EXPLORING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT AMONG COLLEGE WOMEN: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Previous researchers of rape mythology have primarily employed quantitative methodology to understand the nature and prevalence of rape myth adherence among college populations. This study specifically utilizes qualitative methods to explore the varying contexts of rape and sexual assault experiences among cohorts of college women as they use prevalent rape myths to interpret ambiguous sexual assault and rape scenarios. It is important to understand rape mythology and the reality of the rape experience within a subjective context and the negotiation strategies employed by college women. This approach to rape mythology research acknowledges the methodological differences and the variation in rape myth agreement when individuals are exposed to ambiguous sexual assault scenarios. This research contributes to the existing body of literature on rape mythology, as well as presents alternative approaches to studying rape myth adherence among college women. As rape remains underreported and violence against women is pervasive on college campuses, this research explores the dynamics of peer group processing present when first and fourth year college women explore incidences that meet the legal definition of rape and sexual assault but are ambiguous and do not fit the traditional rape script.
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INTRODUCTION

Within the last 30 years, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the definitions and prevalence of rape in America. More specifically, researchers have examined the impact that rape mythology has on perpetuating rape-prone societies. Brownmiller’s (1975) groundbreaking book, Against Our Will, exemplified the stories of women and history of rape within this culture. As an underreported crime, researchers have also developed measures to quantify rape and sexual assault within this culture (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, and Cox 1988). Not only did researchers find that women are being raped at alarming rates, but they uncovered the varying cultural norms associated with labeling rapes and the production of rape mythology (Brownmiller 1975). Previous research on rape mythology (Burt 1980; Johnson, Kuck, and Schander 1997; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999) explored rape myths using survey methodology and determined that the adherence to rape mythology is culturally widespread. Findings also suggest that younger cohorts adopt similar ideologies and that employing rape mythology in ambiguous sexual assault scenarios is a common mechanism utilized by women to understand the complex and subjective experience of rape.

Previously, researchers of rape have not explored the social processing of ambiguous sexual assault when it occurs with someone known to the victim and alcohol consumption. Similarly, mythology researchers have not examined the social processing of rape myths and the methodological differences in responses when individuals are presented with rape myth statements versus contexts. This research specifically addresses the social processing involved in the labeling of rape as it occurs in realistic portrayals of assault and the possibility of rape myth acceptance in those labeling processes.
Rape Mythology

Rape myths are defined as false perceptions of sexual assault and rape that condone sexual violence against women. These myths are culturally learned ideologies that allow women to accept responsibility for their sexual victimization (Burt 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). Beliefs in rape mythology reduce confirmation of the occurrences of sexual assault within this rape-prone society. Rape occurs in the context of a misinformed culture; rape myths conceal knowledge about who is likely to be raped, where they are most likely raped, and by whom women are most likely to be raped (Fonow, Richardson, and Wemmerus 1992).

Rape myths are conceptualized as stereotypes regarding gendered views of women; these stereotypes reflect attitudes regarding women’s behavior (Payne et al. 1999). Examples of these rape myths are that women provoke their own sexual assault by their clothing, demeanor, being alone, drinking, and being out at night; these myths suggest that only “young, white, sexually promiscuous women get raped; and that rape primarily occurs at night, outdoors, by a (Black) stranger, who uses a lethal weapon” (Fonow et al. 1992:112).

Rape myths are fluid and they flux with changing perceptions, yet they are still the dominant mode of assessing rape experiences that are ambiguous and not easily definable (Feldman, Caufman, Jensen, and Arnett 2000). These myths are pervasive and affect men’s and women’s perceptions of sexual assault experiences. Rape myths also influence the perceptions of others who judge victims of sexual assault and their experiences (Burt 1980; Madriz 1997; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997).

Common themes of these sexual assault experiences show a belief in rape mythology. Themes consist of “she asked for it,” “it wasn’t really rape,” “he didn’t mean to do it,” “she wanted it,” or “she lied” (Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999). These consistent themes attest
to the belief in rape myths and women’s inability to recognize that they were sexually assaulted and the overwhelming prevalence of rape myths that are employed during ambiguous experiences of rape.

Believing in rape myths gives women the misconception of the types of assault they are most likely to encounter. These myths cause fear and hinder women’s ability to move freely on college campuses. These myths also change perceptions of the reality of rape and the victims of sexual assault (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1997; Levine-MacCombie and Koss 1986; Pain 1997; Rader, May, and Goodrum 2007; Schwartz and DeKeseredy et al. 1997).

This ideology is consistent with the common rape myths, “men don’t usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away,” “rape happens when a man’s sex drive gets out of control,” and “many so-called rape victims are actually women who had sex and ‘changed their mind’ afterwards” (Payne et al. 1999).

The adherence to rape mythology not only harms college women in justifying their alleged experiences of sexual assault by allowing them to believe that “women provoke rapes,” “healthy women can resist rape,” and “good girls don’t get raped” (Johnson et al. 1997; Madriz 1997); but these myths also allow men to become relinquished of the responsibility as perpetrators of sexual assault and rape. Although men have higher beliefs in rape and sex scripts than women (Littleton and Axsom 2003), women still believe in rape myths.

In a study of 149 undergraduate women, Johnson, Kuck and Schander (1997) found that 16.7% of women believed a man has a right to assume sexual intercourse if she allows him to touch her in any sexual way, 24.7% believed that if a woman touches a man in a sexual way, he has a right to assume sex, and 33.7% believed a man has a right to assume intercourse if a woman has had an oral sexual encounter with him.
These myths are not just popular, however, but often emerge in the everyday understanding of sexual violence towards women through rape mythology, political views, the criminal justice system, and the American cultural value system (Pineau 1989).

The consistent finding is the continued belief in rape myths, the gendered scripts, and the presumptions of behavior that allow women to misperceive their sexual assault experiences and mislabel them (Abbey et al. 2004; Anderson, Simpson-Taylor, and Hermann 2004; Bartoli and Clark 2006; Crocker 2002; Disch et al. 2000; Forbes, Jobe, White, Bloesch, and Adams-Curtis 2005; Johnson et al. 1997; Littleton and Axsom 2003; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994; Madriz 1997; Masters, Norris, Stoner, and George 2006; Nayak et al. 2003; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997).

Previous research has employed survey methodologies (Beere 1990) to determine the pervasiveness of rape myth acceptance, however, these findings do not depict the social processing involved in acknowledging rape experiences and seeking assistance. Often attitudes regarding rape and sexual assault and presumptions regarding consent and responsibility affect the decision making process of labeling incidences of rape. Women often weigh the odds with prospective positive outcomes and thus often decidedly admit that although they recognize that sexual assault has occurred, it may be less traumatic to not legally pursue the incident further; and thus young women use avoidance strategies and rape mythology to avoid future instances of sexual assault and rape.

Social Learning Theory of Rape

The social learning theory of rape (Ellis 1989) explores the socialization process by which sex and violence become inextricably linked and how they affect men’s treatment of women through cultural scripts, norms, attitudes, gender roles, and rape myths (Ellis 1989). Men and women acquire
these attitudes, behaviors, and belief systems through the socialization process that fosters these 
ideologies through cultural norms. These joint influences produce the mythology of sexual assault 
and rape. These discrepancies of expected and acceptable behavior become exemplified in women’s 
relationships with men. The social learning theory of rape explores the dimensions by which sex 
and rape become socially scripted behavior that transforms into a pervasive rape culture.

The social learning theory of rape (Ellis 1989) proposes that individuals are taught through 
the socialization process the appropriate actions for their genders regarding their expected 
behaviors in society and that gendered violence is normative. This theory proposes that frequent 
and repeated displays of violence towards women through gendered aggression, mass media, and 
the adherence to rape myths produces a tolerance where these acts of violence are deemed as less 
offensive due to repeated exposure (Ellis 1989). This socialization process through cultural 
norms has often contradictory views of women (Robinson, Gibson-Beverly; and Schwartz 2004); 
these discrepancies reflect attitudinal perceptions about sexuality and how women should present 
themselves in society (Ellis 1989).

Women adopt similar ideologies as they have expected forms of behavior that are somewhat 
consistent with rape myths. These socially learned scripts allow women to accept responsibility for 
their sexual assault and rape experiences. These common traditional views perceive accusations of 
sexual assault as nothing more than “a lie,” or a “woman’s attempt to get back at a man” (Pineau 
1989). The central theme, “that the natural aggression of men and the natural reluctance of 
women somehow makes date rape understandable underlies a number of prevalent myths about 
Rape occurs more frequently as these acts are depicted in different social contexts (Madriz 1997; Nayak et al. 2003; Potts and Wenk 2002). Many college women have experienced behaviors that can be defined as rape, yet they often do not seek treatment or services because they do not label these violations as “rape” and do not want to be perceived as victims (Hamby and Koss 2003).

These social scripts explain the gendered differences between men and women as sexual assault and rape become acceptable behavior. These ideologies are ingrained in the socialization process of traditional gender norms that have been transferred into the adherence of rape mythology (Ellis 1989), and employed when men and women face ambiguous sexual assault experiences.

Prevalence of Rape

In the United States, one in six women will be raped in her lifetime (Tjaden and Thoennes 2006). Of these women who will experience rape in their lifetimes, 32.4% are between the ages of 12 and 17, and 29.4% are between the ages of 18 and 24 at the first time of their rape (Tjaden and Thoennes 2006). Rape is a persistent problem on college campuses (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, and Cox 1988; Tjaden and Thoennes 2006; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997). A plethora of research has been conducted to determine the prevalence of rape on college campuses; this research focused on the ages of women, the types of assailants, the locations of assault, and the context of the relationship between the assailant and the victim (Benson, Gohm, and Gross 2007; Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, and Turner 2003; Gidycz, Hanson, and Layman 1995; Koss et al. 1988; Martin and Hummer 1989; Potts and Wenk 2002; Tetreault and Barnett 1987; Tjaden and Thoennes 2006; Ward, Chapman, Cohn, White, and Williams 1991; Wilcox, Jordan, and Pritchard 2007).
Reports of acquaintance rape indicate rates as high as 28.1% for college women and of those women, 84.6% have had some type of previous relationship to the assailant (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1997). Survey methods have been established and implemented to understand the causes and types of rape on college campuses (Disch, Harlow, Campbell, and Dougan 2000; Fisher et al. 2000; Fisher et al. 2003; Gidycz et al. 1995; Hines 2007; Johnson, Kuck, and Schander 1997; Karjane, Fisher, and Cullen 2005; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004; Rozee and Koss 2001; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997; Sorenson and White 1992; Ward et al. 1991). In order to assess and measure instances of rape and sexual assault experiences, rape has been defined as any physically forced or verbally coerced sexual act (Fisher et al. 2003).

Unfortunately, these broad definitions include acts of attempted rape with elements of verbal and physical coercion, yet these vague definitions lead to a classification of rape that is not universally or consistently defined (Fisher et al. 2000; Gidycz et al. 1995; Hines 2007; Johnson et al. 1997; Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, and Halvorsen 2003; Potts and Wenk 2002). This discrepancy leads to further ambiguity among researchers and those who experience rape and sexual assault. Since these broader definitions include the acts of rape, but not the contexts, researchers have a difficult time assessing actual prevalence rates of rape on college campuses; which also leaves individual men and women with vague definitions of rape and sexual assault.

As a result, researchers have implemented surveys that examine specific behaviors of assault experiences; researchers are then able to assess and identify actual instances of rape. For instance, Tjaden and Thoennes (2006) conducted a survey of 8,000 women asking behavior specific questions to determine if women had experiences that met the legal definition of rape.
Of these women, 78.2% indicated they had experiences that met the legal definition even when they themselves did not label their experiences as rape. This finding indicates women’s individual definitions of rape vary significantly from legal definitions.

Other research supports the finding that acquaintance rapes are more common than stranger rapes (Brownmiller 1975; Karjane et al. 2005; Koss and Harvey 1991; Tjaden and Thoennes 2006); yet the contexts of sexual assault are ambiguous and often do not fit precisely into the conceptual framework of the traditional “rape script.” This variation contributes to the lack of reporting and the inability of women to identify their experiences as rape.


Researchers that modified their methodological approach to assess actual rates of rape and sexual assault have also determined that contextual experiences involve alcohol consumption. This component has lead to further research that specifically addresses the nature and extent that alcohol contributes to incidences of sexual assault and women’s inability to identify those experiences as rape (Abbey et al. 2004; Benson et al. 2007; Davis, George, and Norris 2004; Koss et al. 1988; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997; Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hoyt, and Lee 1998). These findings recognize that college women routinely use alcohol and that its
Use is positively correlated with higher incidences of rape (Abbey et al. 2004; Brownmiller 1975; Koss et al. 1988). Findings also indicate that alcohol is used by men as a weapon to turn “no” women into “yes” women (Benson et al. 2007; Davis et al. 2004; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997). These alcohol-related sexual assaults contribute to college women’s inability to identify sexual experiences as rape (Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997).

In a separate study of 504 college women, Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, and Halvorsen (2003) found that 85% of women who did not label their experiences as rape identified reasons such as “alcohol impairment,” “boyfriend’s persistence,” the “man used physical force to obtain sex,” “the man was much older or larger,” and “used threats even when these women tried to resist.” Women who have had previous sexual relationships or knew their assailant well have a harder time labeling their experiences as rape (Kahn et al. 2003).

Research findings still indicate that women are reluctant to report sexual assaults for several reasons. These reasons include “humiliation,” the “use of alcohol,” “inability to acknowledge that the experience was in fact sexual assault,” “the lack of perceived support,” and the “social pressure” that may have been involved in not reporting rape (Fisher et al. 2000; Fisher et al. 2003; Ward et al. 1991; Wechsler et al. 1998).

Other reasons for not reporting rape may be due to the actual emotional distress and the prospect of unavoidable victimization through the trauma of the rape experience. These experiences are often overwhelming and are indicative of women accepting responsibility for rape (Jones, Russell and Bryant 1998; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997). Women’s perceptions of their sexual experiences vary as they are different in their context and their subjective meaning (Ward et al. 1991). Those who identify their experiences as rape may still have a reluctance to report the act to authorities because of embarrassment or because of the stigma
attached to rape victims (Fisher et al. 2000; Fisher et al. 2003; Hines 2007); although other researchers have shown that victims often tell someone close to them such as family members or friends regarding instances of sexual assault and rape (Burt and Albin 1981).

Present Research

This research explores the dynamics of peer group relations as their opinions and rape myth acceptance may contribute to acknowledging instances of rape or denying their allegations of sexual assault or rape experiences. This research specifically explores the differences among first and fourth year college women using qualitative methods to assess women’s use of rape mythology and negotiation strategies with regards to ambiguous sexual assault and rape experiences. This research adds to the exiting literature on rape mythology as well as current research on the prevalence of rape. Previous research has used survey methods to understand the pervasiveness of rape myth acceptance; instead of asking women if they believe in specific rape myths, this research specifically asks women to explain the contents of ambiguous sexual assaults to determine the nature of rape myth acceptance.

This research design asks cohorts of women to determine the content of a series of vignettes. The vignettes for this study were created to incorporate prevalent themes in rape mythology as well as include instances of sexual assault and rape that are common among college women. The themes of the vignettes designed for this survey were derived from three themes found in the rape mythology research of Johnson, Kuck, and Schander (1997). The themes consisted of prominent ideologies within the rape literature and rape mythology such as “excusing the man,” “justifications of acquaintance rape,” and “blaming the woman.” Although the findings in this study are not generalizable, they indicate the pervasiveness of rape myth acceptance and the social processing of ambiguous sexual assault and rape.
METHODS

Participants

First and fourth year college women from a small southeastern university were recruited to participate in focus group research titled, “College Women’s Beliefs About Dating.” Participants for this study were recruited in several stages. The first stage of recruitment involved the presentation of the current study to Introductory to Sociology, Introductory to Criminology, and Women’s Studies classes. Students were given flyers explaining the nature of the study and given contact information for participation. During the second stage of recruitment, first and fourth year women were randomly chosen by last name and year in college via the university web-based mail. In the case of stage two, the selected women were sent flyers to participate in the study including a brief description of the research and contact information. In addition, flyers describing the study were posted in the Department of Sociology and Criminology recruiting first and fourth year college women to participate in focus groups. Students received $10 gift cards as incentives for participation in this study.

Group Characteristics

There were a total of 33 students in this study; the 16 first year students were between the ages of 18 and 19 years. Of the first year students, there were 14 White/non-Latino students, 1 African American and 1 Asian/Pacific Islander. Of the fourth year students, there were a total of 17 women between the ages of 20 and 24 years. There were 16 White/non-Latino students and 1 African American. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their individual identities.
Table 1: Participants by Group

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ONE</th>
<th>TWO</th>
<th>THREE</th>
<th>FOUR</th>
<th>FIVE</th>
<th>SIX</th>
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<tr>
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<td>First Year</td>
<td>Fourth Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenny⁴</td>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Shelley</td>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Kate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amber⁵</td>
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<td>Megan</td>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>Angela</td>
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<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Emily</td>
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<td>Stephanie</td>
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</table>

⁴ First Year Student  
⁵ Fourth Year Student

Procedure

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Human Subjects Protocol approved this study in August 2008 prior to the fall 2008 semester when six focus groups were conducted for this research study. The first group was the pilot and included a mix of first and fourth year students while each successive group was comprised solely of first year students and of fourth year students. Each focus group session was approximately one hour. Students signed informed consents and were advised of the sensitive nature of this research.

Three vignettes were presented to each focus group. Each vignette was read aloud by the researcher to control for affect and tone. Students were asked to determine the content of each vignette and to define each situation as “good” or “bad.” Students were then asked to describe their responses to others if their peers presented these scenarios to them, if they would report the incident, if it warranted talking to someone professionally, and if they would characterize the incidents as sexual assault or rape. Due to the sensitive nature of the research material, a university counselor was present for each of the six focus groups and participants were debriefed after each discussion and given contact information for the university and community sexual assault agencies.
Analysis

Themes based on Johnson, Kuck, and Schander’s (1997) research on rape mythology were used as mechanisms to create the vignettes for this study. Each vignette was designed to incorporate themes that were not only based on the previous research in rape mythology (Johnson et al. 1997), but included aspects of rape myth acceptance, types of consent given at the time of the incident, alcohol consumption, and either the presence or absence of an existing relationship between the man and the woman. A collective scheme of thematic content was devised for each vignette, and then each was analyzed within those themes. Themes were compared and contrasted to understand the negotiation strategies of college women. Each session was audio taped, transcribed, and coded for thematic content. Each vignette was analyzed using Ellsberg and Heise’s (2005) methods to assess for credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability in this research study. The methods (Ellsberg and Heise 2005) employed ensured rigor and validity throughout the coding and construction of the thematic content developed within this study.

Common Themes

Common themes were generated using Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory. Each specific myth was assigned a theme as an overall indicator of the decision making process and ultimate decisions regarding the content of the vignette. Underlying themes were assigned to assess the mechanisms involved in processing each vignette. The prominent themes in this study “excusing the man” for his behavior (e.g. persistence, being “drunk,” and miscommunication), “justification for acquaintance rape” (e.g. having had previous sexual relationship or knew the perpetrator well), and “blaming the woman” (e.g. should have known better or should have been safer) were derived from Johnson, Kuck, and Schander’s (1997) research on rape mythology.
The underlying themes present within this research acted as the mechanisms employed by participants to reach conclusions regarding the contents of each of the vignettes. The first theme was, “negotiating consent,” indicating the timing of consent (e.g. beginning, middle, or end of incident) and the type of consent given (e.g. saying “no” versus behavioral cues such as pushing or shoving). The second theme, “components of alcohol consumption” indicated the level of perceived consumption from the participants and whether or not they could quantify the amount of alcohol based on the vignette (e.g. one beer versus two or three and sober versus “drunk”). The third theme, “commonness of the event” indicated how common the respondents thought the incident was in comparison to their experiences. The fourth theme, “labeling the incident” was an indicator for whether or not the respondents would label each incident as sexual assault or rape. The fifth theme, “responding to their peers,” indicated how participants would respond to a friend who experienced and incident similar to the vignette; and the sixth theme, “weighing the odds and reporting” indicated if the incident warranted reporting and the reasons given.

RESULTS

Vignette One: Excusing the Man

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

This vignette depicted a scenario in which a man is presumably drunk and sexually assaulted
a woman. The vignette occurred as an incident that happened at a beach party where a man
assaulted the woman, yet because she is an acquaintance from class, was at a beach party, and an
unquantifiable amount of alcohol had been consumed; first and fourth year students negotiated
this scenario and decidedly concurred that the best course of action was based upon the woman’s
reaction to the event and to avoid the man in the future. The ways in which women excused the
man for his persistent and pervasive behavior were exemplified in their responses to this
vignette.

Both first year and fourth year students negotiated the vignette differently giving answers that
blamed the woman, blamed the man, or blamed the incident on alcohol. The students employed
a complex combination of themes to understand and interpret the scenario. The prominent
theme, excusing the man, was found in the student’s negotiation strategies to determine the
content of the vignette and their willingness to label the incident as sexual assault and whether or
not it warranted reporting. All of the participants agreed that the situation was a “bad” situation.
First year students excused the man’s behavior in a multitude of ways. The first year students stated that the outcome of the scenario could have ultimately been worse or could have potentially ended more severely. The first year students did not question the women’s response to the incident although a few suggested that if she was really upset, or effected by what had happened, then she should talk to someone; most of them ranked the incident as less than serious. First year students provided a variety of explanations for the event, noting they did not blame the woman for the outcome, but questioned her decision making and judgment. A first year student, Jenny examined the point at which the woman in the vignette gave consent and remarked that the event could have potentially been worse, she explained:

Well, technically she didn’t say, in the story, she didn’t say ‘no’ or she just pushed him away, which I would say obviously is telling him ‘no’ in her own way, but I don’t think it’s as serious as you know, I mean she got to walk away. It wasn’t like he was forcing her into a room or something like that…I mean she kissed him after it happened, but she ended up walking away, so I think that’s enough to be said, it’s her walking away.

Another first year student, Amanda made inferences regarding the judgment of the woman depicted in the scenario. She concluded that she was not responsible for the outcome.

I see your point, but like you do need to be careful about what kind of situations you are getting into but just because you put yourself into a bad situation or maybe not using your best judgment doesn’t give someone the right to take advantage of you, I mean if something like that happens you do need to be more careful and like what you are doing and the situations you are putting yourself into but that doesn’t make it your fault if something like that does happen to you.
A first year student, Josephine commented on the intentions of men and responsibility of women to control their social situations; she said,

It’s often a misconception that guys think that girls want to go farther than they really do and they misread signals and so they keep pushing to do stuff when the girls usually don’t want to… I agree with what she said but I can’t help but feel like the girl is partially to blame just like you’re decision making and judgment like her decision making and judgment really did affect the ending of this story, and she says it right in the beginning that was with acquaintances and that they were going to a party with guys that they didn’t really know and just her judgment was kind of bad and she never said, ‘no,’ so, I mean the guy was wrong, but she was in a way, in some sense put in that situation because of her own doings, so it is kind of like you should just you know your body is your temple, to take care of that and to make sure that you are putting yourself in the right situation and hanging out with the right people and you may not experience something like this again.

Fourth year students excused the man’s behavior by examining the women’s role in the incident. Although they did not attribute blame to woman for the incident either, fourth year students questioned the woman’s judgment within regards to her physical location and the fact that she was with acquaintances instead of close friends. Heather concluded that having friends present at social situations was a necessary safety measure.

I thought that it was sad that she wasn’t there with any of her friends, like she was there with a few acquaintances that she doesn’t really know… that doesn’t seem really… I mean that is just… I don’t know, I am usually not in a situation like that where you are without a friend, kind of like a safety measure.
Other students acknowledged that the situation went too far, yet they examined the woman’s role and excused the male for “miscommunication,” or “misread signals,” which would ultimately excuse him for his behavior. Samantha said, “I guess he thinks that because she started kissing him that he automatically assumes that this is going to go further than what she had planned…and maybe she is kind of into him, so his behavior is acceptable.” Although their reasoning was to understand the motivation (e.g. he didn’t mean to do it, but somehow got confused) was employed to understand the content of this vignette, Jamie added, “I think definitely her kissing him could be his reasoning behind or his justification for going farther, like she was saying, I definitely don’t think that makes it right.”

Negotiating Consent

The negotiation strategies used by the first and fourth year students involved issues with consent including the timing of consent and the type of consent given. Many of the students thought that the woman in the vignette was a little misleading. Kelly, a first year student stated, “I think it was a little misleading, because she did kiss him but then when she said “stop,” he didn’t really stop. He should have realized that she didn’t want him around her anymore. I think at first she was a little misleading, but she made it clear after to stop.” Tina used similar explanations for the woman’s behavior; she mentioned, “She never actually said ‘no,’ but she just pushed him away. I don’t know maybe if he was drunk it would have been clear if she said ‘no.’”

First year students negotiated this vignette by examining the woman’s ability to provide clear and consistent consent throughout the incident, while ignoring the fact that consent is an ongoing process and that women are justifiably allowed to change their minds. Josephine, a first year
student thought that it was often difficult to determine which incidences could be classified as assault and the confusion regarding the consent given in this vignette; she said,

I have been in a situation similar to this, or similar to her experience but it’s just hard to tell what is crossing the line what is turning into what could be sexual assault or rape and what is acceptable, but it is kind of one of those situations, like when you say “no,” you know it should stop there but she was never very clear about saying “no.”

Beth, a first year student contributed, “the fact that she didn’t pull away, he probably thought that okay this is all right even though she was pushing him away, she kept kissing him which she shouldn’t have done.” The negotiation strategies employed by a first year student, Margaret questioned the decision making ability of the woman involved.

I think since she was a bit uncomfortable when it started to go further and she kind of probably should have put her foot down and because she didn’t, she was kind of asking for it like she kept kissing him after he put his finger in her and then she tried to push it away and she kept kissing him and that is kind of giving him permission to keep trying.

Megan, also a first year student thought that there were self protecting behaviors the woman could have used to avoid the situation, as she stated, “I would have left sooner, I wouldn’t have…I would say he was determined so…I wouldn’t have let it go that far.” Josephine had similar views regarding the women’s situation.

Maybe she could have gone to the bathroom with her friend or maybe not partied with people she didn’t know that well or stuff like that… There are ways, like she could have if she was really uncomfortable she could have called for help or you know stuff like that.

Fourth year students employed similar reasoning strategies to understand the content of this vignette; Shelley stated, “It doesn’t mention that she tells him to ‘stop’ or anything, it doesn’t
mention any verbal contact or communication. Well if it was me, I would say something to him, I would tell him to ‘stop.’ I would be more persistent about pushing him away.”

Angela, a fourth year student considered the confusion in the type of consent given by the woman during the scenario; she said,

It is kind of like she didn’t say ‘no’ from the beginning, like maybe she is trying to seem like she is kind of playing hard to get, but that she is kind of seeming like she doesn’t want to do it, but she really does and that is what he is thinking…I mean since she kissed him back, I think that he probably thinks that she is maybe more into him than she really is.

Fourth year students gauged the intent of the man as much as the woman, and explored the dimensions in which women consent, but their answers remained vague and unclear indicating that this vignette was confusing and complex as to whether it should be characterized as sexual assault with regard to the amount of force used by the woman. Heather, a fourth year student added;

I also think she didn’t say anything to or the story doesn’t say that she did, well, I guess she pushed his hand away, I think ‘stop’ pretty much like means ‘stop,’ but it says that she didn’t really, oh, I guess she did push him away, so she pushed him away; yeah, I guess it could be.

Audrey, also a fourth year student suggested that the woman could have been clearer regarding her intentions. She said, “She should have stopped at the first time she felt uncomfortable, because she was giving him mixed signals if she doesn’t say anything but kept going.”
Another fourth year student, Elizabeth also questioned the consent of the woman; she said,

She is still kissing him so obviously she wants to go a little bit further it’s not like she is saying “no,” “stop” and just walks off, well, I guess she finally does but right away she is not clear, like “no” definitely not, we are not doing this, she just…she is kind of indecisive…she didn’t pull away, so I guess he thinks it’s okay, so he continued to do something but she doesn’t want to go further, I mean she kind of knows him and maybe she remembers where she knows him from but I guess she doesn’t feel that much a relationship to him to actually…well they are not in a relationship at all but friend-wise it is going too far.

Fourth year students attempted to uncover the motivations of the man, and in doing so, by understanding his point of view; they labeled the situation as “just the way men are.” They attested to the fact that if she didn’t want to go further, she would have tried harder to leave. Elizabeth added, “Since she didn’t pull away, he is probably like, this is okay, I will see how far I can get kind of thing.”

Components of Alcohol Consumption

Other factors involved in excusing the man’s behavior was the level of perceived consumption of alcohol that lead up to and during the incident. First and fourth year students examined the level of alcohol which was vague from the content of the vignette and used it as a mechanism for understanding the incident and thus excusing his behavior. Josephine a first year student said;

It probably doesn’t help that they had a keg on the porch; it doesn’t really say how much everybody has had to drink, but that may sometimes make signals less clear...since this
guy had been drinking and he probably misunderstood, I don’t know I have just been in a situation like this before and it is just it is not uncommon.

Considering alcohol may have contributed to the possible motive for the man’s behavior, and the students were asked how drinking contributed to the incident, Megan, a first year student replied, “Usually people are intoxicated when it goes that far as in like if you were sober, you would have pulled away sooner.” Margaret, a first year student used alcohol as a mechanism for excusing the man’s behavior, yet recognized the pervasiveness of the problem. “Sometimes when guys are drunk they refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer, so, it is probably a big problem.” Megan, also a first year student suggested that the woman’s reluctance or lack of force when she no longer wanted to continue the sexual act maybe due to alcohol. “They (women) are just apt to give in and not say or not pull away so easily.”

Although each of the first year students assigned responsibility to the male, they did use drinking as a mechanism for negotiating who is ultimately at fault when asked directly about both or one member being drunk during the time of the incident. Beth explained, “Yeah, it’s more like he took advantage of her, well he is drunk, she is not, I was thinking that you said that he was drunker than she was and that would mean that he was taking advantage of her, but they were both drunk.” This statement alludes to the fact that alcohol is used as a mechanism to excuse the man from the incident because they were seemingly both under the influence.

Fourth year students used alcohol to excuse the man’s behavior in similar ways to the first year students. They agreed that alcohol consumption affected the judgment and the possible outcome of this vignette.
Jamie stated;

I think it (alcohol) has a tendency to kind of bring out natural drives more, and so, in people in general, it is going to bring out more of a sex drive inside and I feel like in guys a lot of the time, it will bring out aggression and so being forceful and persistent, maybe he is not viewing it as being rougher than usual.

Angela added, “They had probably (had) both have been drinking, so I mean both of their judgment is probably impaired at least a little bit…I don’t know maybe his more than hers I mean, I am not really sure but I would think so.” These statements are common among fourth year groups of women and they agree that alcohol affects not only the judgment of the person, but the judgment of the situation after the fact; Heather concluded,

Maybe she didn’t really do what she would normally do because she had been drinking and in college sometimes that can happen…what you would do normally if you had not been drinking doesn’t really happen when you have been drinking…not all the time but sometimes people can maybe have not really thinking straight and will do and say things that they wouldn’t normally do.

Commonness of Vignette

First year students explained that this experience is very common among acquaintances and friends; and their judgment of this event may be compounded by the common occurrence, and justification that it happens “all the time,” thereby excusing the man for his behavior. Fourth year students noted that this event was common but some of them attributed the commonness of this event to year in college. Josephine mentioned that among her friends, this scenario is very common.
This stuff happens all of the time at parties. I think just the misconceptions and drinking and all kinds of stuff, everyone has different expectations of how something is going to go, like certain people might, like this guy right here might think that this might be how he treats every girl, and he thinks that this is just the way it worked, or some girls might try to take it slow or even certain guys might want to take situations slower and um, it happens it just happens a lot, I have friends and I know people who have been in situations like these.

Fourth year students were in disagreement as to whether or not this was common among their friends and acquaintances, yet they mentioned that it was a common occurrence within the college community. Lisa, a fourth year student said, “I think it happens a lot, I mean you all, I don’t know, you always don’t want to make a big deal about it, kind of like I was kissing him and maybe I gave him the wrong idea…I don’t know I think it happens a lot.” Heather, also a fourth year discussed the commonness of this event and equated it with younger years in college. I think that this can be, I mean my perspective is that it can be more like common when you are younger in college, I think that sometimes you know you are more prone to go to more parties and introduce yourself to college life so I feel like all of us are fourth years, I feel like this is less likely at our age…that is just what I think.

Another fourth year student, Jean remarked that the general overview of the event depicted in the vignette was common; she said,

I have heard, I mean from different people of guys just being drunk or something and trying to hook up with someone and then not wanting to and then just kind of taking from it, yeah this guy was all over me trying to do stuff with me but I mean this didn’t really go too far so she finally got away.
Samantha, also a fourth year student stated that not only was the scenario itself common, but the woman’s response to the incident was common as well.

I think it happens all the time, and then girls don’t come forward because they have the mentality of oh well, I kissed him, or I should have been more forceful, it is always putting the blame on themselves, when really they need to look at the big picture and say no, you did these things, you didn’t get the picture, who cares if you are still kissing him, you obviously didn’t want things to escalate and I mean so many times, girls just don’t make a big deal out of it, because they blame themselves or think of what they could have done differently.

Although first and fourth year students excused the male for his behavior, they did hold him ultimately responsible for the outcome of the incident. Many of these instances mentioned still related to issues of consent and responsibility. The first and fourth year students still thought the responsibility fell on the man for the outcome, yet they still excused his behavior, by possibly reducing the severity of the event.

Labeling the Incident

Both first year and fourth year students labeled this situation as “bad.” Each cohort varied on labeling this incident as sexual assault or rape indicating the apparent variability within and between each group of women. A first year student, Beth labeled this incident as “harassment.” She clearly indicated her uncertainty regarding this event. “He is harassing her.  It is kind of rape actually, no, well he …with his finger, does that count as rape? Is it considered sexual harassment or rape what he did?”
On the other hand, fourth year students labeled this incident as sexual assault even though they excused his behavior. A fourth year student, Shelley said, “I would consider it sexual assault, because he came on to her and she, out of nowhere, he kind of just like attacked, not attacked her, but bombarded her when she was coming out of the bathroom and wouldn’t leave her alone.” Another fourth year student, Cindy said;

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

The first and fourth year students differ on their labeling of this incident, yet they are in agreement on excusing his behavior and thus the confusion as to whether or not this incident is justifiably labeled as sexual assault.

Responding to Peers

The first and fourth year student’s responses to their peers with regards to this vignette reflected varying attitudes regarding the severity of the incident, alcohol consumption, and the possibility that it could have been worse as a mechanism to excuse the man. They continued to excuse the man for his behavior and attested to the fact that they should discuss these incidences with their peers or friends. They rated the women’s response as to whether or not it warranted reporting or seeking outside assistance for support. First year students noted that they were not sure how to respond to their friends and indicated how much the woman was personally affected by the incident as to whether or not to report it.
First year student Jenny stated;

I probably would have just asked her what she, how she felt about it, I mean she obviously doesn’t want to make a big deal out of it so maybe just talk to her about it or see who she might want to talk to maybe outside of friends if it really affected her that much, because like you said, you weren’t too affected by it, but some people might really be affected by it.

Another first year student Megan, said, “I would go to my friends.” Amanda, also a first year student considered the discrepancy in timing between the event and the time the woman disclosed the incident; she said,

It depends on when she came and told me, if I was at the party and she was like this guy is creeping me out and I would be like okay let’s leave, but if it was like the day after I would just kind of, there wouldn’t really be much that you can say because if she doesn’t really know the guy and he is not around much than it is not like we have to avoid him or we have to like, but there is not much we can really do about it if she was like oh this happened with this guy and oh my god… Probably I could see her or a friend of hers talking to other friends but not actually going to a counselor but I think if it was actually sex rape, then it would be different, but because it is so common I don’t think.

On the other hand, fourth year students were less likely to seek outside assistance even when they labeled the incident as “bad.” The responses given to their friends indicated their reluctance to rely on others for support and provided a possible mechanism for guiding future behavior such as avoiding the man all together. A fourth year student, Amber experienced a similar situation to the scenario depicted in the vignette. She disclosed, “I told my roommate as soon as it happened, I went downstairs, all of us had been friends for probably two years at that point so, we just left
automatically and then that was a year ago and I haven’t talked to him since.” Audrey, also a fourth year student discussed the possibility of seeking friends as support networks, but stated that she would not report the incident to outside sources; she said,

I might talk to my friends, but I wouldn’t report it, like I mean he didn’t run after and grab her and pull her back or something, it said he was just being persistent like forceful, so, I would just think that he was drunk and he might think I was like playing hard to get, kind of between “stop,” if he wasn’t like forceful and like grabbing me and like holding me there then I probably wouldn’t feel as threatened as like push him away; push him away and then leave.

In response to how they would respond to their friends, Heather, a fourth year student stated;

Why didn’t you take someone with you? Or bring me or something? I would probably tell my friend that she put herself in not very good circumstances like I don’t know, I feel like my friends, you can tell them honestly and probably tell them that it wasn’t very smart to be somewhere with people that you didn’t really know that well. I would tell her probably that I am glad she is okay, that nothing else happened to her.

In agreement, Emily, a fourth year student added, “I would probably go along with her and say you don’t, you shouldn’t put yourself in a situation that like where something like that could happen.” Although there was a discrepancy present between how fourth year students responded to their friends and whether or not they would label the incident as assault, they ultimately excused the man for his behavior. Angela, a fourth year student stated,

I mean, I think that I would try to be supportive, but like I, if this happened to me or if this happened to one of my friends, I wouldn’t really know like what my next step should be, is this something that is like, I don’t even know if this is something that is serious
enough that you should go to the police or so…I would be really supportive and I would like go with them and be like you need to talk to somebody like a professional, because I wouldn’t know what to do, like what the next step would be after she told me that this happened or this happened to me, like I wouldn’t know, and so I would probably be like we need to go talk to somebody that knows what we should do.

Another fourth year student, Lisa was concerned over the “mixed signals” given to the man explaining that there may have been a miscommunication involved in the incident; she said,

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

Weighing the Odds and Reporting

Issues with reporting the incident and classifying the incident in severity and if it warranted reporting were evident among first and fourth year college women. Some of the women thought that the incident did warrant reporting, however, others did not. Students possibly used this as a mechanism to excuse the man from his behavior and not consider this incident to be serious enough to bring to the police or outside support networks. Interestingly, both groups indicated that the effect the incident had on the woman gauged the labeling of the event and whether or not it warranted reporting.
First year students thought that every incident was justifiable in reporting, yet their answers to whether or not they would vary greatly. Jenny, a first year student said,

I think everything is justified if you don’t want it to happen, I mean, I am sure the police or something like that would kind of push it off saying something like it wasn’t a rape and she was drunk and blow it off say that obviously she was wanting to report it, but she still, never technically said “no” and things like that she would probably end up backing out of it.

Many of the first year students claimed that the incident may warrant reporting, yet the reality and severity of the situation may be critically examined by police officers, and therefore may not have a positive outcome. Jessica, a first year student said, “I don’t think it warrants reporting, I just think you need to stay away from this guy for future reference and don’t get along with him obviously he doesn’t, he can’t control himself when he is alone with you because he crossed the line.” Another first year student commented on the potential attitudes of police officers; Megan stated, “Yeah, I doubt it, that the person you reported it to would care about that, so this guy was kissing you and nothing…nothing really happened.”

Fourth year students commented more on the probability of a positive response from police officers; but mentioned a reluctance to report the incident. Emily, a fourth year student remarked, “I would probably be pissed, but I wouldn’t report it, but I would be mad at him, I would probably be mad at myself too.” Angela, also a fourth year student commented on her reluctance to report; she said,

I agree with what she is saying, I think that in society that sometimes if she were to report something like that or if she were to go to the police or something or like if she were to go to court or whatever that it sometimes gets well that is what they would keep bringing
up, well you still kissed him, so you wanted to so it is like, well I am just going to get made a fool of and nothing is going to happen and people are going to think that I am stuck up or whatever.

In agreement, Elizabeth, also a fourth year student stated;

Yeah, like she was saying if you go to court, that it probably wouldn’t take it seriously, because oh you were at a party, you were probably drinking… you know it might not have happened or something like that well you pushed him away, he didn’t force himself on top of you so they are saying something next that he wasn’t really forceful, just kind of persistent.

Fourth year student Jamie made similar conclusions regarding the outcome of reporting the incident; she said,

I kind of just, I am not sure like what would happen if I were to go to the police and said this happened to me, would they just brush it off and be like, oh well, he didn’t rape you, he didn’t go all the way so like it doesn’t count, you know, so I would be, I wouldn’t be…I think I would be scared that I would be laughed at, that I would go into a police station and they would be like that is so dumb, they may not take it seriously and then well they would say, well you were drinking and so you would probably wanted to and so that, oh really you just regret that you did what you did, or whatever.

Samantha, also a fourth year student concluded that this reasoning may be why many sexual assaults and rape do not get reported because the outcome may not be perceived as positive for the woman involved.

I think that is why rapes and sexual assaults don’t go to the police, because I mean they will bring up the alcohol, they will bring up her past, if she has had past sexual
experiences, I mean it is like they just run your character, they don’t really go through the whole scene and I mean personally, I mean you just kind of think about, you weigh your odds…and that is awful to say especially as a woman, but it’s like okay do I want to be thrown under the bus or just take what happened and go talk to someone.

Kate, a fourth year student had low expectations for reporting, yet indicated that reporting the incident itself was positive; she added,

I definitely probably think she should (report) just because even if she knew the guy’s name, that’s like a if he is willing to…that kind of shows how far he is willing to take it with someone else, that they may be more weak in peer pressure than Heather was, I mean I definitely think that if she knew his name that she would probably need to report it and talk to someone.

The reasons that first and fourth year women gave to excuse the man for his behavior were apparent. Although variability was present among each cohort of women and some of the mechanisms employed for the processing of this event were more readily apparent among the fourth year group, first year students acknowledged that this was more common among their peers. Fourth year students indicated that this is something that they may have come across while at college, but that currently they employ more self-protecting behaviors and that this incident was potentially less likely.

Vignette Two: Justifications for Acquaintance Rape

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

This vignette depicted a rape scenario with a previous sexual relationship between a man and a woman. The participants explored the dimensions of alcohol consumption and consent as they made justifications for acquaintance rape. By giving explicit examples of personal stories and by their answers to questions when they were asked how they would respond to their friends or if this incident warranted reporting, many of the students gauged the severity of this incident within an ongoing sexual relationship and concluded that the best measures were to seek outside counsel and use avoidance strategies regarding the male. These explanations justified this assault as they excused the man for his behavior and his very clear decision to ignore the woman’s requests to stop regardless of the quantity of alcohol consumed.
Many of the students concluded that this incident would be labeled as rape, yet their reporting ability was affected by the presence of an ongoing relationship and alcohol. First and fourth year students justified this vignette in a multitude of ways. They used mechanisms to justify the man’s behavior and relinquish him from responsibility of acquaintance rape. Many of the women concluded that this vignette could be labeled as rape and warranted reporting, but they used mechanisms such as having a previous relationship and alcohol to justify this incident.

First year students explained that the woman in the vignette was justified in reporting the incident, yet she probably wouldn’t due to emotional ties to the man. Allison, a first year student reported, “She probably wouldn’t want to take the action against him and like she wants her chance for him (a relationship) and if she reports him for raping her, like their relationship is shot to hell basically.” Beth added, “I think because she knew him before, this is not like the first time they have had sex but if she brought it up as rape, then he could argue, it would not be that hard for him to fight it.” Another first year student discussed the fact that they had a previous sexual relationship before the incident. Josephine said, “Well maybe because they had done it before that he thought he had the right to do it again, it’s like once my territory, always my territory.” Many of the women agreed that the man should have respected her wishes and that he should have stopped when she said “no,” and made it clear that she didn’t want to go further; but they justified the incident by examining the woman’s behaviors regarding consent. One of the first year students, Margaret said,

If it was really uncomfortable, she could have tried to get up and leave. Okay in my opinion, it doesn’t really say that there was a struggle but like for her to get up and for him to hold her down and but I just feel that if she was really uncomfortable about the situation, she would have left or at least pulled away.
Other first year students justified acquaintance rape by equating this incident with casual consensual sex. One first year student, Beth said;

One of my friends dated a guy for years and years on and off, like they had been dating for like six years or something and this would happen, he would do that and then just not talk to her for months at a time and like she would feel used and all this other stuff, but she kept going back to it, because she still loved him, I don’t know, I guess it is rough.

This was a common finding among first year women and many of them did not differentiate between this incident and casual consensual sex. Megan, another first year student said,

I would say that the relationship is unhealthy and in my opinion, I think he broke up with her just to get another girl in bed with him and when that was done then he dumped her and he saw Samantha and went back to her, but I would tell her it is unhealthy and to get out of the relationship and move on.

Another first year student justified acquaintance rape by examining the possible gendered sexual behaviors of each of the individuals involved in this vignette. One first year student, Tina said;

I feel like that is kind of the difference between the ways that guys think and the way that girls think, it is just that guys are like oh well I have done it before so it is whatever, but he really hurt her because he broke up with her right after they had sex for the first time and so obviously to her it was very special and then he just dumped her because he liked another girl which is kind of ridiculous so it is just the difference in he hurt her and she doesn’t want like to open up to him again but he doesn’t understand that…

On the other hand, fourth year students displayed some of the differences between justifications for this incident and casual consensual sex. Yet some of them still examined the previous sexual history between them to justify this incident while relying on the proposed
sexual differences between genders. A fourth year student, Amber said, “Well, they had a history and he doesn’t think it’s a big deal because they have had sex before, it’s not like it’s the first time between the two of them, so, guys have a different perception of continuing things like that anyways I think.” Even if they agreed that the incident was not consensual, Sarah, a fourth year student stated;

He is using her…I mean, at least, that is how I would see this if he broke up with her after she gave him something that is like pretty important, that I think is pretty important when you are in a relationship and then he dates someone else and then they break up and then they happen to run into each other, and it is like he knows he has been with her before so he knows that he can get what he wants, so I feel that he is using her for sex…I mean I think it has a lot to do with that he had sex with her before or that they were in a relationship that after in his mind he didn’t see it as hurting her or I guess raping her as per se, even though it definitely is if she is telling him to stop I just think he is looking at it like, oh, we have done it before, it is not like you don’t know me kind of thing, but that doesn’t make it right.

Some other fourth year students commented that her emotionality and romantic ties to the man could have played a factor in the outcome of the incident. They explained that he was using her for sex and that the possible justification for his behavior was because they have already started having sex and they are sexually familiar with each other. Kate, a fourth year student said, “I think he took advantage when she was so vulnerable and he wants that and he didn’t really care about her.” Another fourth year student, Lisa added, “I think a lot of times guys make you feel guilty because it is going to hurt them or like they can’t stop or whatever, I think a lot of guy’s use that as an excuse, like, I can’t stop now because you know.”
Negotiation Consent

First and fourth year students used the type and timing of consent given by the woman as an indicator for wanting to have sex and used this as a mechanism not only for justifying acquaintance rape, but also as a mechanism for believability should the woman choose to report the incident. A first year student, Nicole said, “Yeah because she didn’t start saying ‘no’ until they were already in the… middle of it, so like obviously she was consenting to everything else they did, it would be really hard to fight that.”

Fourth year students had similar responses to the incident regarding consent, a fourth year student Heather, said, “I think it’s difficult because she agreed all the way up to a certain extent, to a certain point, but I think because she protested, he definitely should have understood that and from what it seems, he didn’t and so…I don’t know, I guess that is some assault or maybe even rape.” Lisa, a fourth year student added that the woman could have left the premises or fought harder to avoid or end the incident; she said, “…like with that happening and then staying there…there is, most times there are options of getting out of that situation with him so, to leave the place.”

Components of Alcohol Consumption

Students also used alcohol as a mechanism for determining the outcome and deciding on the severity of the event. First and fourth year students acknowledged that alcohol played a factor in this incident, and thus the labeling of the outcome. When asked directly if alcohol played a factor in the outcome, Jenny, a first year student replied,

I think it did, I think that probably him too if he had been drinking like he might not have pushed her so hard if he wasn’t drunk, I think alcohol does have a big thing to do with it and I think that girlfriends definitely need to stick together when you are drinking at
parties and things like that, I mean her friends left her which I would definitely never do it at a party situation.

Another first year student, Allison noted that alcohol did contribute to the outcome in this incident; she stated,

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

Margaret added, “When he puts on the condom, it is obviously clear that something is about to go down if she was sober, she would have put two and two together and realized what was about to happen and but he thought it out.” She indicated the man was coherent enough to think about the ramifications of having unprotected sex and therefore should have complied with the woman’s request to stop.

Fourth year students employ similar reasoning with alcohol use; Emily said, “I think maybe it does, but I think that people use that as an excuse a lot of times.” Another fourth year student agreed, Jamie stated,

I think that it is probably the reason she let it go so far before she said no was kind of like her inhibitions were down and she you know it felt good and then she was like hold on this isn’t right, this isn’t what I want to do and I think maybe if she hadn’t have been having alcohol that she would have realized that she that it just wasn’t right before that…I don’t, I mean I kind of felt like it might have played out differently for him too, he might not have even wanted to have sex with her, I mean I don’t know…it is kind of hard because you don’t know, like I don’t know if he still liked her, if because he just
broke up with that other girl so it is possible that it would have changed the entire situation that they wouldn’t have even got as far as they did, they wouldn’t have even started kissing or any of it.

Commonness of Vignette

First and fourth year students made similar judgments regarding the how common the event was as they justified the man’s behavior; interestingly both the first and fourth year students still equated this incident with casual consensual sex, although there were some distinctions among the fourth year cohort. A first year student, Jessica, commented on the commonness among her peers and acquaintances, “I think it happens a lot because you know somebody breaks up with you and you are bummed then how she said that he broke up with this girl and they started kissing like she wanted it then once they started, she realized that she didn’t.” Another first year student, Jenny shared a story regarding the commonness, yet she did not make the distinction between casual consensual sex with remorse and the rape indicated in this vignette.

That situation is actually going on with my roommate right now, she dated this guy all through high school and obviously they had sex during that time and they have broken up since, they have probably been broken up for six months, but yet whenever she is feeling lonely or whatever she will call him and they will end up having sex and she always feels uncomfortable, she always regrets it afterwards, but several weeks later, same thing happens again, so she will keep going back to him because she feels that comfort and she doesn’t want to with a random person that’s her excuse, so, she says she would rather have sex with him because she has before, but then she always ends up not wanting to.
Fourth year students remarked that they have seen similarities between this vignette and incidences among their peers and friends. Some of the fourth year students suggested that they have seen this before and that they distinguished between remorse after the fact for reasoning to not engage in this behavior again and the rape depicted in this vignette. Although these women do make the difference known, they still justified acquaintance rape by offering these responses when asking if this incident was something that was familiar to them. A fourth year student, Amber stated;

I definitely think that it does and I think it happens especially because they had been in a relationship before she probably wanted, she obviously wanted him back, she went along with it even though she didn’t want to go that far with him and I think that does happen to girls because they want to take them back, they want them to like them again.

Another fourth year student, Heather remarked;

I feel like I see this a lot in college, I feel like I see this within my really close girl friends, I think that if you have been in somewhat of an intimate and serious relationship than you harbor a lot of really special feelings for someone and I see friends that have broken up with their boyfriends and then their boyfriends come back and they don’t come back in a dating relationship but just in a physical one, but I think that a lot of people like women link like sex to other feelings that don’t…like sex does not equate those other things and I think that women our age definitely can think that and get themselves in this cycle, like this circumstance and I don’t know I just see this a lot, I feel like I do.

Fourth year student, Emily stated;

This actually happened to one of my really good friends and she wanted to, but she didn’t want to at the same time, she did it but and didn’t regret it or tell him to stop but it was
more of she was disappointed in herself because she wanted more out of it and I was really mad at her too, just like you were because I just didn’t think he cared about her and he shouldn’t get that from her, but I mean they still talk and they are still like hooking up or whatever they are doing I don’t know, I mean you have to learn for yourself I guess.

Another fourth year student Elizabeth said;

It seems like it would be common she still has feelings for him after they broke up, so it is kind of like she wants him back so she wants to…in the beginning she is happy, she is kissing him and you know he broke up with the other girl so she is trying to make him happy so he will be with her and it seems like since there is that emotional, it seems common that…because most of the time, when someone breaks up with you, you are emotional a lot and you still have feelings for him.

Both cohorts of women employed the commonness of the incident depicted in the vignette as possible reasoning to justify acquaintance rape, although they all recognized that the situation was “bad,” they thought that the man should respect the choices of the woman, and they relied on the commonness of this event to justify this rape experience.

Labeling the Incident

Alternatively, first and fourth year students did label this incident as rape or sexual assault, they also acknowledged their potential reluctance to report the incident; they often regarded it as an unhealthy situation and one that should be avoided in the future or the possibility of discussing the problems between the man and the woman involved in the vignette. First year students labeled the incident as, “rape,” or “date rape,” yet they clearly were unsure if this incident would be believed by police officers because of the consumption of alcohol and the presence of a previous sexual relationship.
Another first year student, Amanda stated;

It’s sexual assault probably I mean I doubt that if the first one happened to me, I don’t know if I would press charges, but I think that if that did happen to someone and they did want to press charges, I think that they would be completely justified in doing that…I mean yeah she agreed to it at first and that he wasn’t raping her but after the second she said no and he kept going, that was rape I mean she said no clearly, she didn’t feel comfortable, but he didn’t care and he just kept doing it and that’s just rape.

In agreement, Jessica, another first year student stated;

I agree with that, because technically, the way that I understand the definition of rape is that it is rape unless you say “yes,” you don’t have to say “no,” I mean all you have to do is not tell him yes and officially it is rape that is my understanding of it, I am not sure that everyone has that understanding of it which could be an issue because a lot of guys might say oh well she didn’t say “no,” or she said “no” but she didn’t mean it, therefore it’s not rape but I think the definition is not exactly clear to everyone.

Fourth year students agreed that rape had occurred in this vignette, yet their responses to their friends and the differences in individual definitions of rape and sexual assault were apparent. A fourth year student, Angela stated, “For me, my definition of rape is anytime a girl says ‘no’ whether you are in the middle of it or not, or a guy says ‘no’ if someone says ‘no’ that is it, if you keep going you are raping them.” Similarly, fourth year students agreed that the content of this story indicated a violation of the women’s request to stop having sex, yet they displayed ambiguity regarding their response to their friends and peers regarding avoidance strategies as
well as the content of the personal experiences they shared with the rest of the group. Both 
groups referred to the emotionality of the break up instead of the explicit fact that the man 
ignored the woman’s request to end the sexual encounter.

Responding to Peers

Both cohorts of women justified acquaintance rape in their responses to their friends and peer 
in this vignette. First year students relied on their friends for advice and support, while the 
fourth year students also relied on outside support networks in addition to their friends.

First year students were asked how they would respond to their friends if they presented them 
with this story, a first year student, Jessica responded;

I would want to tell her to stay away because he didn’t respect her but at the same time 
she has emotions involved with him and it is hard to let go when there are emotions but I 
would tell her to be careful and as much as I would want to tell her to stay away, it is 
ultimately a decision that she has to make and like I said, emotions play a big part in your 
decision making.

Many of the first year students stated that they did not want to make the woman feel responsible 
for the outcome of the event, another first year student, Josephine stated, “Whoever it happened 
to I would try to tell them that it wasn’t their fault and that just to be careful and to stay away 
from that person and to make sure that they are careful about their body.” Another first year 
student, Margaret stated;

You wouldn’t want to make her feel like it is her fault, she is obviously going to be kind 
of already upset about the breakup and the situation in general and you don’t want to 
make her feel isolated and if she came to you asking for advice and asking for a friend, 
you don’t want to push her away and make her feel more alienated than she already does.
Fourth year students responded to their friends in similar ways to the first year students, but they also recognized the potential need to discuss the situation with professionals. Many of the fourth year students made suggestions to others regarding this as a learning experience, and measures should be taken to avoid these situations and the man involved in the future. A fourth year student, Amber stated;

In this particular situation, I think it would be good to talk to someone about what happened, but I mean things like that do happen a lot and my roommate had a similar situation, but instead of going back to her boyfriend she went out with a random guy that she met at a bar and she felt really bad about it the next day, because it was a stranger and it was really awkward and she slept with him and it wasn’t rape because she went along with it but I think that when people break up they are very emotionally like unstable, so it helps to get them either to talk with you or talk to somebody else about it.

Another fourth year student, Kate advised, “Don’t talk to him and don’t put yourself in any situation around him anymore because he obviously doesn’t respect you.”

Weighing the Odds and Reporting

When asked if the students would report the incident, the first year and the fourth year were in agreement that seeking outside counsel would be wise, yet also agreed that because of the previous sexual relationship and the consumption of alcohol that reporting to authorities may not be an option due to the perceived believability of the incident. Therefore, many of the students justified the incident by examining the consent, previous relationship, and alcohol consumption present in the scenario.
First year students remarked that they would be willing to talk to someone outside of their immediate friendships, yet displayed a reluctance to report the incident. A first year student, Amanda stated;

I would tell them to maybe go talk to somebody and think about reporting it because that does fit the legal definition of rape if you are having sex and one person says no and the other person keeps going, that is legally defined as rape so they should consider reporting it, but that it is ultimately up to them if they want to and then to obviously stay away from the guy that did it and to try…

Jenny, a first year student considered the possibility of reporting when she added;

I don’t really know because they had…everything would probably end up going against her, I don’t even really think she would feel that comfortable…Well, I mean her friends saw them kissing probably and things like that she did continue with it, but I definitely think it’s the right once she said no, so…I mean I think she can report it and if…the thing is if it doesn’t go anywhere and they dismiss it or whatever, at least something is being said against him, so if he does it again, or if it happens to her again, it’s out there.

First year students appear to be in agreement that this incident warranted reporting although they did mention possible to barriers to reporting this incident. Allison, a first year student stated,

I think because she said “no,” he should have stopped, because he didn’t it is considered rape, but I also I think it would be hard to report this one just because she has feelings for him still, they had been dating for a year and then they broke up a couple of weeks ago like technically that is what like should happen and he could get in trouble for it but I don’t know if she would want to.
Fourth year students displayed similar responses when asked if this incident warranted reporting and if they would report it. They also displayed a greater concern for the believability of the incident and the positive outcome from reporting. Shelley, a fourth year student remarked;

I know this is stupid, but I don’t really know these questions are really hard for me because I guess I don’t really know how it would be prosecuted, how would you…I just feel like his defense would be well we already dated, we have done it before, it is not and she did go all the way up to this point, like but the guy just didn’t believe her and I don’t see how you could prove that.

Jamie, also a fourth year student considered the validity of the complaint if she reported the incident; she stated,

Well, I know for my I would be kind of similarly to how I would in the last situation, I would comfort her and listen to her and do the best that I could you know and tell her that it is definitely not her fault and I would definitely go with her or help her seek professional help because this is another like, I wouldn’t know, I would think that this would be definitely something that you would report, but it is kind of like I was saying before…sound like a broken record, but they, I feel like because they were in a relationship and they have had sex before that it wasn’t like she was walking down the street at night and she got attacked and that is what it would be that people, that if she were to go into the police station, that that, well you have had sex before and you used to be in a relationship with him, you still have, you still kind of have feelings for him and then that’s, and you let it go you let it go so far, not that I am saying that any of it is right, because I don’t think that it is once she said “no,” she said “no” and it was done and that
is when it became rape but I feel like that is what would be said to her was well, you let it
go so far before you said “no.”

Another fourth year student, Kate attested to the validity of the complaint; she stated,

I think if you reported it, it would just be hard to prove that it was sexual assault…I think
they always believe the female first and foremost, I have heard of situations, not
necessarily sexual assault just physical, even if the guy I did not like mean to, they still
believe the girl, it is never a question I think that they would believe her even if she did
stay the night because she could say you know it is not safe for her to walk home if she
doesn’t have anyone to call…so I don’t know, I guess it would just be up to the
detectives.

This assumption regarding law enforcement was common among fourth year students, and as
a mechanism to resolve the incident, some fourth year students suggested talking to friends,
counselors, or even the man involved. A fourth year student, Heather suggested;

I think that you should definitely talk to your friends about it like I think that that is very
therapeutic to have your support system but I don’t think it is, I don’t know, I don’t think
if she were to report it, I feel like I don’t think anything would really come of it just
because she just agreed to so much, like I don’t know.

Similarly, Kate, a fourth year student added;

I think the best option would be to talk to him and if he has an issue like to deal with that,
I don’t think if she necessarily reported it, it would make the situation better unless she
was just traumatized afterward so, kind of depends.
In response to the validity of reporting the rape incident, the alcohol consumption, the previous relationship, and the emotional attachment after the couple broke up; the response from both groups justified acquaintance rape by equating the incident to casual consensual sex and an unhealthy relationship to this incident of rape. In lieu of this response, the most rational choice from both of the groups of women was to discuss this incident with their peers, professionals, and perhaps even the man involved in the incident.

Vignette Three: Blaming the Woman

Mark asked Jennifer out on date; they knew each other from Psychology class. He took her out for sushi and they had a great time. They talked about their class that they had together and they ended up having a lot in common. Towards the end of dinner they talk about what they want to do next. Mark suggests going to the pier to look at the stars and Jennifer thinks it sounds like fun. When they left the restaurant Mark gently kissed Jennifer and she was happy and was having a great time. They start heading towards the beach and Mark suggests getting some beer. He has a great fake ID and they stop for a 6 pack. They get to the pier and the sky is so clear; they keep talking and laughing and drinking beer. He starts kissing her again and taking off her shirt. Jennifer tells him to stop, but he keeps going. She pushes him off, but he is stronger than she is. They start having sex and Jennifer is clearly upset. After they finish, she asked him to take her home. He takes her home and she gets out of the car. She didn’t want to have sex with Mark, but she didn’t tell him before the date that she was okay kissing, but didn’t want to go any further. She feels like she should have told him and then he would have known beforehand that she wouldn’t have sex. But since she didn’t tell him, she feels like it’s
her fault. He misunderstood how far she would go. Now Jennifer knows to tell guys beforehand that she won’t have sex and this won’t happen again.

In the last the scenario, the first and fourth year students made clear distinctions between consensual sex and “date rape.” This vignette displayed a scenario in which there wasn’t an existing relationship between the man and woman. Participants were able to quantify the potential amount of alcohol consumed and believed that drunkenness could not be an excuse as with the possibility in the previous vignettes. This vignette was characteristic of the traditional rape script and it was used in this research to examine the various negotiation strategies of first and fourth year college women.

The blame that occurred in this vignette is interesting, because both cohorts of students did not blame the woman for her behavior in this incident; however, they did blame her for feeling as responsible as she did for the outcome. Ultimately, the women agreed that the man was wholly responsible, yet they thought the woman should seek counseling for her feelings of blame and personal responsibility for this incident. The first year women negotiated the emotional confusion felt by the woman depicted in this scenario. A first year woman, Jenny stated,

She liked him and he proposed it as a perfectly innocent fun thing to do, he didn’t say we are going to go to the pier and have sex, you know he said lets go look at the stars and that sounds fun if you are on a date with a guy and you really like him, but that doesn’t mean that you want to have sex with him, that’s outside for heaven sakes, most people wouldn’t do that anyway.

Another first year student, Amanda explained the woman’s feelings regarding the incident;

It’s also the way people deal with like just when something bad happens and you try to rationalize it, she is blaming herself because she wants to find some way to not let that
happen again and she is telling herself, well if I do this, then it won’t happen. It is just
her way of dealing with it even when maybe deep down she does know that that wasn’t
right, she shouldn’t have to but she is telling herself to deal with it after the fact.

Fourth year students had similar responses indicating that the woman should not have felt as
responsible as she did for the outcome of the incident. A fourth year student, Shelley stated;
I think it started out so innocent that that has got to be really hard for her but instead of
laying ground rules before you go out with somebody, I think that maybe she could do
something else to kind of show that instead of saying that, maybe if she drove separate to
go meet the guy at dinner or you know instead of going to dinner with them, if she didn’t
feel comfortable with someone she didn’t really know maybe they could meet at a party
where she has lots of friends there or something…maybe that can get her used to the idea
of being around a guy I guess.

Interestingly, the fourth year students agreed that the woman in the vignette acted with self-
protecting behavior. Fourth year students clearly blamed the man for the incident. Fourth year
students explain the foresight involved and the potentiality that the man planned the encounter
the entire evening. A fourth year student, Lisa stated,
I just think the whole situation sounds sketchy with like him telling her to go to the pier
and I think that that sounds great but I don’t really know a lot of guys that would say
that, so I think he knew that he could get her to go somewhere by telling her that, I think
in his mind that is what he was wanting the whole time so he kisses her and tries to make
her think that he’s into her and so now she feels like it’s her fault because she didn’t say
that she didn’t want to have sex but you don’t have to say you don’t want to have sex.
Other fourth year students examine the woman’s guilt, shame and embarrassment alluding to the fact that the outcome of the incident was not her fault. Audrey, a fourth year student remarked;

Yeah, like if they thought it was more, usually like the farther I feel it is rape, like the farther they blame themselves and the farther they don’t want to talk about it, so the other two, you like, since it was kind of iffy, they were kind of weighing it, you could talk about it with your friends because maybe you didn’t feel ashamed about it.

In agreement, Stephanie, a fourth year student stated;

Yeah, because you obviously want to feel that you could have done something different but you can’t look at it like that, and I think if I was ever in that situation, I am sure I would probably feel like it was my fault too, maybe I should have said that I wanted to go to the pier and that we should drink, I mean it is little things that could have changed his mind about what she was wanting to do.

Angela, also a fourth year student stated;

Hopefully that they will feel like somebody should help them to realize this is not their fault, like this is not their fault, like she didn’t know that the was going to try and do that...again she shouldn’t have had to tell him beforehand that she wasn’t going to have sex with him on the first date.

Recognizing the blame the woman may have felt, a fourth year student, Samantha added;

I mean it’s a little different but I mean she still blames herself and never said anything about it and maybe I shouldn’t have been drinking that whole nine yards, I mean it is just sad that people still feel that way and are too scared to talk to someone because they just
think all the things they could have done differently and then no, no one should ever be set up in this situation or feel that way, but still today, it happens a lot.

Negotiating Consent

Students examined the timing of consent, the type of consent given, and the woman’s clear remorse over the outcome of this incident. All of the first year and fourth year students agreed that the woman in this vignette gave clear signals to avoid a sexual encounter with the man involved; thus blame was not attributed to the woman for this event. First year students stated that the woman was clear when she said, “no,” and that the man pursued her regardless of the woman’s consent. A first year student, Megan stated, “She said ‘no,’ so that is also rape…she said ‘no’ from the beginning like when he was taking her shirt off.” Some first year students thought that even though the woman in this vignette thought that she should have told him at the beginning of the date that she didn’t want to have sex. Tina, a first year student examined the motive of the male and the ongoing persistence of general male behavior; she said,

Well first of all if she tells him at the beginning of the relationship that she doesn’t want to have sex doesn’t mean he is not going to try to have it so, just because you say something it doesn’t justify him not doing it, he can still do it no matter what.

With regards to the consent given by the female, Jenny, a first year student remarked that the woman had control over her sexual encounters and that her choices should be respected by both the parties involved in the incident.

I think it should go both ways, if she is supposed to be saying I don’t want to do this with you he should as equally be saying if that is his intentions, oh yeah by the end of the night, I am going to try and have sex with you, that is well ridiculous to ever have to
say...And it shouldn’t just be where he has the control whether he decides if he wants to or not and then she has to go either go against what he says or go with it.

Fourth year students negotiate the timing of consent and the consistency of the consent given, for example, Angela stated;

I mean I don’t think that she should have told him before hand that she wouldn’t have sex with him, I mean once she said that she didn’t want to it didn’t matter if she told him before hand that she didn’t want to have sex, I mean I don’t know.

Another fourth year student, Elizabeth stated, “Yeah, she was blaming herself for that and right away when he starts taking off her shirt she tells him to ‘stop’ and so it is immediately clear that she isn’t going to (have sex).” Audrey examined the timing of the consent given during the incident, as she stated, “Well, I guess talking about ground rules, she could have kind of laid it down when he started taking off her shirt...that could have been like kissing is fine, but this ‘no’, or whatever.” Another fourth year student, Elizabeth, acknowledged the clarity of the type of consent given in reference to the other vignettes.

Because it is definitely open and it is like you want to...you wouldn’t think that they casually think that and go along, I mean she was drinking and you know I don’t think she did anything wrong but she told him “no” definitely he pushed himself on her the whole time, it is not like she started getting into it or I don’t know kind of backing out and like it is more clear than the other two, the fact that she definitely didn’t want it and I don’t know see anywhere where she would want to blame herself or feel like it is her fault because she should, I mean you shouldn’t have to tell somebody whether you are going to have sex with them or whether you are not.
Components of Alcohol Consumption

The consumption of alcohol in this vignette as well as the verifiable quantity contributed to the students’ ability to assess the situation and the intent of the man. First year students did not primarily focus on drinking as they negotiated the content of this vignette. A fourth year student, Amber stated;

He almost made it sound like, let’s go look at the stars and almost made it sound like it was going to be something romantic and yeah he is getting a few beers but he is also they had had a really good conversation, so, I mean plenty of people drink and just talk so, I mean, I don’t think she did anything, yeah they kissed, but it wasn’t a big deal at all.

Fourth year students recognized that alcohol did not play a factor in this scenario. Some fourth year students thought that the man in this incident proposed what sounded like a fun event and that very little alcohol was consumed. A fourth year student, Kate stated;

I don’t necessarily think that it’s sketchy because I think that seems like a good first date because they talked and looking at the beach is kind of romantic you know, people do drink beer to you know loosen up, so I think a six pack it’s not like a 24-pack but like a 6-pack between two people isn’t like terrible, so I don’t think it’s that bad, I just think…I don’t think she should have known that that is what he is after, because I wouldn’t, I would have been completely okay with it, like oh watching the stars is sweet, but as soon as he tried to pull my shirt off I would have been like “no,” “no,” so, I don’t know.

Another fourth year student stated that the man was most likely sober when the event occurred, and that he especially should have respected the woman’s requests to stop.

Interestingly, this exemplified that sexual assault and rape may be dismissed when the behavior of either individual can be excused.
A fourth year student, Shelley stated;

But after he took off her shirt, she told him to stop but he kept going after that too so it wasn’t like she told him to stop right before that …and they had a six pack, so three beers each so they were probably, well he was probably, not drunk or anything.

Commonness of Vignette

Students acknowledged that the content of this vignette was common within the college community, yet they reflected attitudes that indicated the reluctance of their friends to disclose incidences like this one depicted in the vignette. They classified this incident as a traditional date rape scenario, and commented that women’s reluctance to discuss these events contributed to the severity of the incident. Each cohort of college women discussed the severity of this event as they labeled this as rape and clearly should be reported. The distinctions made between this vignette and the previous vignettes were clear; although the only difference that was focused on was the component of a previous sexual relationship. When this vignette was introduced, many of the students had very clear responses to the incident and the course of action necessary. A first year student, Josephine explained;

I don’t know anybody personally but I don’t think it is uncommon, I just think a lot of people have the same mind set as her, which is wrong because I think she feels guilty for not saying that she didn’t want to have sex, but she did tell him to stop and she did push him off and that is saying no when it is going on, so he has no right at all. So I think it happens, I think a lot of people are embarrassed about it or ashamed and keep it a secret because they feel like it doesn’t classify, but it really does.
Nicole, a first year student disclosed;

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

Another first year student, Margaret added;

I have a big sister she didn’t report it or anything, but she blacked out one night she was drinking a lot this was like her first year in college and she blacked out and woke up the next morning with bruises on the inside of her legs and everything and she assumed that she got raped and there were four girls that went to that school like high school and out of
those four, three of them got raped at that school and I don’t know if anyone reported it and I don’t really know any of my friends that it has happened to but it does happen.

Fourth year students attested to similar incidences and the commonness of this event within the college community, Amber stated;

I was an R.A. for awhile and you would hear things from residents that they went out with a guy and stuff like that but usually it was through other people, but I would usually try and catch up with them and be like well what happened or are you okay and send them to the right people on campus.

Lisa, also a fourth year student added;

I think that’s really common though, I mean I think, not like maybe end up having sex but guys like doing things like that with those intentions, I think it is incredibly common…yeah it has happened to me before, not necessarily the beach but you know come I want to play music for you and it’s like, yeah right so…I think it’s really common on college campuses.

Labeling the Incident

When students were asked how they would label this incident, both groups of women agreed that this was rape and that the incident should be labeled accordingly. The negotiation strategies employed by the women were more noticeable than in the first two vignettes. A first year student, Jenny, commented on the reality of the situation and the reluctance present as the girl displayed confusion regarding her responsibility in the outcome of the event; she said,

She was raped and I don’t think she understands that it wasn’t her fault at all and they fact that she told him while it was happening was enough and I think if that was my
friend I would definitely try my hardest to convince her that nothing she did was her fault and that she really needs to report this guy.

Similarly, fourth year students label this incident as rape. Shelley, one fourth year student said; I would definitely see this as rape because I feel like even if she did tell him, she told him during and she pushed him off, like obviously he kept going and doesn’t respect what she had to say or how she felt, so I feel like telling him before hand might not have mattered.

Responding to Peers

The responses the students provided in this incident indicated their clear labeling of this event and their inability to blame the woman for the outcome. First year students thought that reporting the incident was appropriate. Jenny stated, “It is definitely her choice, but I would advise her (to report).” Another first year student thought similarly that reporting was the appropriate advice to give a friend or peer who had experienced a situation similar to the one depicted in the vignette. Jessica said;

I think she should report it, because not so many emotions are involved in this case because they never dated before, it was just like a first date kind of thing and honestly she really should report it, I think it would be the best thing if somebody offered to go with her because she is probably, I know if I ever had to report a situation like this, I would be scared out of my mind, so just kind of supporting them and saying that you would go with them, just be a support to them…make sure she knows that it is not her fault at all.

All first year students had sympathy for the woman in the scenario as exemplified in their responses to the situation and the woman’s apparent feelings of guilt. Josephine, a first year student stated, “I don’t know she needs to know that there is nothing she could have done, she did what she could and he still kept going so it wasn’t her fault.”
In agreement, Amanda also a first year student added;

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

Clearly, the first year students displayed the most nonjudgmental attitudes regarding the woman in this vignette, and the sympathy present was apparent and the appearance of less judgmental attitudes regarding the outcome of this incident and the overwhelming blame the woman felt regarding this experience. Allison, a first year student said,

It seems like in this situation, if she was once of my friends, that I would go tell her to talk to somebody about it, like a counselor or something because she really seems like she is blaming it on herself and it is totally not her fault.

Responses from fourth year students such as Heather included;

If I tell her that most men that you are going to go out on a date with aren’t going to do to you, like it seems this person seems really damaged like she felt like she had to do all these things before she went out with other guys and I think it definitely an experience like this will definitely make you not want to go on another date, but I think I would tell her that she is going to meet other people that won’t do this and won’t be like this because this is not normal behavior… I guess I would just emphasize that what happened to her was not her fault and she was not, like she wasn’t responsible and she went in not thinking that this was not… maybe I would tell her that the next time she did go out on another date, like maybe just leave it at dinner, until she got to know someone better.
based on what has happened here and maybe go on a couple of dates before she is going to go sit at a pier, I don’t know…maybe something like that.

Fourth year students remarked on the assistance they would readily provide regarding a friend or peer that experienced a situation similar to the one depicted in this vignette. Jamie, a fourth year student stated;

I feel like and I don’t know how long she would wait to tell her friend, but if this were my friend as soon as she told me, I would be like on her you really need to talk to somebody about this because this is not your fault and I think, especially if I was really good friends with her, she is one of my best friends this is something that you need to talk to somebody.

Another fourth year student, Shelley stated;

She needs to talk to someone to make her realize that it is not her fault because I can see her talking to friends and her friends being like it’s not your fault, it’s not your fault but her not believing them, like I think that she should probably go to a professional to change her mind set.

Weighing the Odds and Reporting

When students were asked whether or not they would report this incident and if it warranted reporting both cohorts of women agreed that this incident was justifiably reportable and the woman’s responsibility in this incident was clear that she did not contribute to her own assault. Students also stated that even if the woman experienced a reluctance to report the incident, they would report the incident in her absence. A first year student, Megan said, “I would tell her to go tell someone like the police or something since there is police on campus I would go to them and if she doesn’t than I would.” Another first year student, Allison added, “That one (vignette) is
rape and she should report that one.” Margaret’s reasoning for reporting was, “She doesn’t even know him and he overpowered her and immediately after she got out of the car she should have gotten right back in the car and gone to the hospital and reported it.”

Fourth year students displayed similar responses to reporting and stated that the woman should report the incident, thus verifying the validity of the assault. A fourth year student, Kate, explained the woman’s feelings of shame and guilt.

He just dropped her off, I mean I don’t know what happened when he dropped her off and said like as soon as she got home, she could have like reported it, if she didn’t, she could still report it later but I just think that it would be okay since they obviously don’t date or anything … I think she is just embarrassed, I mean when people are raped they are always a lot of the time they don’t report it because they feel like it’s their fault or they did something wrong so I think that is common for her to feel like she did something wrong but I think that is part of the process, you feel bad after something bad happens to you.

Amber, a fourth year student agreed, “I definitely think she should report it.” Stephanie, another fourth year student justified reporting the incident by saying because there was no previous relationship, reporting the incident would be warranted.

I think the longer she waits to report it, the more she would be able to rationalize it and consider all of those things and I think she should report it immediately as opposed to waiting a day or two and thinking oh maybe it wasn’t as bad as I remember or whatever.

Interestingly, both groups blamed the woman for feeling as bad as she did regarding the outcome of the event, not for the event itself. This finding suggests that when women could depict the amount of blame and closeness in resemblance to the traditional rape script, they
labeled the incident accordingly. The rape myth, blaming the woman is traditionally employed as a labeling mechanism for the incident that occurred; instead the women thought that there was something innately wrong with the woman for thinking that she should have disclosed her sexual boundaries before the date occurred. As a result, the students blamed the woman for feeling guilty.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the social context in which rape and sexual assault occur and the group processing of college women when they interpret incidences that meet the legal definition of rape yet remain ambiguous in their subjective meaning. I wanted to do this study to develop an understanding of how first and fourth year college women negotiate their sexual behavior in the context of which it occurs and examine the kind of support college women offer as they may encounter friends who experience sexual assault and rape that is ambiguous and confusing. This study was conducted to specifically uncover prevailing attitudes regarding rape and sexual assault and to determine the possibility of rape myth acceptance among first and fourth year college women.

The findings in this qualitative analysis suggest that individual college women regardless of age vary in their descriptions and labeling of ambiguous incidences of sexual assault and rape. The adherence to rape mythology is present in each of the groups studied and across age cohorts. The differences that are present attest to the social norms apparent in each of the peer groups from which the individual college women belong.

This study requires my critical analysis of the qualitative data presented by college women and their explanations of ambiguous sexual assault scenarios. In 30 years of rape myth research on prevalence statistics and percentages of those who accept rape myths, research has not
determined how women negotiate situations when sexual assault and rape are confusing and ambiguous that include the group processing involved in these incidences of sexual assault; as well as the potential advice college women may give their peers and acquaintances regarding conceptions of rape and sexual assault. It is important to explore the dimensions of peer group interaction when sexual assault occurs within the context of alcohol consumption, different views of consent, and with someone known to the woman.

Other researchers on rape and rape myth acceptance have used vignettes to measure whether or not women accept myths that excuse males for their behavior, but they haven’t examined the social processing involved when women may or may not support their peers regarding their labeling of sexual assault and rape experiences. Unfortunately, prevalence statistics and reports of rape myth acceptance cannot capture women’s use of rape myths to understand ambiguous sexual assaults and rape and they do not have the ability to change behavior regarding rape and sexual assault. Navigation processes of rape and sexual assault are inherently social. Rape myths are employed as mechanisms to gauge the outcome of scenarios and categorize safe and unsafe situations of women, and thus used to explain and label incidences of ambiguous sexual assault and rape. As women find these experiences to be common among their peers and people they know, they tend to normalize the events of sexual assault and rape depicted in these vignettes.

The most prominent findings in this study were the commonness of the vignettes in each cohort of women compared to experiences they were familiar with in their peer groups and among women they knew. The situations in which both groups of women negotiated these instances of sexual assault and rape were defined within the social context in which they occurred. As these women found these experiences of sexual assault to be more common, they
were less likely to label them as sexual assault and rape. This finding is consistent with the social learning theory of rape in that women defined these acts of sexual assault as less offensive depending on the commonness of the incident and thus judged the event accordingly.

In the focus groups, participants reported how they would respond to their peers who shared information with them. Several indicated that they had already been in these situations noting how they did respond when they were presented with these occurrences. If they hadn’t experienced these situations, they all reported that they were familiar with these stories as they have heard about these experiences from other peers. They were so familiar with these experiences that they reported to find them common among their peer groups and social circles. This is troubling in the sense that both first and fourth year women disclosed that the scenarios depicted in each of the vignettes were common within the college experience.

However, the last vignette was somewhat different than the previous two vignettes in that fewer women indicated that they actually knew someone personally with whom date rape had happened; they revealed that the disclosure of this incident would require the personal intimacy found in close friendships rather than among acquaintances or peer groups. In the third vignette, all of the groups studied elicited a different type of response from the participants. First and fourth year college women reacted to the third vignette with similar characteristics, instead of blaming the woman for the rape; these women, regardless of age blamed the woman in the vignette for feeling bad and responsible for the outcome.

Interestingly, many of the fourth year students placed greater sanctions on the women’s behavior and her ability to construct and navigate “safe” social situations in which she was safe from sexual victimization; this belief suggested that fourth year college women ultimately held
the woman responsible of the outcome in the vignette as they considered aspects of alcohol consumption, previous sexual relationships, and differing beliefs regarding consent.

The women in this study clearly stated that the timing and type of consent given was an indicator of who was responsible for the outcome of the scenario as they indicated there were differences in effect when women gave verbal cues such as “no” or “stop” and/or behavioral cues of non-consent such as pushing or shoving. When first and fourth year women examined the specific type of consent given in these vignettes, all women indicated that the type of consent given was not effective. The college women indicated that the woman involved could have done more to stop the incident by not consuming alcohol or displaying clearer signals of non-consent.

Interestingly, in the third vignette when alcohol consumption was quantifiable, first and fourth year students stated that the type and timing of consent given was irrelevant because the man in the vignette clearly disregarded the woman’s sexual boundaries. These issues regarding consent suggest that these college women analyzed the consent given by the woman within the larger structure of the event itself when they determined the level of responsibility attributed to the woman for the outcome of the incident.

Consistent with previous literature regarding instances of rape and sexual assault, alcohol consumption was a component in the negotiation strategies employed by college women as mechanisms for understanding the content in each of the vignettes. Situations in which alcohol was present were very important in these contexts in that peer groups perceived gradations of social responsibility depending on the quantity of alcohol consumed. To them, if a woman drinks one or two beers it does impair her judgment, but not to consent or refuse sex. When women were asked regarding alcohol specifically in the first two vignettes, they not only
negotiated the amount of consumed by both parties, but they focused on the amount consumed by the woman and excused the alcohol-induced behavior of the man involved.

Considering that alcohol is so important in how peers explain the social context in which ambiguous sexual assault may occur, I must question the extent to which the legal age for drinking is responsible for differences in the responses of first and fourth year students. Clearly, it affects the social location in which they meet potential sexual partners. Underage women may be at greater risks for relying on others for the production of alcohol, or may be tempted by social situations that they would not readily choose had they been able to purchase and consume alcohol legally.

The contexts in which women consume alcohol may be why women rely on peers so much for avoidance strategies of sexual assault and rape experiences. I found that fourth year college women judged their peers more harshly if they went to parties and did not use their peers as safety measures. Women who do not depend on peers to protect them from sexual assault and rape are judged harshly, critically, and socially responsible for negative sexual encounters that can be classified as sexual assault and rape.

This is particularly important because it indicates that the social context in which sexual assault occurs and is discussed among college women includes those in which behavior is most often ambiguous, unplanned, and with someone known to the women. When peers advise their friends, they are very concerned with weighing their perceptions of the response that others will have if their friend tells them what has occurred. This concern was frequently examined with legal authorities such as police, as women assumed that the police will question the validity of the assault. In particular, they note that when alcohol is involved, or when sexual assault has occurred with a man with whom an individual had a previous sexual relationship, they believe
that police are likely to challenge a woman who reports sexual assault. While none of the women in this study described the vignettes as positive, and in fact labeled them as “bad,” many of them questioned the woman’s behavior regarding the outcome of the vignettes.

I found that women often do tell their friends about these ambiguous rapes and negative sexual experiences, but depending on the perceived severity of the situation, there may be a lapse in time before they talk to their peers. They may feel anger, fear, shame, or personal responsibility especially if they were drinking at the time of the incident which affected disclosure. I know this because some of the women in the study reported personal experiences where they were assaulted and others reported on these situations in which they had actually responded to the reports of their friends.

Although this is a qualitative study, there appears to be a strong relationship between clarity in the context of sexual assault and advice within regards to reporting to authorities. The closer the experience resembles the “classic rape” scenario, the more likely peers were to recommend reporting to authorities. In contrast, the more ambiguities there are in this classic script, the less likely peers are to recommend reporting the incident to legal authorities or to seek outside support networks such as community or university counselors. As these experiences become more normative within first and fourth year women’s social circles, they were likely to judge them to be instances of sexual assault and rape.

I am troubled by this discovery concerning ambiguity; and of course there are several hundred rape myths and each varies in its context, social connotation, and subjective meaning. My research participants do not accept the myth that all women want to be raped. However, they do accept other myths such as “when women are raped, it’s because the way they said ‘no’ was
ambiguous.” The myths they do accept are very much linked to the social contexts of alcohol and prior sexual relationship that have been noted above.

Consistent with the social learning theory of rape, as it appears in this study, the more normative the situation; the more accepting peers are of those situations. When college women experience instances of sexual assault and rape, and they expect them to happen, they are less likely to advise their friends to report them. Myths about sexual assault then do not remain myths; rather they become normative explanations that are used to justify behavior that the women nevertheless judge to be bad.

These findings are interesting because they suggest that appropriate behavior and avoidance strategies are only necessary or effective in some situations, but not in others. This finding suggests that individual definitions and the subjective meaning of social contexts vary as well. We can do little if nothing to change the behavior if we do not understand the contexts in which rape and sexual assault occurs. I am committed to understanding the context of sexual assault among college aged women so that hopefully future sociologists can work to change those situations and the social situations in which college women define sexual assault and rape. Much more research is necessary to address the social contexts in which rape and sexual assault occur and university prevention strategies need to be addressed to reflect issues of how rape and sexual assault occur among college women along with alcohol consumption, the presence of a previous sexual relationships, and consent.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research specifically addressed the social contexts of rape and sexual assault and utilized methodologies that mimic similar events and mechanisms found within the experiences of first
and fourth year college women which differ from previous methodologies employed to address beliefs of rape mythology. The purpose of this study was to explore the dimensions in which sexual violence towards women becomes normalized among college women as they experience situations in which the scenarios in this study were common experiences among their peer groups and acquaintances.

Future research on rape and rape myth acceptance needs to address the social contexts in which rape and sexual assault occurs to begin to understand the prevalence of rape on college campuses. Not only is there ambiguity among first and fourth year college women as they define their experiences of sexual assault, but there is ambiguity among federal and state laws in the legal definitions of sexual assault and rape. This discrepancy may explain why the women in this study employed several negotiation strategies to understand the content of the vignettes.

The use of negotiating consent, alcohol consumption, and the presence or absence of a previous sexual relationship attests to the social context and subjective meaning of the rape experience. These contexts in which sexual assault and rape occur need to be further addressed to construct prevention strategies that specifically reduce the commonness of these experiences within the college community. Then, instead of employing rape myths as mechanisms to understand normative behavior, college women may employ the necessary mechanisms to not only negotiate ambiguous sexual assault and rape scenarios, but to seek supportive networks outside of their peer groups.

The implications for this research study are to further address and understand the experiences of sexual assault and rape not only as it occurs with ambiguities among college women, but as sexual assault and rape are experienced by women in the larger community. The use of rape mythology to interpret ambiguous sexual assault and rape experiences perpetuates mainstream
ideas regarding sexual violence towards women. Mechanisms to reduce these beliefs can be found in constructing universal definitions of rape and sexual assault and thus educating women of the classifications of rape and sexual assault may be an effective measure for reducing rape and sexual assault among women.

Future research that includes mixed methodologies to explore the social and subjective definitions of rape and sexual assault among women would assist community as well as university prevention efforts to educate both men and women on the definitions of sexual assault and rape. These educational strategies may be effective for finally dispelling the cultural myths regarding rape and sexual assault.
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