

SEXUAL VIOLENCE PERCEPTIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: DOES A PERSON'S GENDER PLAY A ROLE?

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence on college campuses across the United States has been on the rise in recent years. Research exists on prevalence of sexual violence cases on campuses but little research exist on gender perception disparities. This study addresses this limited research by using a cross-sectional research design. The researcher collected data from the students' scores in North Eastern Mid-Atlantic University. There were 2495 responses that completed this online administered survey. The researcher collected data on participants' gender and their perception of sexual violence on the University's campus. These findings suggest that gender does predict different perceptions on sexual violence, although further research is needed.

PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence includes sexually coercive behavior (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003), sexual assault (Abbey, 2002; Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013), and sexual aggression (Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003). According to a national probability sample of American women, one in eight women reported being a victim of rape (Humphrey & White, 2000) and the research on male victims displays a high rate of sexual assault among males (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Sexual violence is a national problem with victims' ages ranging from the age of 14 to 26 (Abbey, 2002; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Women in undergraduate colleges are more likely to be victims of sexual violence compared to women not enrolled in a college (Abbey, 2002; Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Humphrey & White, 2000), and recent research has found that the number of male victims of sexual violence is increasing due to more self-reporting (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003).

PERCEPTIONS OF MALE VICTIMS

The number of reports on male victims of sexual violence has been increasing in recent years (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). About one in four men (Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003) had experienced one nonconsensual sexual contact with a woman (kissing, petting, intercourse, oral sex). Victims of sexual violence are perceived differently based on victim gender (Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013) and gender of perpetrator (Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003). Females hold positive attitudes towards victims regardless of gender (Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013), but men alone as a group view male victims more negatively when a woman assaulted him compared to a male perpetrator (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003). Male rape victims are blamed more than female victims due to sex role expectations (Davies & Rogers, 2006) especially if the perpetrator is a female (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003). This is because the sex-role expectation of men enjoying any sexual experience with a woman (consent or no consent) as pleasurable (Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013), and men holding masculine qualities to be able to fight off a perpetrator if he truly didn't want the act to occur (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003). These negative views of male victims of sexual violence might be a reason why many college students don't believe there is a sexual violence problem on college campuses. Also, due to lack of reporting, many students aren't made aware of sexual violence incidents occurring on campus.

PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE VICTIMS

Literature on female victims of sexual violence has shown that women are blamed for sexual violence because of their personality (Davies & Rogers, 2006), traditional roles of being manipulative (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995), and gender role norms (Abbey, 2002). A woman is blamed for acts of sexual violence occurred to her if she had a greater sexual history (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006), outwardly friendly towards men, dressed promiscuously, and if under the intoxication of alcohol and/or drugs (Abbey, 2002; Davies & Rogers, 2006; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003).

RAPE MYTH

Another issue surrounding sexual violence against women and men is the rape myth, which describes stereotypes or false beliefs about rape victims, the act of rape, the perpetrator (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) and majority of the research about rape myths have used samples of college students (Lutz-Zois, Moler, Brown, 2015; Powers, Leili, Hagman, & Cohn, 2015). Rape myth acceptance has negative consequences on the victims of sexual violence because they are less likely to report the incident if they hold high levels of rape myth acceptance compared to a victim who has low levels of rape myth acceptance (Lutz-Zois, Moler, Brown, 2015). Research by Powers, Leili, Hagman, and Cohn (2015) illustrated that the rape myth is so embedded within the American society that higher education needs to provide anti-violence initiatives to help stop the rape myth acceptance among primarily male college students.

There is a relationship between men holding hostility towards women and acceptance of the rape myth (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) along with having traditional masculine ideologies (Lutz-Zois, Moler, Brown, 2015). This can describe how men try to justify sexual violence towards women when the perpetrator is a male. A study by Aronowitz, Lambert, and Davidoff (2012) found that 63% of the male college students reported that “if a woman makes out with a guy, it is okay for him to push for sex” (p. 179). Another study found evidence that supported the male ideology theory and its positive associations with negative beliefs towards women (Lutz-Zois, Moler, and Brown, 2015).

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND VICTIM BLAME

When a female rapes a heterosexual man, the victim is blamed more for the act of sexual violence because the perpetrator was of his sexual preference (Davies, Pollard, Archer, 2006) compared to a male perpetrator (Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013). When another man rapes a heterosexual man, some people might question the victim’s sexual orientation, thus leading to a victim blame approach (Davies & Rogers, 2006). With all this research, this present study aims to expand previous research by focusing on a person’s gender and if it can predict their perceptions of sexual violence on TCNJ campus.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were a universal sample of all students enrolled at a University from 2014-2015 academic school year. The students’ ages ranges from 15 to 64 years old. The study took place at a suburban public, coeducational University located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The survey has anonymity; the students were offered consent, and a \$350 lottery incentive in the survey. The overall response rate was 33%. The sample consisted of 29% men, 70% females, and 0.4% transgendered. A majority of the participants (75.5%) indicated on the questionnaire that they were Caucasian: 5.5% identified as African American, 9.5% as Asian/ Pacific Islander American, 0.8% as American Indian/ Alaskan Native, 11% as Hispanic, and 1.7% as Other.

MATERIALS AND MEASURES

The survey materials were administered via a secure online server, Qualtrics. It consisted of reading and acknowledging receipt of the informed consent form, a demographic form, and the 86 question questionnaire. The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University.

The two questions that were examined in this study were single-response questions. The first question regarding gender was "What is your gender?" with a three category response option including 'Male, Female, Transgender.' The second question regarding sexual violence was "Do you feel sexual violence is a problem on your campus?" with a two category response option including "Yes, No."

PROCEDURES

The survey was administered during the beginning of the school year to all students at the college.

RESULTS

A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that the participant's gender has a significant association with sexual violence perception ($\chi^2(2)=6.399, p=.041$). After comparing the sexual violence perceptions on campus between each individual's gender, 6.5% males, 9.7% females and 10% transgender students said 'yes' to viewing sexual violence as an issue on campus.

DISCUSSION

The research question addressed was "Does a person's gender predict their perceptions of sexual violence on the University's campus?" Data reflected that gender did determine statistically significant sexual violence perceptions on campus. The present study's sample was similar to many other previous studies that have used female and male college students. An explanation to why gender demonstrated statistically significant results for sexual violence perceptions on campus could be based on the notion that the North American culture is a "rape-supporting culture" (Aronowitz, Lambert, Davidoff, 2012). Studies have found that socio-cultural perspectives can shape a person's perception of sexual violence (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013). This present study showed that a person's gender does predict whether they have positive or negative perceptions of sexual violence on the University's campus.

LIMITATIONS

In looking at the data, some issues do arise such as the fact that this is not a true experiment. The researcher did not randomly assign students to take this questionnaire. Instead, the researcher used existing cohorts provided by the University. Also, this study was a cross-sectional design study and contributing confounds of a cross-sectional study came into this study. The school itself could be used in explaining why the study's hypothesis was supported because the school's student population is overwhelmingly Caucasian females.

Another potential confound in the study could be attributed to the administration of the questionnaire. There was no proctor to administer this questionnaire because it was sent to student's email via Qualtrics survey. A limitation of the study was that the actual survey was extremely long creating potential survey fatigue. Another limitation to this study was the researcher's definition of gender. Due to choice-option restrictions, the researcher did not ask the participant's opinion on whom to classify as other genders. Furthermore, sexual violence was defined by the present researcher's operational definition. Sexual violence can yield ambiguous meaning, which can be thought of in several areas such as sexual assault, sexual trauma, rape, sex crime, sexual offence, etc.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

For future studies, a larger sample with more gender equal sample in the student body would be best because the effect size can be greater thus having a greater likelihood to yield significant results. As for the definition of gender, future research could have an open-ended response category for students to enter their preferred gender category. Also, future studies could use a standardized definition of sexual violence provided by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2015). Future studies could ask participants why they think females or males might not be reporting sexual violence incidence. This could help demonstrate participants' gender norms and college environment norms surrounding sexual violence.

There are other ways to measure sexual violence such as other assessments, oral documentation, and vignettes. Earlier studies looked at students' sexual violence experience by measuring the number of

incidences a student encountered in their life that were considered sexually coercive (Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013). Future studies could use a combination of ways to test students' sexual violence perception.

CONCLUSION

This present study shows that gender does predict different perceptions on sexual violence on campus and the need for sexual violence training on campus for all students. More education on sexual violence is needed on college campuses. Also, the definition of sexual violence should be explored by students in order to have a universally similar understanding of the definition of sexual violence. Since some students do feel that sexual violence is a problem on campus, the need for sexual violence programs is needed on campuses that have had past sexual violent incidents.

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