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Acceptance of Rape Myths in Greek Life Participation

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Abstract

This study addressed the concern that rape culture is prominent on college campuses, particularly with regard to Greek life and drinking alcohol. West and Zimmerman's doing gender theory and theories on routine activities were utilized to explain these associations. The hypothesis of the study was that students who were members of Greek life would have a significantly higher acceptance of rape myths than students who do not participate in Greek life. In addition to this, a second hypothesis was tested to see if higher alcohol consumption led to greater acceptance of rape myths. To test these hypotheses, 169 participants, 116 females and 52 males were given a survey consisting of three different vignettes, each which gave an example of rape. Respondent agreement/disagreement with rape myths was then measured. The main findings of this survey showed that members of Greek life were more accepting of rape myths than those who did not belong to Greek life, and those who drank more were also more accepting than those who did not drink, but these differences were not statistically significant.

Rape Myth Acceptance in Greek Life Participation

Numerous studies have found evidence in populations of rape myths. I researched perceptions of rape in college students in both Greek life and non Greek life members in order to determine if the acceptance of rape myths is more prevalent in Greek life. I argue that college campuses are more gendered institutions, and Greek life further creates these gendered institutions, which have fewer effective controls in place to deter and disabuse rape myths. To the extent that rape myths are socially accepted, there is a greater risk of sexual assault.

Background

Sexual assault is defined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as, “any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone’s will.” (CDC). According to the CDC, there are three main components of sexual violence, which include, “nonconsensual sex, abusive sexual contact such as touching, and non-contact sexual abuse, such as verbal harassment”. Both males and females of any age can be victims of sexual assault. One in four girls, one in eight boys, one in eight women and one in six men are sexually assaulted (Hamlin, 2005). These statistics demonstrate how common sexual assault is in society today.

One of the major reasons that sexual assault is a frequent occurrence in society is because of the acceptance of rape myths. According to Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), rape myths “perpetrate sexual assault and ignore the reality of rape”. A common rape myth is the idea that males can not be raped, however, “one in six males is raped before the age of eighteen, and this results from this which can be physical or psychological trauma are prominent” (Hopper, 2014). This statement discredits the rape myth that sexual assault is less harmful for males than for females. Gender does not play a role in the trauma that sexual assault victim’s experience.

Many also accept the rape myth that gang rape is rare. Forty-three percent of reported cases of rape had “more than one assailant involved”, which classifies these cases as gang rape (Hamlin, 2005). Another rape myth that is greatly accepted is that rape is a minor crime. Rape is a major crime, however 97% of rapists are never arrested and will never spend time in jail (RAINN). One of the main causes for perpetrators not being arrested is because very few people will report rape to the authorities. In a study done of over 17,000 women, only 230 reported a recent rape to the study, and of those women, only 27 of them reported their rape to the authorities (Wolitzky-Taylor, et al, 2011). These statistics on sexual assault demonstrate the frequent occurrence of sexual assault, and how society generally tends to ignore these problems.

Ninety-five percent of sexual assaults occur on college campus are not reported to the authorities, according to the American Association of University Women (AAUW). Rape is not a crime that is frequently committed by a stranger. Fourteen percent of women are raped by their husbands, contrary to the belief that rape does not occur within a marriage (Hamlin, 2005). 38% of rapists are friends with the victim, and 90% of women reported knowing the rapist (RAINN, AAUW).

Theoretical Framework

Some social environments and their populations perpetuate rape culture. College campuses entail the promotion of rape culture, to the extent that college is a gendered institution. While society has many other gendered institutions, the standards held for males and females differ, and there are fewer consequences for males than for females. The workforce is another example of a gendered institution, however there are strict laws against sexual harassment and gender discrimination in place. Although these laws are still in place at universities, they are not as strictly enforced as they are in the workforce, as the environment of college goes beyond an office setting, and includes a classroom setting and a social and residential setting as well. At

universities, gendered expectations for males and females differ. An example of this is the double standard, where females are portrayed as trashy after having sex with a male, however males are portrayed as heroes after having sex with a woman. According to West and Zimmerman, and their theory of doing gender, rape is a social construction of gender. They argue that, “rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive gender as an emergent feature of arrangements and meanings of legitimizing one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (32). Through West and Zimmerman’s argument, they argue that gender can often be used as a tool to argue or explain inequalities that exist. Rape is therefore a social construction of gender, as people will often use gender as an excuse. This is done by the belief in the rape myth that males cannot be raped, or by using an excuse like the way that a woman was dressed suggested that she was looking for sex.

Cohen and Felson (1979) explain through routine activities theory that the frequency and location of a crime are caused by three prominent factors which include, “the amount of likely offenders presumed to be motivated to commit the crime, the absence of effective guardians, and the availability of suitable targets” (Schwartz, et al, 625). According to Boswell and Spade, fraternities allow for rape culture to thrive making it a dangerous place for women. Fraternities are a place that allow for potential perpetrators. There are no guardians present at a fraternity house, and there are suitable targets, defined as, “women who voluntarily ingest large amounts of alcohol or drugs on campus” are frequently found at fraternity houses (Schwartz, et al, 627).

Greek life housing allows for an ideal environment for routine activities supportive of rape culture to occur. Parties held in Greek life housing were identified as a high-risk environment had “uneven male to female ratios, gender segregation in common areas, dirty women’s bathrooms, degrading comments spoken by fraternity brothers and were overall less

friendly” (Boswell and Spade, 136). The perceptions of males and females definitions of hooking up were also discussed. Males believed that hooking up included sexual intercourse, however females never defined hooking up as having sexual intercourse. This is consistent with rape culture, as it shows the different expectations that male and females have towards hooking up. When there is a difference in definition, this may not always be expressed, and this can cause problems when factors like alcohol are included. This is especially dangerous in a college setting, where fraternity houses set up environments that support rape culture. The different definitions that males and females provide for hooking up show adherence to the double standard, but also show how college as a gendered institution sets up these gendered roles that students follow. These roles and the differences of understanding all contribute to the rape culture of college.

Existing Studies

Anderson (2007) conducted a study of 119 students, aged 18 to 40 at the University of East London, and they were asked to describe their belief of typical occurrence of male and female rape. Results from this study found students to identify the perpetrator as male, stranger and psychopath. Students would identify the victim as having a good reputation, being alone and usually in a situation that was unavoidable. Students described the rape as always occurring outside and identified the victim as struggling, and the perpetrator as aggressive. The findings from this study give an example of how students conceptualize rape. The study also demonstrates how students adhere to rape myths, as they believed that the rapist was a stranger, and that it occurred because the victim was helpless. The male was always identified as the perpetrator and never identified as the victim.

Anderson and Quinn (2009) conducted a study measuring medical students’ attitudes towards rape. 240 medical students from the University of Birmingham were randomly selected

and giving a survey measured by the Attitudes Towards Rape Victim Scale (ATRV), which is a “questionnaire used cross culturally and emphasizes on victim blame, credibility and deservingness” (Anderson, Quinn, 2009). Measurement of attitudes of rape was done in a way that suggested that the victim did something to deserve being sexually assaulted.

Davies and Rogers (2011) conducted a study that measured how sexual orientation of a rape victim would affect perceptions of adolescent males. Participants were given a vignette of a sexually assaulted boy and were asked to respond to questions on a five point Likert scale. Results from this study showed that when there was a female perpetrator, the male victim was blamed. Males who took this survey also had higher amounts of victim blaming than females. In both this study and the one done by Anderson and Quinn, there is a great deal of victim blaming done by males.

McMahon (2010) studied incoming college freshman’s acceptance of rape myths and how it would affect a bystanders “willingness to intervene” (5). McMahon also studied how rape myths will affect the attitudes of bystanders. This study consisted of 2,338 surveys given to undergraduate incoming freshman where 52% were female and 48% were male. Each student was given a vignette and then asked to answer a series of questions to determine their perceptions of sexual assault. The findings from the study show that students were willing to believe that the sexual assault was unintentional. Students also believed that the victim lied about being raped, or that the behaviors of the victim were asking for sexual attention, which led to sexual assault. This survey targeted students who were identified as high-risk, which included athletes and students who showed interest and joining Greek life. These students had a higher acceptance of rape myths than non-athletes and students who expressed little or no interest in joining Greek life.

These studies suggest that many students accept the rape myths that the perpetrator is always male, and that the perpetrator will be a stranger. The studies also demonstrate overall negative attitudes towards male victims of rape. Students in these studies were more likely to participate in victim blaming when being asked who was at fault for sexual assault, all of which contribute to the high acceptance of rape myths.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to see whether the acceptance of rape myths is more prevalent among Greek life students than students who are not involved in Greek life. This study will differ from previous studies because the selected University does not have Greek life housing but it does have Greek organizations, In addition, this study focused on a vignette study of three rape myths given to participants, which is different from previous studies. The hypothesis is that participants who are involved in Greek life will have a higher acceptance of rape myths than their peers who are not involved in Greek life..

Methods

Participants

This study consisted of 169 participants. 116 participants were female and 52 were male. Ages of participants ranged from ages 16 to 75, with the majority of participants ranging from 18 to 22. Demographics for this study in regards to race and ethnicity were; 85.2 % white, 3.6% Hispanic or Latino, 0.6% were African American, 1.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2.4% other. Education status of participants was as follows: 0.6% did not complete high school, 0.6% received their GED, 5.3% received their high school diploma, 5.9% are current college freshman, 10.7% are current college sophomores, 24.3% are current college juniors, 33.1% are current college seniors. 2.4% are currently in graduate school, 3.0% graduated with an associate's

degree, 8.3% graduated with a bachelors degree, 3.6% graduated with a masters degree and 1.2% graduated with a PhD. 1.8 % of participants identified as lower class. 9.5% identified as lower middle class. 46.7% identified as being middle class, 32.0% identified as being upper middle class, and 3.6% identified as being upper class.

Procedures

A non-probability sampling method was used for this study. The study was purposive, and was sent out to students at the university through Facebook. Members of Greek life were asked to post the survey to their alumni pages as well in order to get participation from past Greek life members. The survey was posted and shared to personal accounts, and then also to different groups throughout the university in order to gain enough participation.

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey was administered through Survey Monkey. Participants were asked to read three different scenarios, each which outlined a different rape myth. Participants were then asked to answer a series of questions based on the scenario in order to determine their acceptance or rejection of rape myths. This can be accessed in Appendix 2. The beginning of the survey had an informed consent, which promised confidentiality. This can be accessed in Appendix 3.

Measures

The independent variable was membership in a campus Greek life society- either a fraternity or sorority. This was operationalized by a question asking the participant to indicate whether or not they were or had been a member of Greek life. The dependent variable is defined by the person's level of acceptance of rape myths. This was measured by an index, which

included ten indicators, which can be referenced in Appendix 1. Responses were based on a five point Likert scale.

Results

Of the 169 participants, 30.8% reported to be a part of Greek life involvement, while 42.6% of participants were not involved in Greek life. The remaining 23.1% of participants did not answer the question. A Rape Myth Index was created in order to determine how accepting or rejecting one was towards the given myths. The theoretical range from this index ranged from 18 to 90. Those who scored lower on the Rape Myth Index were less accepting of myths, and those who had a higher score accepted the rape myths. All three means for sorority members, fraternity members and non-Greek life members were low, showing an overall rejection of rape myths. The standard deviations and means for the acceptance of rape myths in Greek life is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Range and Means- Greek Life Acceptance of Rape Myths

Report			
RapeMythIndex			
Greek	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Sorority Member	30.9545	22	9.02630
Fraternity Member	35.5000	18	11.20005
Non-Member	30.2537	67	7.78371
Total	31.2804	107	8.81443

In order to test the hypothesis that Greek life members as compared to non-members will have a significantly higher mean on the Rape Myth Index, and independent sample t test was run. This is shown below in Table 2. Table 2 shows that although there was a slightly higher acceptance of

rape myths within Greek life members than non Greek life members, the findings are not significant enough to support my hypothesis.

Table 2: Comparison of Rape Myth Index Means According to Greek Membership Status

Group Statistics					
GreekCollapse		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RapeMythIndex	Greek Life	18	35.5000	11.20005	2.63988
	Non Greek Life	18	31.4444	7.28594	1.71731

Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
									RapeMythIndex	Equal variances assumed	5.235
	Equal variances not assumed			1.468	66.170	.147	2.74627	1.87060	-.98833	6.48086	

A secondary hypothesis was tested, expecting to find a significant positive correlation between the number of drinks per night and the acceptance of rape myths. Findings in Table 4 are below. There is a significant 1-tailed test result (0.32), however the association is weak.

Table 4: Number of Drinks Per Night and Rape Myth Acceptance

Correlations			
		On average, how many drinks do you have a night when you go out?	RapeMythIndex
On average, how many drinks do you have a night when you go out?	Pearson Correlation	1	.181
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.064
	N	127	105
RapeMythIndex	Pearson Correlation	.181	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.064	
	N	105	131

A final test was done in order to determine if there was any significance between males acceptance of rape myths compared with females acceptance of rape myths. An independent sample t-test was done. Results can be found in Table 5. While males had a slightly higher acceptance mean than females, the findings were not significant.

Table 5: Gender Comparison of Rape Myth Acceptance

Group Statistics					
Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RapeMythIndex	Male	40	32.8250	9.41327	1.48837
	Female	91	30.1758	8.58629	.90009

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
RapeMythIndex	Equal variances assumed	.528	.469	1.579	129	.117	2.64918	1.67786	-.67052	5.96887
	Equal variances not assumed			1.523	68.757	.132	2.64918	1.73937	-.82098	6.11934

The findings these tests show that overall, there is a rejection of rape myths regardless of Greek life participation, alcohol consumption or gender.

Discussion

The results from this study did not support my hypothesis that Greek life members were more accepting of rape myths than non-Greek life members. This also did not show significance in alcohol use or gender impacting the acceptance of rape myths. This study had several limitations, which included the size, especially the relatively small set of Greek life members. Those who participated in the survey did voluntarily, and were my Facebook friends, and friends of people who I asked to post to their specific sorority or fraternity in order to gain greater Greek life participation. This only contains information from one student body and may not be representative of all sororities and fraternities present on campus. Findings cannot be generalized because of the non-probability sampling method.

There may also have been an issue with reactivity, as respondents may have rejected rape myths for reasons of social desirability. At Sacred Heart this past fall, incoming freshman were required to attend a lecture about sexual assault, which included knowledge about sexual assault, and bystander prevention. This allowed for a greater awareness of rape myths among the campus, and therefore may have educated many students. In addition to this lecture that freshmen were asked to attend, at the beginning of the semester, there were two reported sexual

assaults. The study body was notified of these incidents, and was informed on how to prevent sexual assault. At the time that this was going on, my survey had been distributed, so there was an overall greater knowledge of sexual assault on campus than previously.

There are limits to being able to prove all cause and effect because of extraneous variables.. For future studies, I recommend that the survey is sent out to an entire student body, and not just posted through Facebook. This will allow for a greater number of respondents, and will provide more insight to Greek life as well. I also recommend sending this to several colleges, instead of just limiting it to one. In addition, I would focus on the specific of one rape myth, but provide participants with different vignettes where the context of where it happens changes. This would alter the scenario. This would test if people in Greek life or those who are not in Greek life downplay the context of campuses. A final recommendation for future studies is to see how the acceptance or rejection of rape myths affects attitudes towards gender.

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Appendix 1

Acceptance of Rape Myth Indicators

The questions in Appendix 2 are looking at the following indicators of accepting or rejecting the following rape myths:

1. Rape doesn't occur within a marriage
2. Victims are to blame if they are raped
3. Males can't be raped
4. Rape only happens by a stranger
5. Rape only happens when you are in a bad area
6. Gang rape includes many men
7. Gang rape is a physical attack
8. Gang rape only happens by strangers
9. Victims are able to easily able to press charges against their perpetrator
10. Victims are comfortable reporting rape to the authorities

Appendix 2

The following scenarios and questions were all answered on the same 5 point Likert scale as follows: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree.

Scenario 1: John and Meg have been married for five years. One night John tries to have sex with Meg, but she tells him no. Although she refused, he ignores this and pressures her into having sex anyway.

1. John should have accepted his wife's wish not to have sex.
2. John raped Meg.
3. John did nothing wrong to Meg.
4. It is impossible for John to have raped Meg because they are married.
5. Meg shouldn't have been so passive if she didn't want to have sex with John.

Scenario 2: Joe and Ally are both college students. They both know each other from class and one night they saw each other at a party. They break off from the rest of the party and go into a room. They start kissing, and Ally says that she wants to have sex with Joe. Joe doesn't want to, and he tries to make Ally stop, however she pressures him into having sex anyway.

1. Ally raped Joe.
2. Joe led Ally on, therefore she couldn't have raped him.
3. Ally did nothing wrong to Joe.
4. Joe shouldn't have been so passive if he didn't want to have sex with Ally.
5. It is impossible to determine if anyone was raped in this situation because they both knew each other.
6. It is impossible for Ally to have raped Joe because he is a guy.

Scenario 3: Michelle is attending a local event in a middle class neighborhood. While at the event, she meets two men. They talk for a while, and after the event is over they go together into

a room. After a few drinks, the men try to initiate sex, but Michelle says she doesn't want to. They pressure her into having sex anyway.

1. Michelle was a victim of gang rape
2. Michelle couldn't have been a victim of gang rape because she was in a middle class neighborhood.
3. Michelle wasn't a victim of gang rape because only two men initiated sex with her.
4. Michelle was not a victim of gang rape because she was not physically attacked by the men.
5. Michelle was not a victim of gang rape because she spent the night in conversation with the men.

Other questions:

1. Typically when rape is reported, charges are pressed.
2. Most victims of rape feel comfortable reporting it to the authorities.

Appendix 3

Informed Consent:

My name is Kathryn Pierce and I am an undergraduate sociology student at Sacred Heart University. I am writing my thesis on attitudes regarding interpersonal relationships. This is voluntarily and all results will remain completely anonymous. This will only take a few minutes to complete. Thank you for your participation.