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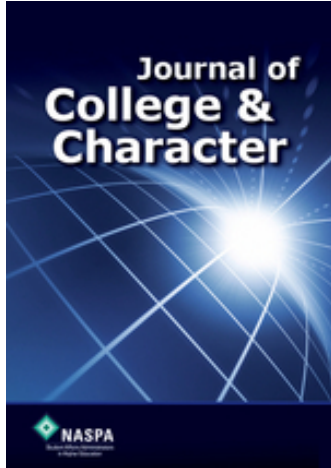
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The Allure of the Freshman Girl: Peers, Partying, and the Sexual Assault of First-Year College Women

Brian N. Sweeney, Long Island University—C W Post Campus¹

Abstract

Although sexual assault has long been recognized as a problem among college students, little attention has been paid to why first-year women are the most likely to be assaulted. In this article the author drew on two studies of college students to analyze peer culture and the organization of gender and sexuality within a college party scene. Within this scene, fraternity men's masculine identities and peer status were linked to their ability to hook up with women. However, strong sexual double standards stigmatized many sexually active women, reducing their appeal as sexual partners. In contrast, men saw first-year women were seen as "fresh," "clean," and especially alluring. The organization of campus life at the beginning of the year also made these women particularly available.

Sexual assault has long been recognized as a serious problem on U.S. college campuses (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005). According to one study, nearly 3% of all college women will be assaulted in any 9-month academic year; 1 in 5 women will be assaulted at some point during college (Fisher et al., 2000). Sexual assault is more common on college campuses than in almost all other social contexts in the United States. Moreover, women early on in college are the most likely victims of sexual assault, and the first few weeks of the year are the most dangerous (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007; Sampson, 2010). To state the issue another way, college men sexually assault women at disproportionately high rates, and first-year women are often their victims.

Research indicates that most sexual assaults on college campuses are directly related to a peer culture focused on drinking and sex. Between 80 and 90% of assaults are between people who know each other, at least as minimal acquaintances (Fisher et al., 2000; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999). According to a Department of Justice report, typical aspects of college partying make women vulnerable to rape, such as easy access to alcohol, loud music, private rooms, and peer cultures among men that may emphasize "group secrecy" over reporting possible assaults (Sampson, 2010, p. 6). Other factors that place women at greater risk of being assaulted include being a new student (Gross et al., 2006; Krebs et al., 2007), frequently drinking to get drunk (Fisher et al., 2000; Krebs et al., 2007; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004), holding less conservative attitudes about sexual behavior, and socializing after midnight (Fisher et al., 2000; Krebs et al., 2007). College party scenes are fun but sexually dangerous places—especially for first-year women.

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What is it about the college environment that makes this outcome—the assault of first-year women—occur? In this article, I draw on data from two studies of college students at one university to analyze peer culture and the organization of gender and sexuality on campus. I map out the dominant campus party scene and explain why first-year women are uniquely appealing and particularly available to upper-class fraternity men in this scene. I show that peer-driven concerns about partying and hooking up, combined with men's understandings of femininity and women's sexuality, lead to fraternity men's particular interest in sex with first-year women. The organization of campus life at the beginning of the year also makes first-year women especially available as potential sexual partners to fraternity men.

Peer Culture and Partying Among College Students

Sociologists and higher education scholars have long been interested in the role peers play in development. Peer culture (communal meanings, routines, and artifacts) provides youth with a sense of belonging and predictability, giving them a framework within which they can learn, interpret, and produce cultural knowledge (Corsaro, 2010). College peer culture, then, can be understood as the established behaviors, artifacts, beliefs, and values that students produce and share in interaction with each other in both formal and informal groupings. Students “identify, affiliate, and seek acceptance and approval” from these groups during the college years (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 564). In a large study that tracked nearly 25,000 students at over 200 institutions, Astin (1993) concluded the peer group is “the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Similarly, in their two comprehensive reviews of college's impact on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that peers are at least as influential as faculty, if not more. A wide body of research has explored how peer groups socialize students and shape social, cognitive, emotional, and psychological development (Astin, 1993; Evans, Forney, Renn, Patton, & Guido, 2009; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Although institutions of higher education have sought to harness peer culture's power toward formal goals of student growth and learning, it has often loomed as a destabilizing threat—a “monster within the gates” (Dalton & Crosby, 2010).

College students learn and develop through peer culture, although perhaps in hidden, unintended ways. A new student must map out not only the physical spaces on campus and surrounding environs, but also the sociocultural landscape of meanings and identities; relationships among individuals; and the beliefs, traditions, and narratives that make up the specific institution. College peer culture emphasizes fun and friendship and demands that students demonstrate competence in particular forms of socializing (Light, 2004; Moffatt, 1989, 1991; Nathan, 2005). Along these lines, recent scholarly attention has focused on college partying and the “hookup culture” (Bogle, 2008; England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Freitas & Winner, 2010; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Hooking up, widely understood to be casual sexual activity outside of committed relationships, has become the dominant form of sexual interaction on residential college campuses in the United States (Bogle, 2008; England et al., 2007). As sociologist Kathleen Bogle (2008) explained, hooking up is prevalent on college campuses due to a confluence of factors, including freedom from adult authority, a homogenous population, and residential density. Students are drawn to partying and hooking up because they satisfy developmentally specific desires for belonging, self-exploration and definition, and general meaning making (Arnold, 2010).

Partying and hooking up have different implications for men than for women. Because of widely accepted sexual double standards (Crawford & Popp, 2003), women may be stigmatized for desiring or engaging in sex outside of a context of love and commitment, whereas men may be

rewarded for doing so. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) argued that sexuality can figure prominently in the way men signify and claim masculine status because of notions in our society that connect manhood to sexual performance and virility. Males seem “manlier” for engaging in sexual activity and other behaviors that display heterosexual prowess. College peer cultures, and party scenes in particular, may be likely to encourage sexualized performances of masculinity—especially ones based on the sexual objectification and pursuit of women (Bogle, 2008; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Some men may find themselves judged by peers based on their ability to procure casual sex with women. Moreover, it is likely that sex with some women garners men more social approval than sex with others. College party scenes are fraught with masculinity-related expectations and possibilities for proving manhood through sex.

In contrast, women may face stigmatization for the same types of party and hookup behavior. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) found that many college women were ultimately frustrated with hooking up because of sexual double standards. The women they studied feared social judgment from peers and adjusted their sexual behavior and preferences accordingly. Women were also frustrated by men’s mistreatment and disrespect of women, which double standards seemed to legitimize. College women’s successful participation in party scenes requires mastery of interaction skills, such as how to “let go” and engage in alcohol-fueled, erotically charged revelry; how to flirt and attract men’s attention; and how to signal sexual sophistication—all without violating feminine norms of sexual propriety (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006; Hamilton, 2007; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Women must map out fine lines demarcating “sexy” from “slutty” or else face exclusion and stigmatization (Bogle, 2008; Phillips, 2000). Some women, having higher levels of mastery of such skills and knowledge, will be better able to navigate through these party scenes—to have fun without being exploited or stigmatized.

College Partying and Sexual Assault

In addition to producing a lot of fun, college party scenes also produce sexual danger. Research on college sexual assault has focused on the aspects of peer culture that promote rape-supportive beliefs and practices. Often referred to as “rape culture,” these attitudes, values, and behaviors normalize men’s sexual aggression against women (Boswell & Spade, 1996). Men’s sexual objectification and predation of women are encouraged, whereas victim-blaming ideologies place accountability on women (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Sanday, 2004). Rather than identifying “bad” men, this research has attempted to identify why some contexts are more dangerous than others. Along these lines, a body of research on sexual assault has investigated fraternity culture. Some fraternities are seen as especially dangerous for women because they promote alcohol-fueled partying and the sexual objectification of women (Boswell & Spade, 1996).

Most sexual assaults in college involve alcohol and occur during or soon after partying, leading the U.S. Department of Justice to define *party rape* as distinct from other forms of acquaintance rape (Sampson, 2010). Party rapes tend to occur on or near college campuses and involve men targeting intoxicated women or “plying a woman with alcohol” (Sampson, 2010, p. 6). Exploring the issue of party rape at a large Midwestern university, Armstrong and co-authors (2006) showed that party rapes are the result of factors operating at multiple “levels” of the social order. For example, new students arrived on campus having been socialized in anticipation for college partying, which often included excessive drinking and hooking up. University housing policies clustered students of similar backgrounds and social orientations, while uneven policing of alcohol abetted fraternities’ dominance of campus partying. In interactions at fraternity-hosted parties, men controlled women’s access to party space and alcohol while women were held to feminine norms of niceness. The

synergistic confluence of factors, the authors concluded, produces a peer culture full of fun but also sexual danger. Students invested in party scenes are unlikely to recognize problems and advocate for change.

Based on existing research on college partying and sexual assault, one can conclude that a significant number of assaults evolve out of situations that begin as fun and consensual—situations where hooking up is not ruled out as a possibility. These assaults tend to involve alcohol and are likely preceded by some levels of erotic interaction, such as dancing or kissing. Eventually, however, these fun party and hookup experiences become nonconsensual. Therefore, an important question arises: How do men identify women as potential sexual partners, regardless of whether the sex, in the end, is consensual? And related: Why are first-year women so often targets of men's sexual interest and aggression? I addressed these questions by studying peer culture, gender, and sexuality from multiple angles. First, I drew on in-depth interview data to explore men's sexual subjectivities—how men think and feel about sexuality and understand themselves as sexual beings. Second, I drew on focus group data with a diverse range of students to explore the organization of student life more broadly. I explain why first-year women, in particular, were likely sexual targets within a typical college party scene. Stated another way, I explain why first-year women were *appealing* and *available* to fraternity men at the beginning of the academic year—the time they are most likely to be assaulted.

Methodology

In this study I combined data from two studies of college students in order to examine the high rates of sexual assault among first-year college women. First, I collected 44 in-depth interviews as part of a study I conducted on college men and sexuality at a large Midwestern university. Twenty-four interviews were with fraternity men, and 20 were with male residents of a coed living and learning community. In this study I aimed to explore men's sexual subjectivities, or how they understood themselves as sexual beings, especially in relation to gender, emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), and college peer cultures. Through semistructured interviews, I asked the men about their values, attitudes, and practices regarding sexuality and relationships with women. I asked about their perceptions of normal male sexuality, female sexuality, and their peers' sexuality. I also asked about their ideas regarding manhood and their aspirations for the future, including educational, career, and family-oriented goals.

Second, I also drew on data from 16 focus groups of college students ($N = 87$; 24 men and 63 women) collected as part of a larger study of college student social life. This study, for which I was a co-investigator, was conducted largely concurrently and at the same university as the first study. Most of the focus groups comprised students from formal organizations (faith-based organizations and sororities, for example), whereas others were based on informal groupings (friendship groups, for example). Eight of the focus groups were women only, four were mixed-gender, and four were men only. Although we purposively sampled different types of students to provide a range of perspectives on college life, White students formed the overwhelming majority of the focus group sample.² I conducted eight of these focus groups by myself or with a co-investigator. The co-investigator conducted the remaining focus groups, either alone or with one

² At the time of the study around 80% of undergraduates were White and from the United States, whereas around 4% were African American. The mainstream party scene, a focus of this paper, was arguably less diverse. This lack of diversity is likely a reflection of the wider student body but also the historical race and social class exclusivity of fraternities and sororities.

other researcher. Students were asked many questions about their social experiences since entering college, including their experiences partying and hooking up, their views on campus life and relationships among students, and the challenges of balancing academics with social life. Each student also completed a survey that gathered information on families and backgrounds, political and religious views, romantic and sexual experiences prior to and during college, and educational goals and career aspirations.

As others have noted, focus groups may be limited in usefulness for collecting data on individuals' thoughts and experiences and may be more useful for observing interaction processes (Hollander, 2004). Focus group data may be influenced by the relationships among the participants, between the participants and facilitator, and other features of the social context of the interview. I attempted to keep these concerns in mind as I combined data from the two studies. For most of the focus groups, participants knew each other as friends or as members of the same organization. As this article is concerned largely with peer culture, the focus group data may be especially useful for analyzing shared experiences and the collaborative construction of meanings among peers (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998).

The data for both studies were collected over a period of about 2.5 years, from 2004 to 2006. At this time the university enrolled approximately 35,000 undergraduate students. The flagship campus of a large state system, the university was situated in a small city in a largely rural area of the state. Although strong and diverse in academic offerings, the university was also known for its vibrant social life and was regularly listed by national sources as a top "party school." Over half the students came from within state, although a sizable portion was also drawn from the larger Midwest region and East and West Coasts.

The interviews from each study were transcribed and analyzed with the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. This software allows interview data to be analyzed through coding of concepts and the mapping of relationships among them. Additional notes and memos were developed through repeated readings of the data. The software facilitated the building of conceptual frameworks that spanned the large amount and different types of interview data (one-on-one versus focus group). The analysis of data was largely inductive, meaning that assessments and categorization emerged from the data. A list of codes and emergent themes was developed through initial readings of the data and then refined through additional analysis. The mostly inductive approach also privileged students' own voices and subjectivities. Each study was interested in how students labeled, constructed, and made sense of the social world around them.

The strength of the analyses presented in this article lies in the breadth of student voices contained in the two studies. Students interviewed were from many walks of campus life, providing different points of insight on college in general and life on this campus in particular. Some students were members of the Greek organizations that formed the heart of the party scene. These students drank heavily and routinely engaged in recreational sexual activity. Other students identified as evangelical Christians and abstained from both alcohol and sex. Still others lived in a coed living and learning center that stressed intellectualism, academics, and political activism. Having both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives provides insight on the dominant peer culture and nature of the party scene, including some of the social processes by which people inside are sorted and those outside are excluded. Importantly, the data reported on here contain the voices of both men and women students.

The Fraternity Party Scene

The main party scene was dominated by fraternities, whose large, graciously styled houses clustered in two areas of the campus studied. Similarly styled sorority houses were mixed in,

creating definable “Greek Rows” near to, but separate from, the main academic and residence hall areas of campus. These locations set the stage for intense partying, especially on weekends, and allowed students to easily roam from one fraternity to another. The parties were characterized by crowds, loud music, alcohol, and dancing. As one female resident of a living and learning center said of the first fraternity party she went to, “It was really hot and everyone was just dancing all over each other.” She continued to attend parties because “I just have fun, and . . . I like going with my friends but I end up losing them and I don’t really mind. I just like meeting new people and there’s so many more people there.” The policing of underage alcohol use in residence halls and off-campus bars led many students to attend fraternity parties. As one sorority woman said, “Usually freshmen, for the most part, don’t have [fake] IDs immediately. . . . That’s why we go to the frats.” Getting in trouble for drinking at a fraternity, though possible, was perceived as unlikely.

Fraternities were seen as hotbeds of social and sexual activity, even amidst a broader campus culture students perceived to be rife with casual sex. In a focus group of evangelical Christians, a woman observed that hooking up was easy; all you had to do was “walk next door.” A man in the same group discussion followed up, saying sexual opportunities were “abundant,” and, for those students interested, “It’s not too hard to find one of those [a hookup] if you’re looking for it.” He then offered more specific advice, saying that if a man wanted to hook up, he should “check out a fraternity party.” Fraternity men agreed. When asked where the best place to find a hookup on campus was, a fraternity man responded, “My house! Or the house next door. Or the one down the street. It’s really all of ’em.” Another man succinctly stated that the main point of parties was to “drink, meet girls, hook up.” Men cited opportunities for partying and meeting women as key reasons for joining a fraternity. One man said, “I think joining a fraternity provides you with a kind of quintessential college experience.” Another man said he sought fraternity membership so that he could have “booze, boobs, and brothers.”

For women, too, fraternities were seen as providing opportunities for socializing and meeting the opposite gender. As one sorority woman said in a group interview, “A lot of girls do join sororities because there is that potential to go out and go to fraternities.” Another sorority woman reported that new house members get initiated into the party scene quickly: “First week we have girls in the house, we take them out almost every night to a fraternity and every night it’s just centered around getting wasted.”

Even students who were not members of sororities or fraternities expressed familiarity with this party scene. Students saw “frat parties” as epitomizing raucous, college partying. Many non-Greek students had attended at least one fraternity party, often in their first year of college. Students from all walks of campus life reported that college was a time to let loose, meet new people, and have new experiences. For many students, fraternity parties were a way to do so.

Fraternity Men: Peers, Partying, and Status

Those fraternity men who lived at the center of the party scene reported strong peer expectations to party and hook up with women. They described a male-focused peer culture built around alcohol-fueled socializing and the sexual objectification of women. Parties were an especially rich site for male bonding and “proving manhood” to peers, namely through hard drinking and pursuing women. Although fraternity men sometimes conveyed a sense of fatigue at the pressure to engage in these activities, they mostly reflected on the positive aspects. For example, one man said, “When I look back on college, my best memories by far are going to be going out with the guys, partying, going to the bars, checking girls out.” Similarly, another said, “This is really the time of our lives. . . . The friendships that I have now, with my brothers, I’ll have those for life.” The rituals and widely

understood scripts involved in partying gave the men opportunities to participate in a shared culture with their peers, leading to feelings of belonging, gratification, and an enhanced sense of manhood.

Importantly, these men reported that they were expected to want recreational, nonrelational sex with women. A man's successful hookup could garner him significant peer attention and masculine status. As one fraternity man reported, acceptance among male friends is dependent on "how many girls you've been with, what you do with girls, and you know stuff like that." Another man reported proudly that he was known as "Pornstar" among his fraternity brothers because of his success with hooking up with women. Living in their fraternity houses, in a sense, trained the men to approach women and sex in pointedly recreational ways. As one man explained:

It's just that, before I might have seen that as something not OK to do—like, have sex with a girl just to have sex with her. But in the house, it's what's you do, guys do it all the time, and it's OK.

The fraternity men thus worked individually and collectively to procure casual sex with women: "Working a group of girls together is pretty normal," one man said. Another described "playing wingman for my buddy"—a term several men used to describe the supporting role a friend plays in helping another hookup. Men also reported collectively celebrating hookups. "You do get that attention," one man said, "You know, that, everybody wants to know your business" after hooking up. The men demanded details of each other's sexual exploits, often telling stories and grilling each other after a night of partying. The fraternity men clearly indicated that the most popular and highest status men among them were successful sexually with women: "It's definitely like the more girls you hook up with the more of a man you are. Especially if you're on a roll with the girls, you're the man, you know, you're the man. . . . And everybody likes that feeling." Hooking up was a *homosocial* activity (Bird, 1996) among these men—something done for and among male peers.

Although the party scene provided men with many opportunities for sexual performance, sex with some women garnered men more attention and status than with others. Some women were stigmatized as "unclassy," "slutty" (words the men used often), or lacking in self-respect if they partied with too much abandon or were thought to have had too much sex—things the men assumed often went together. The men drew distinctions between desirable women and other women deemed low status.

Gendered and Sexual Double Standards

Partying and hooking up had different implications for men than for women. Students from across the different groups interviewed reported a strong sexual double standard. Men rarely faced penalties for having many sexual partners. Indeed, some, like the fraternity men described above, were rewarded by peers for doing so. In contrast, women faced potentially strong stigmatization for sexual impropriety.

Beliefs that women should not be too sexually active transcended the different student groups interviewed, indicating the widespread, robust nature of the double standard. Even a group of evangelical Christian women voiced frustration, despite their own pledges to abstain from sexual activity, which, for most of them, included kissing. "The double standard makes me so angry," one woman blurted out, garnering good-natured laughter from the other women in her focus group.

Anything, like, in the world outside of [our religious group], the more girls a guy sleeps with, his regard is higher in the hierarchy of cool, and the more boys a girl sleeps with, she is regarded as a lower slut, whore, or whatever.

Another woman agreed, saying, "No matter what girls do they're lost, because if she like sleeps with everybody, then she is like a whore, and if she doesn't sleep with anybody, then she is a prude."

Although these women's evangelical beliefs made sexual double standards concerning casual sex largely irrelevant to their lives, they were nonetheless indignant. A wide array of other students agreed that women were perceived as slutty, weird, or unwell if they partied with too much abandon or had too much sex.

The campus party scene was viewed as a place where women got "bad" reputations. The following quote from a male resident of a living and learning center illustrates the double standard women faced when partying:

A lot of college women arrive to college and go a little bit wild, kind of like they don't really understand what they're doing, what kind of situations they're getting themselves into. And then it's done, you know. They can't take that back, all those guys they've done stuff with. They might have thought they were having fun at the time but might look back and regret it.

Implied in his response is that men do not "regret it," but that women, facing a kind of permanent spoilage, will regret their behavior in the long run. In a more critical tone, another resident of the hall strongly condemned sorority women for partying with fraternity men and "basically paying all this money to be made sexual objects." Sorority women, he contended, regularly submitted to men's desire for casual sex, proving that they lacked self-respect. A "responsible" woman would be aware and cautious:

You know if you wanna submit to that kind of stuff or not. If it's not rape you're gonna be submitting to it. So I think it doesn't depend on the situation it just depends on what kind of person you are.

Women who had casual sex, according to his logic, were losing, giving up, or being taken in. A woman's sexual behavior (enjoying casual sex) could become her social identity (a promiscuous woman who submits to men). In a group discussion, another resident of the same hall was more sympathetic, although he agreed that there was a strong double standard:

Like that's the thing, if a guy sleeps around a lot he's a player and if a girl sleeps around she's a slut and that's not fair, you know what I mean, if a girl is hypersexual, but is held back.

A group of sorority women, active in the campus party scene, felt this tension acutely. When asked if women "have permission" to want sex, one woman answered decisively, "No," and another quickly followed: "No, not at all, it's totally unacceptable. It's just, guys that are. . . . It's totally fine for guys to have multiple sexual partners, they're a player. But we do and we're sluts." It was not that these women did not desire sex or did not like having it. As one woman said, clearly wrestling with the intricacies of the double standard: "It's just not acceptable for the girl to want it as much. The man, he's got to initiate something, but she's not going to say no." Women had to be careful, if having sex, not to appear too assertive or agentic. Protecting reputations was paramount, both for individuals and the entire group. "We're nice girls, we're partiers," one woman began to say of her sorority during a group interview. "I would rather have an alcoholic label than a slut label." Her sisters agreed—their house had earned a reputation as drinkers, but, importantly, they were not perceived to be promiscuous. Women had to negotiate a fine line, as partying too hard was seen as undignified and often taken as a sign of promiscuity.

The fraternity men were intensely wary of sexually improper women and told many stories of women who were unappealingly sexually forward or experienced. Typical was one man's report that: "There are some crazy girls out there. They'll just grab you, grinding on the dance floor with nothing on, they'll put their hands down your pants and grab your, your stuff." These women could potentially be fun party mates, but they could also be seen, as another man said, as "dirty, unclean,

nasty girls.” Men could engage such women sexually, but only “if they’re desperate. Guys who can’t get any better, I guess,” as one fraternity man said.

Intricate rules thus guided whom the men could hook up with. Many fraternity men—as well as sorority women in focus groups—agreed that women should not hook up with men who know each other. One fraternity man, for example, said that fraternity brothers sometimes hooked up with the same women, but that such women easily gained reputations as “easy” and promiscuous. These women would be seen as low status—appropriate for only some types of sexual contact and definitely not desirable for dating. A sorority woman agreed, saying, “you’re a frat rat if you go over there all the time.” A majority of the fraternity men indicated familiarity with the term “house rats,” a term used to describe women who socialized regularly at a fraternity and who were assumed to be open to hooking up with multiple brothers. To an extent, the men appreciated these women because they provided company and sex. However, the men also disrespected them and perceived them as low status and lacking in self-respect.

Fraternity men were deeply critical of women perceived to party too often or with too much abandon. These women were characterized as out of control and undignified. One fraternity man said, “If a woman’s so wasted she doesn’t know where she is, can’t barely walk straight, she’s not really showing a lot of respect for herself.” Another man made the connection between partying and sexual impropriety somewhat more clearly:

If you’re going to get shit faced and take your panties off and dance with your skirt up around your waist, that’s not showing a lot of class or respect for yourself. And guys will get certain ideas about you.

Men, in other words, will think she is promiscuous.

Egregious behaviors aside, more general partying also raised men’s suspicions. The men assumed that, as women progressed through college and continued to party, they picked up sexual experience, as seen in the following quotes:

After a certain while, you know she’s been around. You know she’s been with this guy or that guy, so you gotta take that into account.

It’s not right, but, girls get a reputation, you know. It’s like, you party pretty regularly, two or three years go by, and, you know, you can’t take those experiences back. Everybody knows who you been with.

Unless you know she’s a really good girl, and there are some, don’t get me wrong, unless you know she’s a really good, classy girl, she’s been around. . . . She’s hooked up with a bunch of guys.

Even if men had little actual knowledge of a woman’s prior sexual experiences, her participation in the party scene was taken as evidence of her promiscuity.

The fraternity men active in the party scene spoke often and at length about women’s sexual propriety. Because their masculine status and identities were tied to sexual interaction with women, they were preoccupied with women’s sexual reputations. They had to take into account the status and social value of women as potential hookup partners, and at least in the party scene, women’s sexual propriety was the largest determinant of this value. An upper-class woman with “experience” was seen as lower status and less desirable.

The Allure and Availability of First-Year Women

The fraternity men thus found themselves in a bind: They were expected to pursue casual sex with women, yet were wary of women known to have casual sex. Sexual contact with women

deemed low status could result in negative peer attention and a loss of social standing. First-year women helped men resolve this bind. These women, new to campus and naïve to the party scene, represented a kind of fresh and exciting new start. First-year women were seen as untainted by participation in the college party scene, as indicated in the quotes below from fraternity men:

Freshman girls, yeah they're new, you know. They haven't been around yet, so I think guys like that.

It's 'cause they're clean, you know. I don't mean to be offensive, but, it's like the song. We say, so fresh and so clean clean.

The old girls, you know them. You been with them. The new girls, they're new, like a new beginning. And I guess some guys are thinking, well I don't have to worry about, like, did my brother hit that, or did so and so hit that. Not at first, you know what I'm saying?

In a literal sense, first-year women represented a large replenishment of women available on the erotic market of the party scene. However, embedded in the men's comments that first-year women were "fresh" and "new" were beliefs that upper-class women were unclean and spoiled. Older women had "been around" and had been "hit" by (had sex with) other men.

The fraternity men also eroticized first-year women's youth and naïveté. The men spoke of first-year women in ways that equated sexiness with a lack of agency and, in a sense, a lack of sophistication. Typical was one man's belief that first-year women were "clueless, just clueless," and that this quality made them more appealing. In similar ways the men criticized first-year women as "eager" and "naïve." Importantly, these descriptions were often given in a humorous context, as if the men were amused and enticed by the women's ineptitude. In telling contrast, these same men often described upper-class women as sly and devious and gender relations as adversarial. They often characterized the party and hookup scene—and gender relations more broadly—as adversarial and riddled with conflict, as seen in the quotes below:

You can get a girl, and she'll let a guy talk to her all night and buy her drinks, and she knows she's not interested in him.

And girls always act like they're not interested, like they're not down, 'cause they always want to see how far that guy's willing to go. How much time, sometimes how much money they're willing to spend, you know buying them drinks or whatever, to actually get this girl to be down.

I think guys need to watch out for girls, 'cause girls have a lot of bad intents as well. . . . Getting a guy in trouble—let's say that a girl knows that a guy has a girlfriend, and she knows her. And she's trying to break them up, so she'll like flirt with him and get up on him.

According to this way of thinking, men and women were constantly trying to best one another, to have one's interests met at the expense of the other. Women could, for example, control men with their sexual appeal and ability to withhold sex. Hooking up was as a game in which some women were savvy competitors. For many fraternity men, upper-class women's greater sexual experience and increased social sophistication were unsexy. First-year women's cluelessness and pliability were.

Other factors made first-year women uniquely appealing and available to fraternity men. Parties at the beginning of the year were far more common than at other times of the year. In general, each fraternity held several nights of partying the first week after students arrived and each weekend for the first month. After this time, social networks among students became more settled, making it more difficult to meet new people. It was widely acknowledged that fraternity parties

in the beginning of the year were open to most students, but as fraternity “rush” was completed, fraternities began to exclude most nonaffiliated men.

Sorority women also reported settling into patterns of interacting with the same people in the same places. One sorority woman complained, “I see the same god damn people at the bar every night and there’s 40,000 kids that go here.” Another explained that “being in a sorority narrows you down in the guys you meet. You meet frat guys. . . . I only meet this one fraction of the people.” Sorority women also reported intentionally narrowing their social worlds and only partying at houses where they knew men and felt comfortable. As one sorority woman said in a focus group, “I think we could all name two or three frats that you wouldn’t go over there because you know the reason that they are inviting you over.” The men, she implied, just want sex.

Fraternity men described the party scene as “getting old” and familiar. As one man said offensively, “You see the same old tired hags.” Less offensively, another man reported that by the end of the year “you’ve met all the girls, you’ve hooked up or become friends. Whatever. Everybody knows each other, and that limits things. It gets real small.” Fraternity men, wary of women who had partied and accumulated sexual experience, eagerly awaited the arrival of first-year women each fall.

Discussion and Conclusion

The organization of gender and sexuality within this party scene made first-year women uniquely appealing and available to upper-class fraternity men. The fraternity men’s peer culture linked men’s masculine identities and status to their ability to hook up with women—but not just any women. Strong sexual double standards stigmatized many women, making them less appealing as sexual partners. In contrast, first-year women were seen as “fresh,” “clean,” and especially alluring.

The men also eroticized first-year women because of their naïveté and ineptitude. These qualities may appeal to men for a couple of reasons. First, the women may seem like easier sexual targets, reducing some of the men’s anxiety about their ability to attract women and procure sex. Research shows that men place great emphasis on their ability to sexually perform (Bordo, 1999; Fracher & Kimmel, 1995; Kimmel, 1996; Tiefer, 2004). Second, these women’s perceived passivity may appeal to men’s desire to feel active and in control—cornerstones of masculinity (Johnson, 2005; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Framing women as naïve and clueless likely enhances a man’s sense of power and agency. The pursuit of women can itself be a reward, as “girl hunting” often involves bonding rituals with other men and the collective performance of masculinity and heterosexuality (Grazian, 2007).

In comparison to upper-class women, first-year women may lack key knowledge about how to navigate the party scene safely—about how to maximize fun and minimize danger. They may not fully understand the intricate social structure of the party scene, including the meanings that govern interaction, the processes by which people are evaluated and sorted, and the relationships among different individuals. In their longitudinal study of a group of college women, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) found that many party-going women grew savvier but also weary of gender inequality: “Even those interested in the erotic competition of party scenes tired of it as they realized that the game was rigged” (p. 599). Perhaps part of these women’s frustrations was that younger women were valued more in this “rigged game.”

Fraternity men may be able to exploit first-year women’s vulnerability to their advantage. A first-year woman may be flattered when a man invites her to a private room, away from the main party space, and offers her better alcohol. She may not, however, understand the interactional expectations guiding his invitation or the implications of her acceptance. And she may not have the

skills to extricate herself when she wants the interaction to end. Although some may contend that she can leave “whenever she wants to,” face-to-face interactions are rarely so easy to negotiate. As social actors in specific interactional “scenes,” we commit to definitions of situations, particular roles, and presentations of selves (our own and those others “present” to us) (Goffman, 1959, 1967). We, as interacting individuals, constitute the structure and flow of these scenes, but the scenes also come to constrain us. This interactional complexity and negotiated subjectivity challenge common assumptions of free will—the assumption that, for example, we can leave whenever we want to. Disapproval and conflict (actual or the threat of) can be powerful coercive agents. The first-year woman in this situation may also fear appearing unsophisticated for agreeing to something and then wanting out. (Changing one’s mind is capricious and childlike; not understanding the situation in the first place is incompetent, etc.) Alcohol intoxication, of course, also influences the ability of this woman to act on her will and colors her judgment as she attempts to reconcile the interactional expectations of the moment with her own personal values and those of the peer culture. A man, privileged by age, gender, and likely physical size, may be able to impose his will—and undermine hers—with little effort and indiscernible coercion.

None of the men sampled in these two studies reported sexually assaulting women. And, to be clear, it was never my intention to identify individual men who do. Rather, in the spirit of existing research on sexual assault that has attempted to identify dangerous contexts and cultures, my aim was to explore the conditions under which women are likely assaulted. I extended these discussions in an attempt to explain why this danger exists, especially for first-year women.

The analyses presented here suggest a few possibilities for reducing this danger. Colleges and universities should ensure that students have appealing social options besides participating in fraternity-driven party scenes. Other research indicates that women feel pushed into the fraternity-driven party scene because few other venues exist for having fun and meeting men (Armstrong et al., 2006). However, party scenes do produce a great deal of fun, in addition to sexual danger, and likely help further institutions’ formal goals related to student involvement, retention, and, years later, alumni donation. That said, steps could be taken to help women successfully and healthily navigate party scenes—to have fun without being exploited. Such education might be more effective if delivered from peers, especially upper-class women with personal experience partying.

Other strategies could address men. Programming could educate men about women’s negative experiences in the party scene, including sexual assault. Research shows that many college men who sexually assault do not understand their actions to be criminally or ethically wrong (Karjane et al., 2005; Krebs et al., 2007). Men could also be encouraged to question the link between peer status, heavy drinking, and the sexual objectification of women. Kimmel (2008) stressed the importance of helping men “break the silence” of the “guy code,” or the unwritten rules of what it means to be a man in emerging adulthood (p. 280). This silence makes it difficult for men to discern other men’s individual thoughts and feelings, making it more likely that group think and behavior will go unchallenged. Yet, as research on college drinking shows, students often overestimate the amount their peers drink, and these misperceptions lead students to drink more than they actually want (Kimmel, 2008).

As the objectification of women often functions as a way men bond with other men, researchers and fraternities would be wise to identify examples of when bonding occurs without sexism and misogyny. As Boswell and Spade’s (1996) research on fraternities and rape culture showed, not all fraternities are the same; some, indeed, are safer places for women. Fraternity culture is variable, and the conditions that produce sexual danger for women are not inevitable. Therefore, fraternity men and those administrators who oversee them should be trained to recognize the structures and processes that produce sexual danger.

A peer culture focused on partying and hooking up provides students with many opportunities to find meaning, purpose, and fun, making it stubbornly resistant to change. It is not, however, impervious to intervention. The continuing problem of sexual assault on college campuses presses upon us to find ways to ensure that peer culture maximizes student learning and development while minimizing danger.

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