to go any further. She feels like she should have told him and then he would have known beforehand that she wouldn't have sex. But since she didn't tell him, she feels like it's her fault. He misunderstood how far she would go. Now Jennifer knows to tell guys beforehand that she won't have sex and this won't happen again.

Data Analysis

During transcription, the first author assigned pseudonyms to each of the participants in the study to protect their individual identities. The first author proceeded to conduct the analyses in two stages. First, focus group data were examined to determine the use of rape myths. Second, focus group content was compared and contrasted to create a collective scheme of thematic content using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This inductive process was utilized to discover emergent themes in the data that may explain how women negotiate these incidents of rape. The first and second authors discussed the themes present in the focus groups and the adherence to rape myths. The researchers categorized common ideologies by revisiting the notes taken during the focus groups and the transcriptions. The themes that emerged were complex in the sense that several of these women clearly stated how they felt about each of the scenarios, but were unsure of how to label the events, thus capturing the negotiation processes. First- and 4th-year responses were separated by vignette and then mapped by the commonalities found by each cohort within each vignette. A constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) assessed the mechanisms employed by the women to understand, negotiate, and label these incidents of rape (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Notes taken during the focus group session by a note taker and notes taken right after the session were reevaluated throughout the coding process for individual behaviors, comments, and body language not captured on the audiotape during the session. The themes addressed the decision-making processes that women engaged in, how they explained the vignette scenarios, and whether or not participants saw the behavior as rape.

In order to establish scientific rigor throughout the research process and analysis phase, the researcher established *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Dahlgren, Emmelin, & Winqvist, as cited in Ellsberg & Heise, 2005, p. 214; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These mechanisms are utilized to conceptually address issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research. The first author confirmed the *credibility* of the findings in this study by constructing focus groups in which college women were asked questions that led them to think about and engage in discussions regarding ambiguous rape scenarios. In the focus groups, women were given the opportunity to define, label, and process each vignette from their perspective within the group setting. *Transferability* addressed issues of how applicable this research is to other subjects in other contexts. The findings in this research may be generalizable to other college populations with similar sociodemographic characteristics in the United States, yet these findings may not be generalizable to the larger population of college women. *Dependability* refers to the extent to which study

findings would be replicated if the study were conducted again. Data indicate that findings from a replication would be similar, as the same themes emerged consistently across the different focus groups that were conducted for the study. *Confirmability* refers to the potential bias of the researcher while conducting focus groups. The first author was conscious of affecting participants and their responses to the vignettes and therefore responded to participants' questions and comments by reflecting individual ideas back onto other participants for clarification or confirmation. In the focus groups, the researcher asked confirmatory questions by giving the participants the opportunity to correct or clarify the statements that they made during the focus group sessions. The themes that emerged from the data attest to the commonality of negotiation strategies of the college women in this study.

Results

Rape Myth Endorsement

This section describes findings for the first aim of the study, to determine if women endorsed rape myths by "excusing the man," "justifying acquaintance rape," or "blaming the woman."

Vignette 1: "Excusing the Man"

Excusing the Man was the prominent theme in focus groups discussing the first vignette. Some of the students recognized and thus labeled this incident as rape, yet a few also excused the man for his behavior by blaming the incident on alcohol or misread signals. Both 1st- and 4th-year students thought that women are responsible for navigating safe environments and need to conduct themselves accordingly. When students were asked what is going on in the vignette, a conversation regarding women's safety emerged:

You do need to be careful about what kind of situations you are getting into, but just because you put yourself into a bad situation or maybe not using your best judgment doesn't give someone the right to take advantage of you. I mean if something like that happens, you do need to be more careful and, like, what you are doing and the situations you are putting yourself into, but that doesn't make it your fault if something like that does happen to you. (Amanda, 1st year)

Other students acknowledged that the situation went too far, yet they examined the woman's role and excused the male for "miscommunication," or "misread signals," which would ultimately excuse him for his behavior. Samantha (4th year) said, "I guess he thinks that because she started kissing him that he automatically assumes that this is going to go further than what she had planned . . . and maybe she is kind of into him, so his behavior is acceptable." Often their reasoning was to understand the motivation for the man's actions (e.g., he didn't mean to do it, but somehow got confused).

Vignette 2: "Justifications for Acquaintance Rape"

This vignette depicted a rape scenario between a man and a woman who had a prior sexual relationship. The participants explored the dimensions of alcohol consumption and consent as a few of them made justifications for acquaintance rape. Several 1st- and 4th-year women suggested reporting the incident, yet these students also expressed reluctance to report due to alcohol and a previous sexual relationship. Josephine (1st year) discussed the fact that they had a previous sexual relationship before the incident. She said, "Well maybe because they had done it before that he thought he had the right to do it again; it's like once my territory, always my territory." Many of the women agreed that the man should have respected her wishes and should have stopped when she said "no," and made it clear that she did not want to go further. The women in this study navigated this scenario explaining the man was using the woman for sex. They understood that if the woman was really uncomfortable, she would have tried harder to leave. Some students did not equate the incident with forced or coercive sex, but rather "hooking up."

If it was really uncomfortable, she could have tried to get up and leave. Okay in my opinion, it doesn't really say that there was a struggle, but like for her to get up and for him to hold her down and but, I just feel that if she was really uncomfortable about the situation, she would have left or at least pulled away. (Margaret, 1st year)

Vignette 3: "Blaming the Woman"

In the last scenario 1st- and 4th-year students made clear distinctions between consensual sex and "date rape." This vignette displayed a scenario in which there was not an existing relationship between the man and woman. Participants were able to quantify the potential amount of alcohol consumed and believed that drunkenness could not be an excuse, as it may have been in the previous vignettes. None of the women commenting on this scenario blamed the woman for the outcome. Ultimately, 1st- and 4th-year women agreed that the man was wholly responsible and the woman should seek counseling and report the rape.

In sum, the students did employ the expected rape myths ("Excusing the Man" and "Justifications for Acquaintance Rape") to understand and interpret the first two scenarios. They did not employ the rape myth, "Blaming the Woman" in the third vignette. Although there was rape myth endorsement in each of the groups regardless of cohort regarding the first two vignettes, for the third vignette the women were more likely to excuse the man rather than to outright blame the victim for her sexual assault experience.

Emergent Themes: Women's Negotiation Strategies

The second aim of the study was to explore how women as a group negotiate and discuss the content of ambiguous rape scenarios. Six themes emerged from the data; these themes were present in group discussions of all of the vignettes for all of the

focus groups conducted: (a) *Negotiating Consent* indicated the timing of nonconsent given by the woman in the vignette (e.g., was nonconsent given at the beginning, middle, or the end of the incident) and the type of nonconsent given (e.g., did the woman say “no” or did she push or shove him away); (b) *Components of Alcohol Consumption* indicated the level of perceived consumption, from the viewpoint of the participants, and whether or not they could quantify the amount of alcohol based on the vignette (e.g., one beer vs. two or three, and sober vs. “drunk”); (c) *Commonness of the Event* indicated how common the respondents thought the incident was in comparison to their experiences, or if the respondents had heard of similar incidents among their friend groups; (d) *Labeling the Incident* indicated whether or not the respondents would label each incident as sexual assault or rape; (e) *Responding to Their Peers* indicated how participants would respond to a friend who experienced an incident similar to the vignette; and (f) *Weighing the Odds and Reporting* indicated if the incident warranted reporting (e.g., to friends, family, police, counselors) and the reasons given for recommending that a friend who experienced this event should report, or not.

Negotiating Consent. The discussions of 1st- and 4th-year students regarding negotiating consent involved the timing of consent and the type of consent given. In the first vignette, some participants did not think the woman made her refusal clear; for example:

When you say “no,” you know, it should stop there but she was never very clear about saying “no.” I think somebody else said that, but since this guy had been drinking and he probably misunderstood, I don’t know, I have just been in a situation like this before and it is just . . . it is not uncommon . . . [sic]. (Josephine, 1st year, Vignette 1)

Fourth-year students attempted to uncover the motivations of the man; they labeled the situation as “just the way men are.” They attested to the fact that if she did not want to go further, then she would have tried harder to leave. Lisa (4th year, Vignette 2) added that the woman could have left the premises or fought harder to avoid or end the incident; she said, “. . . like with that happening and then staying there . . . there is . . . most times there are options of getting out of that situation with him so . . . to leave the place.”

In contrast, in the third vignette, students regarded the consent given by the woman as absolute and clearly defined. Megan (1st year, Vignette 3) stated, “She said ‘no,’ so that is also rape . . . she said ‘no’ from the beginning like when he was taking her shirt off.” A 4th-year student added:

She told him “no” definitely . . . he pushed himself on her the whole time, it is not like she started getting into it or I don’t know kind of backing out and like it is more clear than the other two, the fact that she definitely didn’t want it and I don’t see anywhere where she would want to blame herself or feel like it is her fault because she should, I mean you shouldn’t have to tell somebody whether you are going to have sex with them or whether you are not. (Elizabeth, 4th year, Vignette 3)

Components of Alcohol Consumption. The women in this study regarded alcohol consumption as contributing to a situation in which individuals may not act the way they would if they were sober. They agreed that alcohol affected judgment and possibly contributed to the outcome of the first vignette:

It probably doesn't help that they had a keg on the porch; it doesn't really say how much everybody has had to drink, but that may sometimes make signals less clear . . . since this guy had been drinking and he probably misunderstood. (Josephine, 1st year, Vignette 1)

Angela (4th year, Vignette 1) added, "They [both] had probably been drinking, so I mean both of their judgment is probably impaired at least a little bit. . . . I don't know, maybe his more than hers, I mean, I am not really sure but I would think so."

Similarities in this belief are found throughout the negotiation strategies of both 1st- and 4th-year college women:

I think it usually does in something like this, if there is alcohol involved, alcohol plays a part in what happened, like sexually, I mean, he also had enough mind, like he was there enough to pull out a condom and put it on so he had some idea of what he was doing because he was worried enough not to want to get her pregnant. (Allison, 1st year, Vignette 2)

In the first two vignettes, the respondents in this study assumed one or both parties were drunk without knowing how much each individual had actually consumed. In contrast, in the third vignette, alcohol was not considered as a possible mechanism for the man's behavior towards the woman. In this vignette, students could gauge how much the man and woman had to drink by the presence of a 6-pack of beer. Thus, when these students negotiated the third vignette, many of them did not mention alcohol as being related to the outcome of this scenario.

People do drink beer to, you know, loosen up, so I think a 6-pack, it's not like a 24-pack, but like a 6-pack between two people isn't like terrible, so I don't think it's that bad, I just think . . . I don't think she should have known that, that is what he is after, because I wouldn't, I would have been completely okay with it, like, oh, watching the stars is sweet, but as soon as he tried to pull my shirt off I would have been like, "no," "no," so, I don't know. (Kate, 4th year, Vignette 3)

Commonness of Event. First-year students explained that the experiences portrayed in the first and second vignettes are very common among acquaintances and friends. Their judgments of these events were affected by their perceptions that these were common occurrences, leading to justifications that it happens "all the time." Fourth-year students noted that these events were common, but some of them attributed the commonness of these events primarily to younger (i.e., 1st year) students.

This stuff happens all of the time at parties. I think just the misconceptions and drinking and all kinds of stuff, everyone has different expectations of how something is going to go, like certain people might, like this guy right here might think that this might be how he treats

every girl, and he thinks that this is just the way it worked, or some girls might try to take it slow or even certain guys might want to take situations slower and, um, it happens, it just happens a lot. I have friends and I know people who have been in situations like these. (Josephine, 1st year, Vignette 1)

Fourth-year students were in disagreement as to whether or not this was common among their friends and acquaintances, yet they mentioned that it was a common occurrence within the college community. The older students clearly believed that learning how to negotiate relationships with men occurs with experience:

It can be more, like, common when you are younger in college. I think that sometimes, you know, you are more prone to go to more parties and introduce yourself to college life, so I feel like all of us are fourth years, I feel like this is less likely at our age . . . that is just what I think. (Heather, 4th year, Vignette 1)

Students made few distinctions between the first two vignettes. Yet when the final vignette was introduced, many of the students had very clear responses to the incident and the necessary course of action:

It happened to my friend like the second week of school. We were all at this guy's apartment from one of her classes and she had met him, they had classes together, but she had only been hanging out with him like three days before and she had been drinking a lot and went in to just get her coat and we were going to take . . . and I was the designated driver and I was ready to take her home, and she went in his room or in his friend's room that has like all the coats on the bed and like she went to get her coat and he came in and he went in the room and shut the door and locked it, and locked her in there and she blacked out, and so she doesn't know what happened, but he has since date raped five or six girls that I know and we could not get her out of the room. So when he finally, so two hours later, he came out and we were freaking out, like banging on the door and you feel so defenseless, but he unlocked the door or whatever and she had his shirt on and none of her other clothes were there, and she doesn't know what happened, but he told her that they didn't have sex, so she just believed him because she was a virgin, so she, I guess doesn't want to believe it. . . . We tried to get her to report it and to report him, but she wouldn't do it because I guess that she doesn't want to believe that it happened, and so she would have to admit that she put herself in that situation, or that he put her in that situation and that it physically happened for her to feel comfortable reporting it. (Nicole, 1st year, Vignette 3)

Labeling the Incident. Each cohort varied when labeling the incident in vignette one as sexual assault or rape, indicating the variability within and between each group of women. Beth (1st year, Vignette 1) wasn't sure how to label the incident; she said, "He is harassing her. It is kind of rape actually, no, well he . . . with his finger, does that count as rape? Is it considered sexual harassment or rape what he did?" Shelley (4th year, Vignette 1) stated, "I would consider it sexual assault, because he came on to her and she, out of nowhere, he kind of just like attacked, not attacked her, but bombarded her when she was coming out of the bathroom and wouldn't leave her alone . . ." Another 4th-year student said:

I don't feel like he necessarily, at the same time he tried it again like, okay, I can see that being sexual assault but I don't know . . . I think about sexual assault when they are raping you totally. . . . I don't know, I would probably talk to my friends about it . . . because maybe he was just drunk and I don't know . . . I think if it was rape she wouldn't have been able to break free. (Cindy, 4th year, Vignette 1)

First-year students labeled the second vignette "rape," or "date rape," yet they clearly were unsure if this incident would be believed by police officers because of the consumption of alcohol and the presence of a previous sexual relationship, which determined how they labeled the incident.

I agree with that, because technically, the way that I understand the definition of rape is that it is rape unless you say "yes." You don't have to say "no." I mean, all you have to do is not tell him "yes" and officially it is rape. That is my understanding of it. I am not sure that everyone has that understanding of it, which could be an issue because a lot of guys might say, "Oh well, she didn't say 'no,' or she said 'no' but she didn't mean it, therefore it's not rape," but I think the definition is not exactly clear to everyone. (Jessica, 1st year, Vignette 2)

Fourth-year students agreed that rape had occurred in this vignette, yet their responses to their friends and the differences in individual definitions of rape and sexual assault were apparent. Similarly, 4th-year students agreed that the content of this story indicated a violation of the woman's request to stop having sex, yet they displayed ambiguity regarding their response to their friends.

He raped her . . . umm, well even when, for me, my definition of rape is anytime a girl says "no," whether you are in the middle of it or not, or a guy says "no," if someone says "no" that is it, if you keep going you are raping them. . . . I think people can get raped in relationships often. (Angela, 4th year, Vignette 2)

The third vignette was clearly defined and thus labeled rape by all participants:

I would definitely see this as rape because I feel like even if she did tell him, she told him during and she pushed him off, like obviously he kept going and doesn't respect what she had to say or how she felt, so I feel like telling him beforehand might not have mattered. (Shelley, 4th year, Vignette 3)

Responding to Peers. First- and 4th-year women's responses to their peers depended on when the person disclosed the incident and the victim's response to the incident. Many 1st-year women discussed their feelings of empathy and trying to be supportive to their friend:

It depends on when she came and told me. If I was at the party and she was like, "This guy is creeping me out," and I would be like, "Okay, let's leave." But if it was like the day after I would just kind of, there wouldn't really be much that you can say because if she doesn't really know the guy and he is not around much, then it is not like we have to avoid him or we have to like, but there is not much we can really do about it if she was like, "Oh, this happened with this guy and oh my god" . . . probably I could see her or a friend of hers

talking to other friends, but not actually going to a counselor. But I think if it was actually sex rape, then it would be different. But because it is so common I don't think . . . (Amanda, 1st year, Vignette 1)

However, 4th-year students responded with victim blaming and suggested that the woman in the vignette was not being careful with her personal safety and should have known better. Again, that women should have learned to protect themselves by the time they are 4th-year students emerged in how the women explained the situation:

I would probably ask her what happened, like what was going on, ask her if there were things she was doing that maybe did make him think that she was wanting to do more or if there weren't things, then maybe it would be more of his coming on to her. I think that she should just think about maybe if she had given him a signal that made him think that it was okay, because I think sometimes that, like you were saying, like guys aren't necessarily always the bad guy if they are getting signals that they think are something else. (Lisa, 4th year, Vignette 1)

Both cohorts of women suggested employing avoidance strategies towards the man involved and to possibly seek counseling regarding the relationship. When students were presented with the final vignette, both 1st- and 4th-year students clearly recommended seeking outside counseling regarding the incident.

I would just tell her it's not her fault and try to get her to go, even if she doesn't want to press charges or not. I think she should, but it is up to her what she wants to do. But definitely talk to somebody at least, and be able to get through it and realize that it wasn't her fault at all, it was the guy's fault completely, there wasn't anything that she did wrong. (Amanda, 1st year, Vignette 3)

Fourth-year students remarked on the assistance they would readily provide regarding a friend or peer that experienced a situation similar to the one depicted in this vignette:

She needs to talk to someone to make her realize that it is not her fault because I can see her talking to friends and her friends being like, "It's not your fault, it's not your fault," but her not believing them. Like, I think that she should probably go to a professional to change her mind set. (Shelley, 4th year, Vignette 3)

Weighing the Odds and Reporting. First- and 4th-year women thought that both the first and the second vignettes may warrant reporting, but that very little justice will come from involving the police.

Jessica (1st year, Vignette 1) said, "I don't think it warrants reporting. I just think you need to stay away from this guy for future reference and don't get along [*sic*] with him; obviously he doesn't, he can't control himself when he is alone with you because he crossed the line." A 4th-year student said:

I would think that this would be definitely something that you would report, but it is kind of like I was saying before . . . sound like a broken record, but they, I feel like because they were

in a relationship and they have had sex before, that it wasn't like she was walking down the street at night and she got attacked and that is what it would be that people, that if she were to go into the police station, that that, "Well, you have had sex before and you used to be in a relationship with him, you still have, you still kind of have feelings for him" and then that's, and "you let it go, you let it go so far." Not that I am saying that any of it is right, because I don't think that it is. Once she said "no," she said "no" and it was done and that is when it became rape. But I feel like that is what would be said to her was, "Well, you let it go so far before you said 'no.'" (Jamie, 4th year, Vignette 2)

When students were presented with the third vignette, not only did they recommend reporting, but they thought the incident was believable as rape and may even be prosecuted. Allison (1st year, Vignette 3) added, "That one [vignette] is rape and she should report that one." Margaret's (1st year, Vignette 3) reasoning for reporting was, "She doesn't even know him and he overpowered her and immediately after she got out of the car she should have gotten right back in the car and gone to the hospital and reported it."

Discussion

In exploring the social context in which rape and sexual assault occur and the group negotiation strategies, it becomes possible to uncover prevailing attitudes regarding rape and sexual assault. It is also possible to determine the extent to which 1st- and 4th-year college women differ in their acceptance of rape myths. The differences that are present attest to the social norms apparent in each of the peer groups from which the individual college women belong.

The most apparent findings in the cohorts of these women were their reluctance to report the incidents in both the first and the second vignettes and the commonness of these events among their peers. Although these women were more likely to excuse the man than outright blame the woman for the sexual assault, excusing the man for his behavior creates a climate in which unwanted sexual contact is tolerated.

The 4th-year women in this study placed greater sanctions on the woman's behavior and her ability to construct and navigate "safe" social situations in which she was protected from sexual victimization. This belief suggested that 4th-year college women ultimately held the woman responsible for the outcome in the first two vignettes as they considered aspects of alcohol consumption, previous sexual relationships, and differing beliefs regarding consent.

Several of the women from both cohorts stated that reporting the incident was warranted, yet expressed reluctance due to cultural norms of victim blaming. These women literally weighed the odds of reporting in relation to whether or not they would find fairness in the criminal justice system. As women were presented with scenarios that fit the legal definition of rape, there was ambiguity regarding labeling the event and, even if they did label it rape, participants acknowledged that achieving justice was often unlikely.

The situations in which both groups of women negotiated instances of sexual assault and rape were defined within the social context in which they occurred. Each

cohort perceived the scenarios in the vignettes to be common, perhaps even normative, within their peer groups. It appeared that the more common the women found these experiences of rape to be, the less likely they were to label them sexual assault or rape.

The women in this study clearly stated that the timing and type of consent given was an indication of who was responsible for the outcome of the scenario, as they stated there were differences in effect when women gave verbal cues such as “no” or “stop,” and/or behavioral cues of nonconsent such as pushing or shoving. When 1st- and 4th-year women examined the specific type of consent given in the first two vignettes, all women indicated that the type of consent given was not effective. The women indicated that the woman involved could have done more to stop the incident by not consuming alcohol or displaying clearer signals of nonconsent. Interestingly, in the third vignette when alcohol consumption was quantifiable and was seen as low, 1st- and 4th-year students stated that the type and timing of consent given was irrelevant because the man in this vignette clearly disregarded the woman’s sexual boundaries. This finding supports the recognition of the traditional date rape script in which little alcohol is consumed and the perpetrator is someone not well known to the victim.

Consistent with previous literature regarding instances of rape and sexual assault, alcohol consumption was present in these contexts in which college women understood and negotiated the scenario (Abbey, 1991). Alcohol is perhaps the most important contextual factor considered by women as they attempt to understand the content of each vignette. Peer groups perceive gradations of social responsibility depending on the quantity of alcohol consumed. If the woman in the vignette is presumed to be drunk or is drinking heavily, she is perceived as acting in a socially irresponsible manner. Yet, if the woman hardly consumed any alcohol, she is judged as acting responsibly and able to ward off unwanted sexual attention. If she is unsuccessful when acting responsibly, she is judged as not responsible for the outcome of assault.

When peers advise their friends, they are very concerned with weighing the response that others will have if their friend tells them what has occurred. This concern was frequently evident with regard to legal authorities such as police, as women assumed the police will question the validity of the assault. In particular, they noted that when alcohol is involved, or when sexual assault has occurred with a man with whom an individual had a previous sexual relationship, they believe that police are likely to challenge a woman who reports the incident. While the research participants do not accept the myth that all women want to be raped, they do accept other myths, such as “when women are raped, it’s because the way they said ‘no’ was ambiguous.” The myths they do accept are very much linked to the social contexts of alcohol and prior sexual relationships that were noted in the first two vignettes.

These findings suggest that when college women have peers who experience instances of sexual assault and rape, and the experiences commonly occur, they are less likely to advise their friends to report them. Myths about sexual assault, then, become normative explanations that are used to justify behavior. Since many college women disclose incidents of rape and sexual assault to their friends, these interactions may affect how individuals label their own experiences of sexual victimization. If peer

group situations help define and label these incidents, then the norms of the group also help to define these situations. In particular, participants stated that experiences like the ones depicted in the vignettes (particularly the first two) were common among their peer groups. Commonness is a cue women used to determine if an incident was rape. If it is a common, normative situation, it must not be rape, because rape is uncommon. If what occurred was not rape, the women stated they would advise a friend who experienced the incident to ignore the situation or avoid the male. Thus, the experience is normalized, the perpetrator is not held accountable, and the response of normalizing these types of sexual assaults is perpetuated within the peer group.

Implications for Future Research and Action

Considering that fellow college students are often first responders in rape and sexual assault situations, educating students to become effective allies and support systems may assist in preventing incidents of rape (Banyard et al., 2005). Current rape prevention strategies need to incorporate men into conversations about how to prevent rape. Similarly, educational efforts should include discussions regarding the legal definitions of rape, what rape may look like in a real context, culturally pervasive rape myths, and support services available to both men and women on college campuses.

The use of vignettes in research is an effective tool for discussing sensitive topics regarding rape and sexual assault, yet the use of vignettes may also have practical applications in educational discussions about the reality of the rape experience. The real context in which rape occurs often includes ambiguity related to alcohol consumption, differing beliefs regarding consent, and may occur between individuals who have had a previous sexual relationship. Interestingly, in this study, after the presentation of the final vignette, several participants reevaluated their responses to the first two vignettes and many of them later concluded that all of the vignettes were rape. This process that occurred during the focus groups may assist in educational efforts in creating opportunities for men and women to talk about, process, and discuss rape in real-life contexts. Educational efforts also should open spaces for discussions regarding gendered norms and the legal definitions of rape. Bridging legal definitions with real contexts of rape may assist college women and men in seeking supportive networks and services.

The following limitations must be considered. First, the college women in this study were presented with a series of three vignettes. The ordering in the presentation of the vignettes (from most ambiguous to least ambiguous) may have affected the responses given by participants as they progressed through the focus group. The same sets of questions were asked of participants during the presentation of each vignette. Discussions of rape during the first two vignettes may have affected the decision to label and identify the last vignette unequivocally as rape.

Second, for the purpose of this study, peer groups were created by cohort; 1st- and 4th-year college women have differing negotiation strategies regarding rape. While examining women by cohort does produce interesting and valuable results, examining

college women and men in their existing peer groups may offer researchers the ability to examine these groups extensively regarding their interpretations and social constructions of rape.

In conclusion, future research that aims to explore how rape is defined by college students should also include mixed methods. While the findings in this study are only applicable to those 1st- and 4th-year college women who participated in the study, future research should include quantitative methods to further explore how college populations define rape.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Abbey, A. (1991). Acquaintance rape and alcohol consumption on college campuses: How are they linked? *Journal of American College Health, 39*, 165-169.
- Banyard, V. L., Plante, E. G., Cohn, E. S., Moorhead, C., Ward, S., & Walsh, W. (2005). Revisiting unwanted sexual experiences on campus: A 12-year follow-up. *Violence Against Women, 11*, 426-446.
- Belknap, J. (2010). Rape: Too hard to report and too easy to discredit victims. *Violence Against Women, 16*, 1335-1344.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women and rape*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*, 217-230.
- Burt, M. R., & Albin, R. S. (1981). Rape myths, rape definitions, and probability of conviction. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 11*, 212-230.
- Chasteen, A. L. (2001). Constructing rape: Feminism, change, and women's everyday understandings of sexual assault. *Sociological Spectrum, 21*, 101-139.
- Chen, Y., & Ullman, S. E. (2010). Women's reporting of sexual and physical assaults to police in the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Violence Against Women, 16*, 262-279.
- Clay-Warner, J., & Burt, C. H. (2005). Rape reporting after reforms: Have times really changed? *Violence Against Women, 11*, 150-176.
- Cook, S. L., Gidycz, C. A., Koss, M. P., & Murphy, M. (2011). Emergent issues in the measurement of rape victimization. *Violence Against Women, 17*, 201-218.
- Donovan, R. A. (2007). To blame or not to blame: Influences of target race and observer sex on rape blame attribution. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 22*, 722-736.
- Ellis, L. (1989). *Theories of rape: Inquiries into the causes of sexual aggression*. New York, NY: Hemisphere.
- Ellsberg, M., & Heise, L. (2005). *Researching violence against women: A practical guide for researchers and activists*. Washington, DC: World Health Organization.
- Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Daigle, L. E. (2005). The discovery of acquaintance rape: The salience of methodological innovation and rigor. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*, 493-500.

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Harned, M. S. (2005). Understanding women's labeling of unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners. *Violence Against Women*, 11, 374-413.
- Johnson, B. E., Kuck, D. L., & Schander, P. R. (1997). Rape myth acceptance and sociodemographic characteristics: A multidimensional analysis. *Sex Roles*, 36, 693-707.
- Kahn, A. S., Jackson, J., Kully, C., Badger, K., & Halvorsen, J. (2003). Calling it rape: Differences in experiences of women who do or do not label their sexual assault as rape. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27, 233-242.
- Kilpatrick, D. (2004). What is violence against women: Defining and measuring the problem. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19, 1209-1234.
- Koss, M. P., & Oros, C. J. (1982). Sexual Experiences Survey: A research instrument investigating sexual aggression and victimization. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 50, 455-457.
- Lee, J., Pomeroy, E. C., Yoo, S., & Rheinboldt, K. T. (2005). Attitudes toward rape. *Violence Against Women*, 11, 177-196.
- Littleton, H. A., & Axsom, D. (2003). Rape and seduction scripts of university students: Implications for rape attributions and unacknowledged rape. *Sex Roles*, 49, 465-475.
- Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18, 133-164.
- Madriz, E. (1997). *Nothing bad happens to good girls*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mardorossian, C. M. (2002). Toward a new feminist theory of rape. *Signs*, 27, 743-775.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *An expanded sourcebook: Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Payne, D. J., Lonsway, K. L., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999). Rape myth acceptance: Exploration of its structure and its measurement using the Illinois rape myth acceptance scale. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 33, 27-68.
- Pazzani, L. M. (2007). The factors affecting sexual assaults committed by strangers and acquaintances. *Violence Against Women*, 13, 717-749.
- Peterson, Z. D., & Muehlenhard, C. L. (2004). Was it rape? The function of women's rape myth acceptance and definitions of sex in labeling their own experiences. *Sex Roles*, 51, 129-144.
- Pineau, L. (1989). Date rape: A feminist analysis. *Law and Philosophy*, 8, 217-243.
- Schwartz, M. D., & DeKeseredy, W. S. (1997). *Sexual assault on the college campus: The role of male peer support*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2006). *Extent, nature, and consequences of rape victimization: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.
- Weiss, K. G. (2009). "Boys will be boys" and other gendered accounts: An exploration of victims' excuses and justifications for unwanted sexual contact and coercion. *Violence Against Women*, 15, 810-834.

Author Biographies

Michelle E. Deming, MA, is a PhD candidate in Sociology and concurrently enrolled in the Graduate Certificate Program in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina. This study was conducted in partial fulfillment of a master's degree in Sociology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) under the supervision of Dr. Eleanor Krassen Covan. She continues her research addressing rape and sexual assault among college women.

Eleanor Krassen Covan is professor of Gerontology and Sociology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW), where she coordinates academic programs in Gerontology. She is also editor in chief of the journal, *Health Care for Women International*. For almost 30 years she has encouraged students and scholars to conduct qualitative research in which gender makes a difference. She recently was honored by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education when she was awarded the AGHE Distinguished Teacher Honor in 2011, which recognizes persons whose teaching stands out as exemplary, innovative, and of impact.

Suzanne C. Swan, PhD, is associate professor in the Department of Psychology and the Women's and Gender Studies program at the University of South Carolina. She received her PhD in social and personality psychology from the University of Illinois. Prior to coming to the University of South Carolina, she was the director of Family Violence Programs at the Yale School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry. She conducts research in the area of intimate partner violence, with particular interests in women who use violence in intimate relationships, and preventive interventions with college students to reduce interpersonal violence on college campuses.

Deborah L. Billings, PhD, is assistant professor in the Arnold School of Public Health, Health Promotion, Education and Behavior, and core faculty in the Women's and Gender Studies program at the University of South Carolina. She has served as a consultant to the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Oak Foundation, UN Women, UNFPA, the Argentine Ministry of Health and Mexican ministries of health working to address comprehensive care programs for survivors of gender-based violence.