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Victim Ambiguity: Bystander Intervention and Sexual Assault in the College Drinking Scene

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol-related sexual assault is the most common form of sexual victimization on college campuses. Bystander intervention has been suggested as effective in preventing sexual assault, but its usefulness in sexual assaults that involve alcohol in particular has not yet been examined. The current study draws from intensive interviews with 30 undergraduates at a large Midwestern university to understand how students' perceptions about sexual victimization and alcohol use affect their bystander behavior. Findings suggest that in alcohol-involved situations, the ambiguity of whether the woman is at risk and her perceived worthiness are significant barriers to intervention. Policy implications are discussed.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, research has established sexual assault as a pervasive problem on college campuses in the United States. It is estimated that one in five college women in the United States have experienced rape or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000). In approximately 50–75% of these sexual assaults, the offender, the victim, or both have been consuming alcohol (Abbey 2002; Wechsler et al. 2002). One study found drug-related assaults were five times more prevalent than forcible sexual assaults involving neither alcohol nor drugs (Lawyer et al. 2010). Those prevention programs that do discuss the concept of responsible drinking fail to articulate how heavy drinking can perpetuate sexual assault (Abbey 2002). Similarly, prevention programs may convey inappropriate and incorrect messages to the larger society.

Many prevention programs minimize men's responsibility for rape prevention by teaching women how to avoid rape through self-defense classes and by advising them to restrict and monitor their movements in public. This not only perpetuates the inaccurate notion that stranger rape is the most common form of victimization (Berns 2001), but it also frames sexual assault as a "woman's problem" (Piccigallo, Lilley, and Miller 2012:508). Furthermore, increasing women's responsibility for avoiding rape can lead to blaming the victim for her own victimization (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante 2007; Ullman 2007).

Further research on bystander intervention programs may be a means of addressing the problematic elements listed above. Recent developments in rape prevention research that suggest bystander intervention could be effective in reducing the occurrence of sexual assault (Banyard 2008). An emphasis on bystander intervention can remove the primary responsibility for rape avoidance from the woman at risk (Ullman 2007), and instead, empower members of the student community to take responsibility for each other's protection (Banyard, Plant, and Moynihan 2004). Additionally, the findings of Katz and Moore's (2013) study suggest that bystander intervention training may also have served well to decrease rape-supportive attitudes and rape myth acceptance among bystanders. Moreover, these programs have excellent potential in preventing alcohol-related sexual assault

considering the majority of alcohol-related sexual assaults take place in social situations where many people are present (Fisher et al. 2000) and drinking on campus tends to occur in social settings (Vander Ven 2011).

In order to understand the relationship between bystander intervention and sexual assault in the college drinking scene, the current study is informed by Shawn Burn's (2009) bystander intervention model. Burn derived her model from the classic model of bystander intervention constructed by Latane and Darley (1970). Whereas this classic model broadly outlines the five steps which bystanders take before successfully intervening in a given situation, Burn adapts the model to specifically address bystander intervention in situations with the potential for sexual assault to occur. The five steps in this model are (1) notice the event, (2) acknowledge intervention is necessary, (3) accept responsibility for intervening, (4) make the decision on how to act, and finally, (5) intervene. There are specific barriers to each of these steps that are unique to situations with the potential for a sexual assault to occur.

One such barrier pertinent to the current study is the potential intervener's "beliefs about rape and rape victims" (McMahon 2010:3). This relates to Burn's concept of how bystanders move through the second step by deciding whether or not a situation is "intervention appropriate" (2009:781). Whether or not a bystander completes this step to continue the intervention process is influenced by a multitude of factors. The bystander's decision that a situation necessitates intervention may be affected by the bystander's perception of the victim's choices, intoxication level, and attire. Based on this and the theory utilized in the current study, researchers attempted to answer the question: How do students frame the potential sexual assault victim and how might this affect their decisions to intervene?

Thus, this exploratory study sought to learn about the actual process of bystander intervention from potential bystanders in their own words. The authors relied on in-depth qualitative interviews with college students from a large Midwestern university to determine the specific ways in which these students evaluated situations with the potential for alcohol-related sexual assault, what conditions would need to be present for them to intervene, if they believed other

students engaged in intervention, and their beliefs on sexual consent when one or both parties have consumed alcohol.

Furthermore, the current study sought to address concerns by Rozee and Koss (2001) who argued prevention programs may fail to be effective because they are not guided by theory. They suggested there need to be increased efforts in producing more prevention programs that are empirically and theoretically supported (Rozee and Koss 2001:297). The present study is set in the framework of constructionist theory, specifically Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) model of understanding social problems as a definitional process. This study is intent on informing future studies on this topic by employing a rich theoretical context in the analysis of the qualitative data researchers have collected. Bystander intervention has the potential to be a prevention technique in alcohol-related sexual assault, but more information is needed to inform program planning and implementation (Banyard 2008; Burn 2009). The current study is an attempt to contribute to the pool of information required to plan, implement, and evaluate bystander intervention programs.

Theoretical framework

Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) book *Constructing Social Problems* states that in order for a phenomenon to be labeled a "social problem" it is necessary for it to be defined as such by specific members of society. Those who define a phenomenon as a social problem are claims-makers (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). In the case of campus sexual victimization, claims-makers may include researchers, university officials, politicians, lobbyists, student organizations, individual students, and more. The claims-making activity is the movement to identify campus sexual victimization as a social problem and to establish policies and programs to address and reduce the scope of the problem. Identifying the claims-makers for this condition and understanding how these individuals or groups of people construct campus sexual victimization can directly influence policy implications and program development.

Loseke offers a way to understand how claims-makers construct and understand the condition of sexual assault. She argued that within the condition-type defined by claims-makers (in this case, campus sexual victimization) there are two people-types: the victim and the victimizer (Loseke 2003). According to Loseke, when people think of victims of certain social problems, they often think about the stereotypical victim, which influences their perception of the problem and this can impact behavioral responses. By way of illustration, someone who views the poor as stereotypically lazy, unemployed thugs is less likely to think of poverty as a social problem and therefore more likely to disregard the need for public assistance for impoverished people. Loseke argued that victims of social problems have to be seen in a sympathetic light in order for their victimization to be taken seriously. Loseke's (2003) people-types theory can certainly be applied to the problem of sexual assault; her ideas are particularly relevant when determining how bystander perceptions of the potential victim might affect their decisions to intervene in a situation with the potential for sexual assault.

As Holstein and Miller (1990) indicate, a victim is seen as undeserving of the harm done, whereas a victimizer is responsible for committing this harm. Essentially Loseke elaborates on this idea and suggests this categorization of victim and victimizer is a claims-making activity that produces "putative people" as being situated in "particular moral universes," which are further separated into two universes: "sympathy-worthiness" or "condemnation-worthiness" (2003:122). It is Loseke's idea that if the victim is perceived to be responsible for the position they are in, then they are placed in the blame-worthy category while the victim who is perceived to be innocent and undeserving of harm will be categorized as sympathy-worthy. The attribution of blame-worthy or sympathy-worthy to a potential victim influences whether or not the victim will be helped. For instance, Loseke found that in battered women's shelters, employees constructed women as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" victims and this evaluation determined whether or not the shelter would allow a woman to stay (Holstein and Miller 2003:77).

According to this theoretical standpoint, a bystander's evaluation of a

situation with the potential for sexual assault as necessitating intervention or not necessitating intervention may rely on the bystander's perceived worth of the individuals involved. The potential victim who is deemed deserving of intervention might be seen as morally correct, sympathy-worthy, wrongfully harmed, and ultimately not responsible for the situation they are in. Whereas the victimizer who is deemed deserving of punishment would be seen as someone who is immoral, blame-worthy, intending to do harm, and completely responsible for the situation. Problematically, if bystanders are viewing the potential victim as contributing to the situation she is in (e.g., by drinking too much, by being perceived as promiscuous), then they might not believe that she is worthy of help or that she is even a victim at all. Thus, the current study utilizes the blame-worthiness category not in terms of the victimizer, but rather in terms of the potential victim who is framed as being responsible for her plight and, in turn, blamed for her victimization or not considered to be a victim. Given how effectively Loseke's people-types theory can be applied to the social problem of alcohol-related sexual assault on college campuses, it is undeniably valuable in understanding how students decide who is a potential victim and who is worthy of help.

Research design

Theoretical paradigm

As formerly discussed, the authors of the present study operated under a social constructionist paradigm due to the desire to identify the specific terms and attitudes respondents used to construct potential victims of alcohol-related sexual assault. Social constructionism functions with the assumption that there is no true reality and that each respondent has a different view of this phenomenon, which permits multiple realities to be created (Poortman and Schildkamp 2012). Using this theoretical framework, researchers can expand the knowledge of the reality of alcohol-related sexual assaults by having respondents give elaborate accounts of their experiences in the college drinking scene as well as hypothetical accounts of what they may do in various given situations. Thus, the authors attempted to understand all of the complexities involved in bystander intervention in alcohol-

related sexual assault from the point of view of the respondents (Creswell 2007) by seeking “a deep understanding of possible constructions of meaning within the data” (Johnston et al. 2013:901).

Study setting

Alcohol-related sexual assault is exceptionally prevalent on college campuses in comparison to other populations (Fisher et al. 2000); therefore, targeting students in college may be beneficial in reducing the occurrence of this crime. The present qualitative, exploratory study, embedded in a social constructionist framework attempts to identify which factors (i.e., situational, cultural, relational, and personal) college students use to decide whether or not to intervene in situations where there is potential for an alcohol-related sexual assault. The overall goals of the research project were to: (1) identify if and when students conceptualize alcohol-fueled sexual encounters as holding the potential for sexual assault; (2) understand what factors students use to determine whether or not they will intervene; (3) if and when students actually intervene; and (4) how (e.g., do they remove the potential victim from the situation or attempt to dispel the potential perpetrator) they intervene. In order to contribute unique and relevant information to future research and discourse on alcohol-related sexual assault this project was specifically intent on examining how a potential bystander’s evaluation of the potential victim might influence the bystander’s decision to intervene.

Data collection

Data were collected between the years 2010–2012 at a large Midwestern university via face-to-face interviews. Unlike observation or survey designs, interviews allow researchers to capture the perceptual information of what underlies the mechanisms to intervention. Interviews are often employed in order to understand the “*how* and *why* of a particular issue, process, situation, subculture, scene or set of social interactions” (emphasis in original) (Dworkin 2012:1319). Rubin and Rubin explain that in-depth interviews are for when researchers want participants to “describe their experiences,” to “give examples,” and to “explain their

answers” (2012:2–3).

In the current study, interviews were chosen as the method of data collection because the authors were interested in the actual process (including the how and why) of intervention (Dworkin 2012); while at the same time this process is explained by the respondents in their own words, which gives them the opportunity to “describe their experiences” and “give examples” (Rubin and Rubin 2012:2–3). Semi-structured interviews often have preset questions, while still leaving dialogue open for other questions to emerge during the conversation (Whiting 2008:36). In the current study, interviews were semi-structured to guide researchers in obtaining answers to certain questions while also allowing for the opportunity to ask and receive answers to questions that may tap into other aspects of the research topic.

The vast majority of interview questions were derived from Burn’s (2009) model of different steps of bystander intervention and the barriers involved. Questions were developed in order to hypothetically evaluate if barriers to intervention prevent respondents from ultimately intervening. Other questions were created to gather respondents’ knowledge or perceptions on issues related to alcohol- related sexual assault on campus. For example, two questions to measure students’ perceptions of sexual victimization and alcohol use on their campus were: “In your opinion, does alcohol use lead to sexual victimization? If so, please discuss the relationship between alcohol use and sexual victimization” and “Do college students take advantage of intoxicated individuals for sexual purposes? Please elaborate.” Researchers also sought to understand whether respondents felt others would intervene on behalf of someone in need by asking: “Do college students actively intervene when they observe an intoxicated person who is vulnerable to sexual victimization?”

The following questions were derived directly from the quantitative categories utilized in Burn’s study of bystander intervention. Burn found that a large barrier to intervention was bystander’s inability to even notice a potential sexual assault situation. The researchers wanted to know if this barrier had a significant impact on the respondents and whether or not alcohol played a role in this. Therefore

respondents were asked: “At a party or bar, do you feel that you are sometimes too busy or distracted to notice a risky situation? Are you sometimes too intoxicated?” Burn outlined the role “taking responsibility” plays in the bystander’s decision to intervene. To capture this, respondents were asked: “When you determine the situation as risky, under what circumstances would you feel personally responsible for intervening?” In addition, Burn focused on how attributions of worthiness impact a bystander’s decision to intervene. One way Burn measured this was by asking respondents about their perception of the potential victim’s promiscuity.

Researchers also asked questions regarding the respondents’ perceived worthiness of a friend given that Burn’s research also suggested bystanders are more likely to intervene to protect their friends. Therefore respondents were asked: “If a friend is known for promiscuous behavior, are you less inclined to step in and help?” Overall, all interview questions were designed and employed in an attempt to understand whether or not respondents had basic knowledge about alcohol-related sexual assault on campus and whether or not the barriers to intervention Burn (2009) outlined in her model were relevant when alcohol is involved by hearing from respondents in their own words.

Naturally, this study is susceptible to social desirability effects (Bachman and Schutt 2011). In other words, respondents may have given answers they thought interviewers wanted to hear. However, it is important to make note that respondents were not only predicting their behavior in hypothetical contexts, but also describing how they *did* behave in their own unique experiences. Thus, researchers were able to gather knowledge of how respondents may behave in the situations researchers presented to them and knowledge of what types of situations respondents had actually found themselves in and how respondents’ behaviors in those situations inform the research questions at hand.

Participants

The current research project was conducted with the approval of the university’s institutional review board, and included an informed consent form. Throughout the findings section, pseudonyms are used; no real names of

respondents were used or known. The study contained a total of 30 respondents with 17 females and 13 males. The mean age for all respondents was 19.85. All of the interview informants were undergraduate students above the age of 18. All participants were traditional college students (entering college between the ages 18–19) and all were white. The current project's aims were to explore the unique position college students are in as bystanders to potential alcohol-related sexual assault situations. To the authors' knowledge, no other research projects examine this specific issue in this particular manner.

All informants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Marshall (1996:523) described convenience sampling as “the selection of the most accessible subjects.” This sample was utilized due to time and budget constraints and the exploratory nature of the project; and researchers stress that time and the aim of the research are very important in qualitative research (Marshall 1996; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). Approximately one-third of respondents were identified through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of judgment sample that is simply where participants “recommend useful potential candidates for study” (Marshall 1996:523).

Non-representative samples can be appropriate when the goal of research is to elaborate on prior research and theory, as is the goal of the study at hand. That is, as long as inferences to a larger population beyond the scope of the study are not made, then the sample size and design are not as crucial to the study (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007; O'Reilly and Parker 2013). Thus, often “researchers recruit participants who have the qualities they are attempting to understand” (Keele 2012). Additionally, McCracken suggested that “a sample of interviewees should be fairly homogenous and share critical similarities related to the research question” (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006:317). In the current study, interviewees were all college students and all had unique, but similar, experiences in the college alcohol scene.

Researchers approached students without specific criteria other than presence, in popular student dwellings, and asked if the students had at least an hour to participate in an interview. Efforts were made to balance the sample by age

and gender. Interviews were conducted in rooms in the library, in dining halls, and in offices. Students in the dining halls were approached, asked to participate, and if they agreed the interview was conducted immediately in a private section of the hall. Students approached in the library who agreed to participate, were asked to accompany the researcher immediately to a private study room in the library in order to conduct the interview. Respondents were asked to suggest their friends to be interviewed. Students identified through snowball sampling were contacted to schedule an interview in an empty office or conference room in a university office building. All of the informants were asked to proceed with an interview to help the research team learn more about the relationship between bystander intervention, sexual victimization, and alcohol use on campus with no compensation. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to ninety minutes.

The concept of saturation in qualitative research can refer to forgoing further research once all categories and variations have been reached or ending the research process once it is not revealing anything new (Brod, Tesler, and Christensen 2009; Dworkin 2012; O'Reilly and Parker 2013). In the current research project, saturation was identified as the latter conception. Researchers met frequently and recognized it was clear no new information was coming to light after the thirtieth interview and thus further data collection was unnecessary. Overall, the findings in this project were exceptionally prevalent, which provided patterns and a potential theoretical concept that can be tested in future projects.

Analytical strategy

Layder (1998) suggested that existing sociological theories can inform or initiate the entire coding process; this is the case with the current study. Loseke's (2003) theoretical concepts of blame- and sympathy-worthiness influenced the data analysis as all interviews were deductively coded for everything related to these theoretical categories. Each incidence in which the respondent appeared to blame the potential victim for their plight was recorded and coded as "blame-worthiness." On the other hand, each statement relating to feeling sorry for a potential victim was

documented and coded as “sympathy-worthiness.”

Several inductive codes including *embarrassment apprehension*, *group effort*, *friend*, *women’s agency*, *stranger rape*, *unknown to bystander*, and *college atmosphere* were identified during the deductive analysis procedures and multiple readings of the data. These codes related to an idea, belief, or concept that was identified consistently throughout the interview data. Then, in order to understand how these codes operated within the larger theoretical categories as blame- or sympathy-worthiness, they were applied to all text previously identified as these categories. For example, *responsibility* is an inductive code that is related to blame-worthiness. Blame results if the respondent assigns responsibility to the potential victim. Furthermore, data were analyzed several more times to further understand and reveal the role blame, sympathy, and the inductive codes play in actual intervention likelihood.

Data were analyzed by a group of three researchers, with a process to ensure consistency and reliability throughout the analysis process. Thus, in order to properly ensure consistency in coding among researchers, the research team conducted an inter-coder reliability check. Our inter-coder reliability check was 68%, which is within an acceptable range for exploratory research (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). This is important because as Saldaña suggests, “coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act” (2013:4) and yet researchers were consistent in their codes. In addition, at each stage of analysis, researchers met to review coding procedures, notes, and findings. Differences between the research team in all areas were discussed and decided based on group consensus.

The researchers agree with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014:72) that “coding *is* analysis” and that “the coder’s primary goal is to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data” (Saldaña 2013:5). In this way, codes are simply a stepping stone to allow researchers to pinpoint patterns in the data (Saldaña 2013). Consequently, in this study, codes enabled researchers to identify themes, including subcategories, in relation to how respondents view potential victims. Thus, these processes yielded three themes that demonstrate the underlying processes that might influence intervention likelihood. Two themes are the theoretical concepts utilized within the

analysis, blame- and sympathy-worthiness. These concepts were employed as themes as they are paramount in explaining intervention likelihood.

The third theme was identified when it became clear that the dichotomous nature of blame- and sympathy-worthiness could not explain every respondent's lack of willingness to intervene. That is, when the inductive codes were analyzed within the context of these two theoretical concepts and during succeeding coding procedures, it appeared some of these codes did not fit neatly into blame- or sympathy-worthiness categories. Given that this third theme refers to a respondent's failure to categorize a potential victim as neither blame-worthy nor sympathy-worthy, but rather indicates a respondent was ambiguous in their construction of the potential victim, researchers assigned the term *victim ambiguity* to this theme. For example, *college atmosphere* and *unknown to bystander* do not refer to a respondent blaming or sympathizing with a potential victim, rather these represent instances in which their lack of knowledge on the reality of campus sexual assault inhibits their ability to acknowledge risk. In other words, due to the frequency of alcohol-fueled (consensual) sexual encounters on college campuses (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011), and not knowing a stranger's desires, respondents did not typically view (very drunk) women who they do not know as potential victims. Thus, respondents were not blaming women in these situations, or feeling sorry for them, rather they were unable or unwilling to even view the woman as a potential victim since they did not perceive the situation as having the potential to lead to a sexual assault.

Findings

Constructionist theory and existing research on bystander intervention guided the researchers in examining all interview data to identify what constituted a respondent blaming or sympathizing with a potential victim and coding procedures revealed a possible third theoretical category: (1) victim blame-worthiness, (2) victim sympathy-worthiness, and (3) victim ambiguity. Loseke's theoretical constructs of victim blame-worthiness and victim sympathy-worthiness were used in order to present the information within a theoretical lens and the data represented in

these themes is consistent with Burn's (2009) model and findings. A third potential barrier to intervention, "victim ambiguity," arose from the analysis procedures. Each theme has several subcategories explored below. These themes are not mutually exclusive and inevitably overlap in some situations. Each theme will be presented separately and with verbatim quotations made by respondents as evidence.¹

Victim sympathy-worthiness

While this research project is largely intent on identifying possible barriers to bystander intervention, it is necessary to first identify the terms and attitudes respondents expressed as attributes of situations in which they would or did intervene in a situation with the potential for an alcohol-related sexual assault. Just as Loseke (2003) postulated in her discussion of victim people-types, respondents reported their greatest likelihood to intervene was in situations in which they constructed the potential victim as sympathy-worthy. The findings suggest there are three predominant ways the potential victim is viewed in a sympathetic light: (1) the potential victim was a friend, (2) the situation was classified by the respondent as an emergency, and (3) the woman was intoxicated. Although intoxication level was considered by half of respondents to be a reason to attribute blame to the victim, the other half of the respondents recognized that a woman who was severely intoxicated could be considered as vulnerable and worthy of help. A discussion of these sympathy-worthy attributes can be used to create a profile of the sympathy-worthy victim people type—the type of victim whose situation is deemed worthy of intervention.

Friend

The majority of respondents stated that they would be extremely likely to intervene if they believed their friend was in need of help. Travis highlights this, stating, "If I knew the individual, then I would feel obligated to get involved." When

¹While the authors do not assume that men cannot be victims of sexual assault, due to the fact that the vast majority of rape victims are women, and the majority of perpetrators are men (Fisher et al. 2000), interview questions were asked in this way. Analysis procedures and presentation of results also align with this scenario.

asked if Nick would feel responsible for anyone he said “like a really, really close friend, somebody you care about. Yeah.” Comparably, David stated he would feel responsible “if it was a friend of mine. If it was a random person I wouldn’t necessarily feel responsible. I would feel like that they should have friends that would see that situation. . .” This is consistent among the entire interview respondents’ answers pertaining to anywhere from acknowledging the woman is uncomfortable, all the way to intervention likelihood. With the exceptions of “emergency situations,” barriers to intervention seemed to be easier for respondents to overcome when the woman is a friend rather than a stranger.

For example, friends may have signals they can give one another, signals a stranger and a bystander would not have. As Megan, a nineteen year old female, described a situation where her friend was talking to a male:

I saw them talking in the corner of a party and um, one of my friends was getting a little uncomfortable, I could tell on her face. And she looked at me and she kinda looked like I wanted to—like she wanted me to come over there. So I went over there and I got right in between them. . .

In this case, it seemed that being able to understand when Megan’s friend was uncomfortable was crucial for identifying that she needed removed from the situation. She elaborated, “. . .it’s not taking the responsibility, it’s taking care of your friends when you know that there’s something wrong with the picture and they just can’t see it because they’re either drunk or they don’t realize it” (Megan, nineteen-year old female).

With strangers, however, respondents were less sure of the potential danger of the situation, as Travis explained:

. . . but then again I being a stranger I don’t know if they like know that person or not, like they might know them and they’re just really drunk, or they might not know them and I don’t know as a stranger, so like just looking at that situation I would think like oh this girl needs help, but then, then I think to myself “well maybe she knows this guy like who I am to be a dick and say something to him?”

Interestingly, however, although respondents openly discussed that they would intervene if their female friend was at risk, some indicated that they would only help her if she was with a male stranger. This may simply mean they did not feel their

friend was in danger or in need of help, if she was with a male acquaintance. For example, one female respondent said: “umm. If they are being carried . . . would probably be an emergency, if they are being carried by someone I don’t recognize, or know that they don’t know. . .” This respondent may or may not have meant she would not have intervened if the male involved in this situation was an acquaintance, but she definitely stated that she would consider it an emergency if the man were a stranger to the woman. This is important to note because even if respondents were willing to help their female friends, they first needed to establish that she was at risk and common misconceptions about rape, like the notion that women are most likely to be assaulted by strangers, can inhibit this.

Emergency situation

Interviewers asked respondents to identify when they would believe someone’s potential sexual assault is an emergency. Although interviewers did not ask respondents to distinguish who they were talking about in an emergency situation (friends vs. strangers), the large majority implied that regardless of the woman’s relationship to the respondent, in an emergency situation, she would be worthy of help and they would be likely to intervene.

For example, Molly, a twenty-two year old senior said an emergency situation would occur when: “I mean, he’s touching her and inappropriately and if she’s like being carried. If she’s being like dragged-out, like clearly intoxicated . . . it could be innocent, like it could be just like a friend trying to get her home. I think that’s something that you have to intervene.”

Molly acknowledges here that this is a situation where somebody would have to intervene, and she does not explicitly state the woman has to be a friend. Researchers interpreted emergency situations to mean any woman in this situation should be helped. This indicates situations involving strangers may be less ambiguous when it is considered an emergency. In emergency situations, it seems the context and background of the people involved is no longer important, but rather the woman’s immediate and apparent danger is crucial to the respondent’s decision to intervene.

Travis also thought a woman being carried was indicative of an emergency situation when he said “if . . . like if a guy was carrying a girl over his shoulders, like I guess down an alley way.” Although this leans more to the myth of stranger rape and where it is thought to occur, Travis is acknowledging that whoever this woman may be, she is at risk. In line with Burn’s five-step bystander intervention model, once the potential respondent established the situation as necessitating intervention, it appears the other steps are much easier to progress through.

Additionally, some respondents mentioned other situations that constitute an emergency. For instance, some discuss physical altercation and/or obvious signs of maliciousness allow for a situation to be considered an emergency. As an example of this idea, Colton, a twenty year old senior, said “. . . you know, there are going to be—there are obviously blatant signs; like, if a guy is accosting a woman, then clearly step in.” Similarly, Miles said an emergency would be when, “a guy putting his hands all over a girl . . . if any weaponry is used. Just clear, obvious signs or when physical interaction is helpful.” Additionally, Brad explained an emergency would have to do with the man and woman’s intoxication level, “. . . yea that it’s, sobriety. If there is a severe difference in that, and I can tell one person is clearly manipulating the situation for their advantage.” Again, the respondent expressed this would be a clear, blatant sign, and would encourage intervention.

Intoxication level

As discussed earlier, although some of the respondents suggested that intoxication makes a woman more responsible for her outcomes, others indicated that her intoxication level meant she was vulnerable and therefore they acknowledged her as a potential victim, which increased the likelihood that they would intervene. Most respondents indicated they use visual signals (e.g., falling over, slurring, vomiting), to understand the intoxication level of the potential victim. However, if it is a friend, they can also use their knowledge about their friend (e.g., tolerance, normal actions) to infer their friend’s intoxication level. David said that if a woman is “very sloppy drunk, they’re saying things that aren’t really making sense, they might vomit. . .” then they are too drunk to go home with a male. In a similar

manner, Kristen, a nineteen-year old freshman in a sorority said:

I'd definitely feel responsible for like younger girls in my chapter, um, girls who do drink heavily all the time, to the point where they have no idea what they're doing. Like, I do feel I have a sense of responsibility for people who are more drunk than I am, basically.

Brad, a nineteen-year-old freshman provided an example of a sign that indicates a woman is unable to consent due to her intoxication level: ". . . if they cannot successfully operate stairs, then they are in no position to make a choice in regards to anything of the sort." Consequently, David, Brad, and Kristen are all looking at the potential victim's intoxication level as more of an indicator that she is at risk, rather than that she is responsible and not the respondent's problem. Hence, these respondents report the ability to successfully overcome the barrier of recognizing a situation as risky and requiring intervention when they view the potential victim as undeserving of what might happen to her which places her in the sympathy-worthy category of Loseke's theory of people-types.

The aforementioned sympathy-worthy attributes are consistent themes which show commonalities in respondents' constructions of potential victims who are deserving of intervention. The respondents' ability to establish the presence of this sympathy-worthy people type contributed to their predicted or reported successful movement through the steps of the intervention process. Further research is necessary to determine the significance of these victim attributes and to consider the prevalence of other characteristics bystanders might attribute to sympathy-worthy victims.

Victim blame-worthiness

There were certain themes that arose in the interviews which indicated respondents' perception of the potential victim did not fit the profile of a victim deserving of intervention. In these cases, some respondents believed there were situations in which the woman was at fault and thus she was not seen as a vulnerable, potential victim. In this case, the woman would be seen as blame-worthy, not innocent, which makes her responsible for what happens to her and unworthy of help. The two most common ways potential victims were seen in a

blame-worthy light were due to: (1) the perceived promiscuous behavior on behalf of the woman and (2) her intoxication level.

Promiscuity

Respondents were asked if they would be less inclined to intervene on a friend's behalf if she is known for promiscuous behavior. Eighteen out of thirty (60%) respondents said they would be less inclined to intervene. Theory suggests this is because promiscuous women are not being seen as moral, innocent, undeserving of harm and worthy of help (Loseke 2003). In contrast to this expected explanation, most respondents did not necessarily blame this promiscuous friend or condemn her, but rather said that if she appears to want to engage in a situation with the potential for sexual assault, then so be it.

For example, when Sierra was asked whether she would be less likely to intervene on the behalf of a promiscuous friend, she stated: "probably, because that's what she's choosing to do." Likewise, Rachel said "to an extent yeah like if I thought that like they were ok with it." Sarah showed this as well when she said "oh yea, yea, I mean if, if I knew that she was like that anyway and I see her leaving with someone, I wouldn't think anything of it." Additionally, a conversation with Karen, a nineteen-year old sophomore, demonstrated this belief by saying ". . . I would just be like, well she's, you know, using the alcohol to get some action." Similarly, Blake discussed the decision-making aspects of promiscuous female friends and why he would be less likely to intervene, "It makes you think that the alcohol they've taken in hasn't changed their decision making. It's still the same decision being made."

Ashley, a twenty-one-year-old senior resonated this sentiment by stating that a promiscuous female friend "might just go down to Jimmy Johns and meet someone there and start hanging out and hook up. So alcohol would not influence what they do." Another respondent, Eric, an eighteen-year-old freshman echoed this by saying he would be less inclined to intervene because, ". . . you know, they're happy about it. Then, obviously, maybe that's what they want then." In addition, one male respondent blamed the promiscuous woman by saying, "like . . . if I know she's

like, she gets around the block then . . . I'd be like, that's her own, that's her fault. . . . Learn your lesson." Interestingly, out of the interview respondents, only three (who were all female) said they would be *more* inclined to intervene if their friend was promiscuous.

Intoxication level

A factor inhibiting identification of a situation as intervention-appropriate is the intoxication level of the potential victim. When women were seen as intoxicated, respondents often would view her as responsible for harm that may come to her. Respondents' perception of a potential victim as responsible for her potential victimization decreased the chances that they would sympathize with her, therefore also diminishing the likelihood of intervention. Sarah demonstrated this idea when discussing the gravity of a particular situation and the responsibility of the woman involved in the following two statements:

Now if it's like a *ridiculous* situation then of course I will make that judgment to say something, but I would never say anything cuz I feel like a lot, you can't take that responsibility away from a female. (Emphasis added by respondent)
. . .and like I don't wanna sound insensitive, but that's my first thought. She shouldn't have drank that much, you know (laughter).

In addition, Rachel, a nineteen-year-old sophomore, placed the responsibility on the woman: "I mean I feel like it impairs your judgment of the victim, like they might go off by themselves or put their drink down and let someone put stuff in it. . ."

In another instance, Aaron, an eighteen-year-old male, echoed the notion that the intoxication level of the victim is her fault and therefore she is unworthy of help, as indicated in the following statements:

. . . I think it's the girl's decision. 'Cause obviously, 'cause the girl is obviously drinking and she obviously knows what happens when you drink, well she should. You know? . . . She's becoming a lot more vulnerable and it's hard as a guy to make that kind of a judgment because she's allowing herself to do that. And then, next thing you know, she's being consensual, but legally she's not consensual. . .

In the preceding comments, Aaron seemed to believe in the commonly held stereotypes that women who drink are more willing to have sex and he appeared to

be placing blame on the victim. As he said, he thinks it is the girl's decision to consume alcohol and therefore her other behaviors are consensual as well. Aaron went further in his interview to say a woman knows the risks she is taking while she drinks, so she should lose some legal protection. What all these respondents seemed to believe is that women are responsible for their own actions and what happens to them when they become voluntarily intoxicated. Therefore, when respondents felt this way about a woman who may be at risk, they indicated how unlikely it would be for them to intervene on her behalf. However, as previously discussed, not all respondents felt this way about the intoxication level of the woman. In fact, some indicated that a woman's intoxication level means she is vulnerable and they acknowledge that she may be at risk, which increases their willingness to intervene.

Again, the themes identified in these interviews are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the attitudes expressed by respondents in this study can inform researchers and stimulate further research on what factors affect a bystander's perception of the potential victim and possibly influence their likelihood to intervene.

Victim ambiguity

While respondents did identify their friends, women in emergency situations, and vulnerable, intoxicated women as "at risk" and in need of help, they also expressed a multitude of other situations in which the woman was not deemed worthy of help. As discussed in the preceding section, several respondents reported women who they perceived to be promiscuous and/or voluntarily intoxicated were considered "at risk" but were deemed not worthy of help because these attributes made the potential victim responsible for her plight. Acknowledging that the woman was at risk was not an issue in either of these conditions. Interestingly, the data analysis process revealed that some respondents were unable or unwilling to acknowledge if or when a woman may be at risk of being sexually assaulted. In these situations, the respondent's evaluation of a woman did not fit their construction of the sympathy-worthy people type or the blame-worthy people type and therefore the respondent's definition of the woman as a victim was

ambiguous.

Burn (2009) discussed the ambiguity of the situation as a barrier to bystander intervention. It is important to note the distinction between the ambiguity of the situation and the theoretical concept of victim ambiguity proposed in this study. Respondents in the present study discussed more issues related to identifying that the woman involved in a situation with the potential for sexual assault could be a potential victim than they discussed having trouble identifying a situation as risky. Put simply, victim ambiguity refers to when respondents did not even consider that a woman could become a victim of alcohol-related sexual assault, which is done by evaluating the woman, not the situation. Two barriers to assigning risk to the woman involved in the situation arose in the interview data collected: (1) when the potential victim was a stranger to the respondent or (2) when the casual hook up culture associated with college and drinking contributed to the respondent's belief that alcohol-fueled sexual encounters are consensual.

Strangers

When discussing intervention in regards to strangers being involved, most respondents did not show sympathy or attribute blame to the potential victim, rather they do not even consider the woman as a potential victim. Sarah, a twenty-three-year-old female, described a hypothetical event with strangers as ambiguous and not her place to intervene because she did not know the relationship between the woman at risk and the man: “. . . I just don't think that it's my place to intervene because, who's to say, who's to say, he's not her boyfriend? You know, who's to say what their relationship is?”

Aaron, an eighteen-year-old male described this, “. . . it'd be easier to intervene if you knew the person. But it's harder to do something when you have no idea about the background.” Olivia a twenty-year-old female, echoed this: “Again, with strangers. You don't know them. You don't know the situation completely.” Aaron, Sarah, and Olivia are not the only ones who mention this phenomena when it comes to the idea of stranger intervention. Sierra a twenty-two-year-old female demonstrated this:

Yeah, because they're your friends, and usually, like you have a fairly good idea of what your friends would and wouldn't do, so you would automatically already know like "oh she didn't intend on going home with a guy tonight, that's not her, that's not how she acts," but with a random stranger you don't know they could've planned on going out to the bars and getting drunk to get laid, so, you never know.

These statements display respondents explicitly stating that a stranger cannot be definitively constructed as a potential victim because the respondent lacked information about the stranger to establish them as such.

College atmosphere

Many respondents reflected a larger societal belief that college and alcohol are synonymous and that hook ups are just part of the fun of the campus drinking scene (Vander Ven 2011). As previously mentioned, a barrier to identifying a situation as intervention-appropriate may be due to the fact that women are not seen as being in vulnerable positions (even while intoxicated) and this may be due to the fact that seeking out sexual partners at bars and parties is viewed as commonplace on college campuses (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011). Respondents demonstrated this. For example, Sierra expressed a widespread inclination to disregard potential dangerous situations as something the woman wants, stating, "I doubt anyone would notice if a girl went into the bathroom and some guy followed her in there, no one would think twice about it, or they would think it was just willing." Similarly, Rachel said: "I think when people drink like their main focus is basically to hook up." Blake, a twenty-year-old sophomore also revealed this common notion: "I feel like there are some people who go out there to drink just to find an excuse to get laid or hook up. To make it, maybe, easier on themselves, and maybe easier on say, the opposite sex, as well." Traci, a twenty-one-year-old senior, said she thinks "someone goes into a situation with alcohol knowing that they want to get drunk so that they can have sex." David, a twenty-year-old junior, resonated with this by indicating it was not fair to say every girl who leaves with a guy is going to be sexually assaulted since sometimes girls want sex too.

These statements lead researchers to infer that respondents believe some of their peers in the college drinking atmosphere to be actively and willingly seeking alcohol-fueled sexual encounters. This is consistent with Vander Ven's (2011) findings that, "college drinkers may consciously plan to use the 'drunk excuse' even before they have an encounter" (Vander Ven 2011:69). When asked "Do people blame their hookups on alcohol?" one of the respondent's in Vander Ven's (2011:69) study stated, "Yeah . . . it [being intoxicated] can be a way of getting out of the responsibility of it [a sexual encounter]." Respondents' statements about the college drinking scene depict an atmosphere in which they may be unable to distinguish those peers who are willing to have alcohol-fueled sexual encounters from those who are potential victims of alcohol-related sexual assault.

As expressed by respondents in the present study, the ambiguity of the woman's categorization as a potential victim suggests that victim ambiguity may be a barrier to bystander intervention. If victim ambiguity does inhibit bystanders from determining that a situation necessitates intervention, the bystander will not proceed through the following steps of Burn's (2009) bystander intervention model. Again, further research is needed to establish the potential significance of victim ambiguity as a barrier to bystander intervention.

Discussion

Bystander intervention and alcohol-related sexual assault—new directions

Most previous research on bystander intervention focuses on the willingness to intervene as related to perceived peer norms (Stein 2007), evaluation of bystander's ability and skills (Banyard et al. 2004) and other factors such as diffusion of responsibility (Burn 2009). Although important, research on this topic has lacked a comprehensive discussion on alcohol-related sexual assault in relation to bystander intervention and thus has simultaneously disregarded how difficult it might be for bystanders to understand when an alcohol-related sexual situation is intervention-appropriate. The present study highlights that respondents appeared to be certain about intervening due to their skill evaluation or other factors, but they were unable to acknowledge when a woman is at risk due to victim ambiguity and

victim worthiness assessments.

Consequently, while our findings are similar to Burn's (2009) previous research in most ways, the present study contributes to the literature in a few unique ways. Burn found that a large proportion of respondents do not notice risky situations, but data here (i.e., strangers, emergency situation, college atmosphere) suggest this may have more to do with the inability to acknowledge that a situation holds the potential for sexual assault. To highlight this, one respondent described that no one would find anything wrong with a severely intoxicated woman being followed into the bath- room. In this instance, she believed people would witness this situation, but these bystanders would not recognize this as a dangerous situation for the woman. Thus, it may not be that students are not "noticing events," it could be that they are more likely not interpreting these events as holding the potential for sexual assault.

Social problems theory

The present study analyzed the interview data through a constructionist lens. Loseke's theory can be helpful in informing prevention programs about various perceptions of victim blame-worthiness and victim sympathy-worthiness. For the sympathy-worthy people type, the person is a victim and not responsible for the situation they are in, therefore worthy of help. For the blame-worthy people type, the person is a victim, but seen as responsible for the situation they are in, and therefore unworthy of help.

We propose that there is a third victim type that programs should consider: the ambiguous victim. The ambiguous victim is a woman who bystanders do not identify as a potential victim. Most often in the data collected in this study, this was a stranger, but could also have been a friend when potential bystanders believe drinking is the main precursory activity needed to engage in sex (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011) or when the male the friend was with was an acquaintance. For the ambiguous victim, there is no evaluation of her character or the scenario. The problem is hidden and displays an absence of blame and sympathy indicators. This is the woman bystanders pass on the street, or the friend who sneaks away with

someone at a house party. There's no desire to step in and help, not necessarily because the victim is responsible, but because there is a lack of awareness about a potential for sexual assault. Victim ambiguity is a people type state, which exists before the assault happens.

Blame, sympathy, and ambiguity

Through in-depth interviews, respondents' statements suggested that in the presence of potentially risky situations, evaluating the victim was more important and more relevant than evaluating the situation as a whole. Generally, if the potential victim was a friend of the respondent, she was evaluated as worthy of help regardless of the specific situation. If the potential victim was not a friend, the respondent would need to evaluate whether she was worthy of help, and this evaluation was more dependent on the personal characteristics of the potential victim rather than the characteristics of the situation.

Loseke (2003) theorizes that those who are responsible for their own negative outcomes are likely to be looked upon with condemnation rather than sympathy. For most respondents, a potential victim's perceived promiscuity seemed to stimulate a negative judgment of her morality, thus placing her in the blame-worthy category of Loseke's moral universes. This may indicate that men and women alike are influenced by a larger societal belief that promiscuous women are of low morality and thus are not vulnerable to harm. Armed with this measurement of morality, respondents who saw a severely intoxicated, promiscuous friend leaving a bar or party with an unknown male seem less likely to be roused to intervention.

Research shows that men and women hold certain stereotypes about women drinking and that when women drink they are held accountable for their actions, even when those "actions" include her being harmed (Abbey 2002). This is consistent with research that found women who have experienced an alcohol-related sexual assault are more likely to be blamed for the assault than the perpetrators are (Abbey 2002; Armstrong et al. 2006; Burn 2009; Gunby, Carlin, and Beynon 2012; Lawyer et al. 2010). These findings help to explain why at least

half of our respondents viewed intoxicated women as guilty for their position and therefore unworthy of help. Interestingly, however, some respondents believed that women who were intoxicated were vulnerable to the point that they could not consent to sexual activity and thus worthy of help. Unfortunately our data were unable to identify some of the mechanisms behind these divergent worthiness attributions based on intoxication level. Further research attempts to examine this phenomenon may produce useful information to the discussion on bystander intervention.

Burn (2009) found that friends of bystanders are most likely to be helped in potential sexual assault situations. While caring about friends certainly influences intervention likelihood, so does the lack of ambiguity in these situations. Respondents who discussed a willingness to help their friends, tended to express that they would not help strangers, largely because they did not know the individual and what person would want in a particular situation. Emergency situations were unambiguous as respondents described them as situations in which they knew definitively that the potential victim was at risk. Additionally, Burn found that ambiguity is related to the failure to identify when a situation could hold the potential for sexual assault, which signifies that intervention would not occur (Burn 2009). Again, data collected in the present study suggests a bystander's relationship to the potential victim (i.e., if the potential victim is a friend or a stranger), may contribute to their ability to determine the potential victim is at risk (some respondents had non-verbal signs they shared with their friends to communicate the need for intervention). It is important to note however that some respondents evaluated their friend's risk based on who she was with. It appeared respondents most often would view their friend as at risk only if she was in the presence of a male stranger. Future research is needed to flesh out exactly how a bystander's relationship to a potential victim and the relationship between the potential victim and potential perpetrator are tied to willingness to intervene.

College students see getting drunk and hooking up on campus as normative behavior (Bogle 2008; Vander Ven 2011), which could be why some respondents in the present study seemed to believe an intoxicated woman leaving with a man

(intoxicated or not) is a willing participant. As our respondents expressed, it should not be assumed that all women are unwilling participants in sexual activities as some may actively seek male partners and may use alcohol as a tool to do so. Nonetheless, college students should be aware of the prevalence of alcohol-related sexual assaults on college campuses so they do not believe every alcohol-related sexual encounter is consensual. The issue of victim ambiguity is further muddled within the college scene, where it is commonplace for students to find themselves drinking alcohol among any number of fellow students, including strangers.

Policy and program implications

Although the current research is preliminary, student respondents reported feeling uncertain if a situation is intervention-appropriate more than they reported a lack of ability or desire to intervene in dangerous situations. This was consistent among both males and females. Contrary to Burn's (2009) findings, men and women reported similar levels of confidence in skills needed for intervention. The only gender differences found in this project were in regards to intervention technique. Male respondents reported they would be more confrontational if they intervened while female respondents reported being more subtle and indirect in their intervention tactics. Therefore, the researchers of the present study suggest further research on bystander intervention and development of prevention efforts explore the effectiveness of teaching risk signs and how to recognize when someone is at risk given that this was the hardest hurdle for this study's respondents.

The data collected in this study suggest students need a better understanding of pre-rape signs so they can make an informed evaluation of a situation, rather than using their evaluations of the potential victim to guide their interpretations (see Rozee and Koss 2001 for a brief overview of pre-rape signs). Second, due to the vast majority of sexual assaults on campus that involve alcohol, emphasis on the relationship between alcohol and sexual assault would be beneficial to future discourse and research on sexual assault prevention. This could potentially reduce the likelihood that bystanders will automatically assume an

alcohol-related sexual encounter is consensual. Third, emphasizing the statistics on stranger rape versus acquaintance rape is important in dispelling myths that stranger rape is more likely to occur than acquaintance rape. This could empower potential bystanders to watch out for their friends' positions in risky situations regard- less of their relationship to or knowledge of the potential victimizer. Lastly, bringing speakers to campus who discuss sexual consent and alcohol could be effective in teaching students the legal, physical, and moral issues surrounding whether or not a person who is highly intoxicated can provide true consent.

Limitations

As with any study, the present study is not without limitations. The sample used demonstrated appropriate diversity based on gender and academic class, however only contained white respondents. Though lacking in racial diversity, this sample reflects the majority population of college students specific to the university where the data were collected. Nonetheless, it is unclear if these same findings would be identified among a different racial group of students or among a racially diverse representative sample. In addition, the current study is narrowly focused on opposite-sex encounters, as researchers did not ask about encounters other than male-female, nor did respondents offer any information on same sex encounters. Future research could expand upon the current data pool to include an analysis of same-sex encounters. The present study also focused on female victims and male perpetrators, which account for the vast majority of sexual assaults (Fisher et al 2000; Koss et al. 1994). However, it is important to recognize that there are male victims of sexual assault by both female and male perpetrators. Questions pertaining to male victims of sexual assault should be addressed in future research on this topic. Finally, future research should look into why the relationship between the male involved and the female friend (i.e., intervention was most likely when female friend was with a male stranger) typically has a strong influence on whether or not the bystander acknowledges that she is at risk.

Researchers sought to create a comfortable environment by emphasizing a conversation free of judgment and by encouraging respondents to be as truthful as

they desired. Nonetheless, like most studies that employ self-report strategies, this study is susceptible to social desirability effects (Bachman and Schutt 2011). This may be even more pronounced because of the sensitivity of the material and face-to-face interviews with a researcher. Interview respondents may have felt obligated to give answers they believed the researcher wanted to hear. Many respondents, for example, may have claimed that they would intervene because they know this is a socially desirable response. As with other studies on bystander intervention (see Burn 2009), we do not know if our respondents will act in the same manner they described to us. However, many respondents spoke about bystander intervention in terms of real-life events that had previously happened. Therefore, we have reason to believe that their responses were largely related to how they would act in real-life situations.

Furthermore, the data lacks information on whether or not male bystanders would attempt to stop their male friends from taking advantage of an intoxicated woman. There were no questions to capture this issue in the interview instrument. Future research should address this topic. Despite all of these limitations, the current study contributes to prior theory and offers valuable insight on how bystanders might evaluate situations that hold the potential for sexual assault and how these evaluations might influence their decisions to intervene.

Conclusion

Clearly, no matter what direction future research and program development take toward sexual assault prevention, research on alcohol-related sexual assault needs to have a stronger presence not only due to the prevalence of this form of sexual assault, but also to the unique issues and concerns it creates for prevention strategies. The current study is preliminary and exploratory; nonetheless, it adds to existing social problems theory, brings light to the unique ways in which alcohol further complicates bystander intervention as a sexual assault prevention strategy, and offers valuable insight into this phenomenon provided by respondents in their own words. The phenomenon of victim ambiguity and victim worthiness require further exploration and should be taken into account in future discourse on sexual

assault prevention and in the development of educational and preventative programs. The findings of this study might be used to inform future research and could generate a greater wealth of knowledge of effective bystander intervention.

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