

DIGNITY

Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence

Volume 4 | Issue 4


Article 2

12-2019

The Myth of the "Gray Area" in Rape: Fabricating Ambiguity and Deniability

Maddie Brockbank
McMaster University, brockbam@mcmaster.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity>

 Part of the [Criminology Commons](#), [Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brockbank, Maddie (2019) "The Myth of the "Gray Area" in Rape: Fabricating Ambiguity and Deniability," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 4: Iss. 4, Article 2.

DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2019.04.04.02

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol4/iss4/2><https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol4/iss4/2>

This Research Note is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

The Myth of the "Gray Area" in Rape: Fabricating Ambiguity and Deniability

Abstract

Sexual violence is a pervasive issue identified on post-secondary campuses. Existing research focuses almost exclusively on an American context and quantitatively explores the frequency with which sexual assault occurs on campuses. As men are overrepresented as perpetrators, it is necessary to investigate their perspectives on the issue. The present study qualitatively examines the perspectives of white, heterosexual, male students to facilitate dialogue about sexual violence on university campuses in Ontario. Several themes emerged, specifically pertaining to negotiations of consent, a perceived "grey area," peer influence, and how the social construction of masculinity fosters specific beliefs that excuse sexually violent beliefs, language, and actions. The present research study illustrates a need to explore this subject further to improve sexual violence prevention efforts.

Keywords

Canada, sexual violence, rape, consent, "gray area," masculinity, ambiguity, deniability, post-secondary, campus, men, white, perpetrators, rape culture, perception

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

The author extends her deepest appreciation of and thanks to McMaster University's Office of the Vice-President, McMaster University's Research and International Affairs, McMaster University's Faculty of Social Sciences, the McMaster University's Research Ethics Board (MREB), and McMaster University's Office of Experiential Education (EE). I am beyond grateful to have had this opportunity to pursue a dream I have had for some time. I would also like to thank my faculty supervisor, Dr. Saara Greene, for her support, belief in me, encouragement, guidance, and endless patience throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. Ameil Joseph for encouraging me to submit my work for academic publication and for instilling confidence in me to follow through. Thank you to the external community consultants that gave me a sense of direction and continuously reminded me of the purpose of this study. Lastly, a special thanks to the participants in the present study for being so open and engaging. Without all of you, this project would not have been possible. Dignity thanks the following people for reviewing and commenting on this article: John Foubert, Dean, College of Education, Union University, USA; Robert Jensen, Professor Emeritus, Journalism, University of Texas, USA; and Jody Raphael, Senior Research Fellow, Emerita, DePaul University College of Law.

THE MYTH OF THE "GRAY AREA" IN RAPE: FABRICATING AMBIGUITY AND DENIABILITY

Maddie Brockbank

McMaster University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is a pervasive issue identified on post-secondary campuses. Existing research focuses almost exclusively on an American context and quantitatively explores the frequency with which sexual assault occurs on campuses. As men are overrepresented as perpetrators, it is necessary to investigate their perspectives on the issue. The present study qualitatively examines the perspectives of white, heterosexual, male students to facilitate dialogue about sexual violence on university campuses in Ontario. Several themes emerged, specifically pertaining to negotiations of consent, a perceived "grey area," peer influence, and how the social construction of masculinity fosters specific beliefs that excuse sexually violent beliefs, language, and actions. The present research study illustrates a need to explore this subject further to improve sexual violence prevention efforts.

KEYWORDS

Canada, sexual violence, rape, consent, "gray area," masculinity, ambiguity, deniability, post-secondary, campus, men, white, perpetrators, rape culture, perception

Sexual violence is an umbrella term that refers to "a sexual act committed against someone without that person's freely given consent" (Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra, 2014). This definition includes sexual assault, which refers to unwanted sexual contact, and noncontact unwanted sexual experiences, including verbal harassment and unconsented exposure to pornography (Basile et al., 2014). Approximately one in five women and one in 16 men will experience attempted or completed sexual assault while attending a post-secondary institution (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, & Stevens, 2011; Department of Justice, 2013). Perpetrators of rape are predominantly male, and an estimated fifty-seven percent are white (Department of Justice, 2013; University of Michigan Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center, n.d.; Katz, 2006; Lambert & Black, 2016). Thirty-one percent of perpetrators are aged 18 to 29, which falls within the typical age range of those attending a post-secondary institution (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015; Department of Justice, 2013). Several of the cited studies presented useful data regarding the profile of a perpetrator, yet the focus on quantitative information does not thoroughly examine why sexual assault occurs and the contexts in which it happens.

Qualitative research may allow for further explorations of the empirical evidence and its implications, specifically pertaining to how non-criminalized men narrate their experiences of negotiating consent. For example, Jozkowski (2012)

found in an open-ended survey given to college students that participants in their sample subscribed to a traditional sexual script, which illustrates men as sexual initiators and women as sexual gatekeepers in the process of negotiating and obtaining consent. Moreover, Grazian (2007) integrates the concept of performative masculinity in contemporary heterosexual courtship rituals in the social endorsement of dominant sexual myths and traditional scripts that depict men as sexual aggressors.

Further to the intersection between masculinity and sexuality, existing and emerging research has attempted to examine risk factors surrounding college-aged men in perpetrating sexual violence and sociocultural attitudes that might exacerbate the risk, including endorsement of traditional and gendered sexual scripts, through mixed methods means (Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005; Orchowski, Berkowitz, Boggis, & Oesterle, 2016; Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010; Meuhlenhard & Lincoln, 1987; Meuhlenhard & Kimes, 1999). These studies examine male students' attitudes toward survivors and how they perceive sexual assault, including rape myth acceptance, which here refers to stereotyped beliefs about the act of rape becoming internalized to create a culture of hostility toward survivors of sexual assault (Angelone, Mitchell, & Grossi, 2015; Bohner, Pina, Tendayi, & Siebler, 2010).

The qualitative narration provided in some studies has allowed for increased understanding of how consent is negotiated and potentially miscommunicated, how sexual violence becomes a concern and possibility in gendered sociosexual rituals, and how men can be socialized to consistently embody and internalize the role of the initiator in heterosexual interactions with women (Muehlenhard & Lincoln, 1987; Beres, 2007; Jozkowski, 2012; Jozkowski, 2013; Grazian, 2007).

Despite these necessary explorations, much of the existing literature is set in an American context, thus limiting its transferability and generalizability to the Canadian university system. For instance, studies often highlight fraternity groups and collegiate athletes participating in Division I sports programs as at the highest risk for perpetrating sexual assault and rape culture (Voller & Long, 2010; Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006; Foubert, 2007; Katz, 2006; Kimmel, 2008). In Canadian universities, fraternities are scarce and rarely have the same impact that the American system has on organizing young men on campus. Moreover, although there are varsity athletics offered in Canadian schools, they are also not as popular or influential in comparison to the U.S.A. Research on sexual violence on Canadian campuses is limited, which precludes scholars from understanding these experiences in this context. Additionally, few studies focus exclusively on young white men's perceptions and understandings of violence against women despite their overrepresentation as potential perpetrators.

The issues of socialization of masculinity, the university context, and the profile of a perpetrator grounds this study's intent to investigate how young, white men perceive sexual violence on campus, and how these factors may foster a rape culture within the university context. The theoretical underpinning of social norm theory, which posits that individuals' beliefs and behaviors are often influenced by misperceptions of their peers' beliefs and actions, will guide the research.

Previous studies have integrated social norm theory to explain how sexual violence is conceptualized by university students, namely young men, through misinterpretation, miscommunication, and perpetuation of misinformation (Gidycz et al., 2011; Jewkes et al., 2015; Jozkowski, 2012; Grazian, 2007). For example, in

their discussion of disparagement humor, Ford & Ferguson (2004) provide an explanation for sexist humor, which often incorporates elements of sexual violence, by suggesting that ongoing exposure to sexist jokes create social norms in which these ideas become tolerated, accepted, and left unchallenged. Moreover, male peer support theory, a framework pioneered by Schwartz & DeKeseredy (2013) examining male peers and the resources they provide as potentially legitimating and endorsing violence against women, will be considered.

As roughly 98% of perpetrators are male, it is significant to investigate how men understand and perceive sexual violence on campus through the lens of social norm theory (Department of Justice, 2013; University of Michigan Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center, n.d.; Katz, 2006; Lambert & Black, 2016). Phenomenological qualitative research, which refers to investigating subjective narrations of lived experiences, will conceptually guide the study by providing participants with the opportunity to discuss their understandings of sexual violence as informed by their own experiences of growing up as young, white men.

Methods

This research project was conducted over a span of four months as a part of an Undergraduate Student Research Award (USRA) at an Ontario, Canada university. Seven male participants were recruited through online postings on a few different university social media groups (that is, on Facebook). As a result of participants responding to the online posting, recruitment often occurred through word of mouth and snowballing from participants informing their peers about the project. For example, after interviewing one male student, he told a peer from another Ontario university about the project, who then contacted the student researcher with the intent to participate. Those who contacted the student researcher to participate in the interview were given an information packet with details of the project, the questions they would be asked, and the university's ethical board's approval of the project. After they reviewed this information and again agreed to participate, an interview time was set-up in a private office space for a one-on-one semi-structured interview.

Ten questions were formulated by the student researcher and the faculty supervisor for the participants to answer in the interviews. These questions included topics surrounding how they understand consent and sexual violence, whether they think sexual violence is a problem on university campuses, their thoughts on their university's attempts to educate students about consent and sexual violence, how they understand the concept of "being a man" as it relates to talking about these issues, and how they think the university community can make a "safer space" regarding talking about sexual violence.

The interviews were facilitated by the student researcher, who is a white, female, undergraduate student, and trained by the faculty supervisor in conducting semi-structured interviews. Based on her identity, some of the participants interviewed were distant university or secondary school peers of the interviewer; however, this was addressed prior to the interviews in a review of confidentiality and the informed consent process. The interviewer reviewed the informed consent form prior to the interview with the participant, discussed any questions that may be present, reminded the interviewee of their rights to withdraw at any time, and provided the interviewee with social support resources should they be needed.

Participants received their compensation, a gift card to a local restaurant, prior to the interviews.

Not by design, seven white male students were interviewed for this research study. All participating individuals were inadvertently within the same demographic (able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual, within the age range of 19 to 22, previously attended Catholic secondary schools prior to postsecondary, and middle-to-upper class).

As the interviewer was a female student, this may have influenced how participants responded to questions; in some regard, perhaps it censored some of their answers based on their comfort level discussing sexual violence with a woman. Interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes in length, depending on how each participant answered each question. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent. Participants were offered the option of being contacted for a follow-up interview, to which all indicated consent and de-briefing two weeks after the interviews were completed. All participants were debriefed about their interview, and all expressed comfort with what was discussed. Following these sessions, the audio files were transcribed and thematically analyzed by the student researcher. The themes that will be outlined below were derived from concepts observed by the student researcher to be repeated in the interviews and the literature.

Findings

In the following sections, emerging themes in the interviews will be discussed.

Consent: Verbal vs. Nonverbal Negotiation

Most of the participants discussed the complexity of negotiating consent through a combination of verbal and non-verbal cues. The process of verbally obtaining consent was deemed unrealistic in social contexts for a variety of reasons, including fear of vulnerability, rejection, and eventual social consequences (that is, derision from peers). This attitude seemed to be reinforced by peer interactions. Moreover, participants expressed that the language taught in on-campus sexual violence policy and education was awkward if used in sexual encounters and risked “killing the mood” and ending the encounter prematurely. For example, one participant stated, “Because you rarely hear people ask you, like, “hey, do I have your consent to sleep with you?” [laughs] It never really happens like that.” Another participant elaborated further on negotiating consent in social interaction by adding:

But the problem nowadays is, like, you wouldn't get a verbal [agreement]...like, it's hard to get that. I mean, you probably could, like, don't get me wrong. I just think someone would think it's, like, maybe out of the ordinary because no one's probably asked that question [...] It's hard to ask a question like that without coming off as, like, weird. The person might not answer the question and be like, “What is this guy saying?”

In this response, the participant suggests that asking a direct question prior to or during a sexual encounter in an attempt to identify potential boundaries creates a sense of vulnerability. Because asking for consent is deemed socially awkward or unusual, the expectation is that a sexual partner will be put off by a direct, verbal question, thus risking potential sexual and social rejection if the partner withdraws from the interaction and shares information about the encounter with others.

Since a direct, verbal negotiation was viewed as socially unrealistic, the participants were asked to elaborate further on nonverbal cues that indicate consent. One participant identified "flirting" and "body language" as a means to "give off the signs" that a female individual is willing for a male partner to initiate a sexual encounter. This "flirting" is multi-layered and outlines unspoken steps that lead to "hooking up," but must be carefully navigated to maintain social composure and avoid social repercussions (that is, rejection, derision, and so on). As one participant noted, "It's more, like...all actions and how the person is, I guess, pursuing you as well." Further elaborating on this process, another participant indicated, "There are certain points of a hook up that give you the green light for sex." Non-verbal cues included a social practice dubbed "eye-fucking" where a heated stare from across the room suggests sexual interest and may motivate one party to approach the other.

Participants discussed identifying the boundaries of consent through testing potential limits by continuing sexual advances until they are met with clear resistance, which can be in the form of their partner saying a firm "no," pushing them away, and expressing physical discomfort. Most suggested that interpreting non-verbal "signs" of consent and resistance are a product of being a good judge of situational contexts, which was seen as an inherent knowledge within the individual. As one participant articulated:

I think I'm a pretty good judge of scenarios and, like, if I can tell that someone is not interested, I'll immediately back off and save myself from embarrassment and humiliating myself. Because I think, at that point, you can kind of take two paths. You can kind of, like, say, "Alright, this girl's not interested, I'm gonna go try someone else or just save myself from whatever," or there's like, the "I'm gonna keep pushing path," which most guys, I think, take that one, which I don't agree with.

The idea that males can interpret cues that indicate a female partner is either not interested or is unsure of pursuing a sexual encounter perpetuates the image of males as initiators and females as gatekeepers in sexual exchanges (Jozkowski, 2012). This conceptualization of negotiating consent through testing potential boundaries until resistance is identified is then linked to possibly creating a platform for sexual violence as one can choose to continue "pushing" a partner rather than face and accept rejection.

The "Gray Area" and the "Fine Lines"

A frequently debated concept discussed by participants was the elusive "grey area" that appears contextually in sexual interactions. Here, the grey area is defined as a series of actions, words, and behaviors that linger between two concrete ends of the sexual spectrum, which are defined as a consensual sexual encounter and a sexual assault or rape. Navigating the boundary between these two extremes was described by participants as locating and avoiding the "fine line" that acts as the gateway to sexually violent behavior. However, as one participant noted, "It's a problem in the fact that people just aren't able to, like, identify when that line stops. Especially when they're drunk." The ability to identify this line is blurred by different contextual factors that subsequently complicate the process of negotiating consent. Although some different factors were referenced by participants, such as mixed signals regarding sexual interest from a potential partner, the primary catalyst in producing the grey area is alcohol consumption. Participants posited that the grey area can be bolstered through both intentional and unintentional

alcohol usage and that it is increasingly difficult to identify the “fine lines” under the influence.

Participants articulated a tension in navigating the grey area and understanding violations of “the line.” Differing understandings of consent and the role of alcohol in negotiating it emerged through attempts to define both terms. One participant noted, “The way I can interpret consent is a lot different than how you can interpret consent, and that’s where there’s the grey area, and that’s how feelings are hurt, people are hurt.” One participant identified that intoxication can be intentionally introduced to facilitate a sexual encounter, thus setting a platform for sexual violence while avoiding accountability. He elaborated on this idea by stating:

I’d say the biggest issue is, um, girls getting too drunk. I think you need to focus a lot more on where it starts and that’s like, “hey, maybe you shouldn’t buy this girl nine double vodka crans” [laughs]. If a guy at a bar buys a girl nine drinks, and he’s trying to get her to come home with him the whole time, and every drink is a step towards her doing that, like, even that’s kind of...yeah, that’s not really a good thing to do. You shouldn’t have to get a girl, like, belligerent to go home with you.

The intentional use of alcohol to inebriate a partner and thus potentially loosen her inhibitions or diminish their ability to reject sexual advances is here cited by a participant as a significant issue that is not being sufficiently addressed. The motivation behind using a common dating practice, such as buying a potential partner a drink, is predatory when the goal is to intoxicate and incapacitate a partner for manipulative and sexual purposes. The grey area is then deliberately manufactured as a justification for sexual violence because of the societal notion that actions committed under the influence apparently lack malintent. Despite this awareness, the onus is again initially placed on women to avoid “getting too drunk” in order to prevent the inevitability of on-campus sexual violence.

Discussion of the grey area revealed gaps in university-aged students’ understanding of consent and sexual violence. When asked about areas of their own confusion, participants frequently cited the role of alcohol and how it creates uncertainty around negotiating consent. As one participant inquired, “Like, can a drunk person give consent? For sure, that is the main one where sexual consent can be, like, a blurred line.” Participants indicated that current on-campus sexual violence prevention campaigns rarely or insufficiently address the differentiation between intoxication and incapacitation, which then translates to who is able to give consent when alcohol is a factor. Several participants did not know the difference between the two terms and were unsure of when an intoxicated person crosses the “line” and becomes an incapacitated person.

Peer Factor

As none of the participants disclosed any participation in or perpetration of a sexual assault or rape, the use of sexually violent language among peers was the most relevant and frequently discussed aspect of the study. The prevalence of “rape jokes” emerged as an everyday, common, and normalized social practice between male peers that trivializes the prevalence of sexual violence while belittling those who experience it or are at risk of experiencing it. Moreover, “locker room talk” was introduced as another bonding social practice among male peers in which sexual encounters are detailed in open conversation and those with more sexually

adventurous stories to share are praised, thus gaining social capital. Explicit discussion of sexual encounters often includes glorifying "destroying" a sexual partner through "rough sex." Through conversation with participants, it became apparent that the peer role is a strong influence on acceptance of and participation in the use of sexually violent language and humor, which maintains the potential to facilitate sexually violent behavior.

One participant aptly summarized the recurring and underlying themes of the peer influence, stating:

With my friends, I mean, like...anything goes, really. I mean, to an extent, obviously. Like, no one I know is committing a crime, but, like, some of the stuff that's said, like...I would not say or repeat in front of people.

This statement acted as a gateway into revealing the multilayered, unspoken standards of behavior that male individuals are often expected to uphold in a peer group, which closely reflect the tenets of male peer theory. Peers as a primary source of information in learning about sex, which participants reported as a replacement for a lack of sex education in Catholic elementary and high school, then provided the opportunity to establish a group standard that was communally determined by male peers. This group behavior, described as a "mob mentality" by one participant, is often contingent on internalization of traditionally masculine concepts at its intersection with sexuality, such as promotion of sexual aggression and degradation of sexual passivity. For example, as another participant stated:

No group of guys gets together and goes like, "aw, dude, I was about to have sex with this girl and she said, like, 'ah, I don't know' and I just didn't do it, and that's awesome" [laughs]. Although that is, like, the right thing to do, like...peers, I would say no, I didn't learn anything or talk to them about consent or sexual violence or whatever. I learned through friends and stuff for sex though. Consent was not through friends because, like...it is the right thing to do, whatever, but it's not something you're gonna, like, brag about to your friends. But you do end up turning to them for information, for sure.

The male peer environment is here depicted as unsupportive and uncondusive to the conceptual basis of sexual violence prevention efforts that focus on open encouragement of negotiating consent appropriately. Instead, the notion of "bragging" emerged as a primary motivator in peer interactions as it pertains to discussing sexual encounters to then garner social acceptance and capital. Learning about sex through peer discussion promotes social norms that complicate internal understandings of "right" and "wrong" as it pertains to sexual behavior, consent, and sexual violence. In this, the male peer influence might endorse and legitimate violence against women, which reflects male peer theory as a guiding framework in this research.

Expanding on the peer role as a source of education about sex and the establishment of social norms surrounding sex, the practice of "bragging" or "boasting" about sexual escapades serves as a form of bonding and social capital within the group. One participant described the "locker room talk" setting, stating:

Some of the guys and the way they talk about shit...it's pretty brutal [...] Anything from referring to girls as, like, broads or bitches, or like, "I fucked

that broad,” you know, stuff like that. A lot of guys try to boast. That’s probably, like, the majority of it, locker room talk. And other guys saying, like, “Oh, that definitely didn’t happen” and, like, “You’re a pussy for not doing this,” or “You’re still a virgin” or whatever.

In this description, the peer group is again depicted as an unsupportive environment that often includes an individual’s attempts to challenge or disprove others’ sexual narratives while endorsing and asserting their own. High levels of sexual activity, that are often paired with ambivalence or indifference toward a sexual partner, are glorified and praised in the peer group setting. As a result, social norm theory emerges as male individuals begin to perceive specific behaviors as norms and expectations based on peer-group conversation, such as being highly sexually active, being indifferent toward sexual partners, labeling sexual partners as “broads” or “bitches,” and pursuing various sexually adventurous encounters. Many participants expressed that they did not embody or take up these prescribed roles in their sexual and romantic relationships; however, they often stated they adapt in the group setting to meet the unspoken standard of behavior by asserting masculinity through claiming to meet the previously mentioned perceived norms. When males conform to these standards, they achieve a sense of social acceptance from the peer group and are less likely to be challenged, excluded, or ridiculed.

The disclosure process of sexual encounters and the acceptance of comments made by other peers about the encounter was discussed as again conforming to an unspoken group standard. As one participant noted:

Crossing the line...it’s weird. I don’t know, there’s not really a line for, like, my friend group. No one’s gonna brag about, like, having unconsented sex, and I’m not saying that even happens. But, um, when the consent’s in check and everything, people, guys like to brag about, like, you know...like, “Oh, I had sex with this girl and we did this, and this, and it was crazy.” That’s all the stuff and they can detail it and they love to brag about it. Um, different people have different extents and stuff. But when you’re in a group of guys, you kind of have to, like, adjust your line for the group’s sake.

Personal understandings of “the line” or the boundary between what an individual is comfortable with and uncomfortable with are compensated to meet “the line” established by the group. Bragging about sexual adventures, which might include fairly graphic descriptions of what took place to legitimize the individual’s narrative to the group, is prioritized over assessing and considering each individual’s comfort level in the discussion. Moreover, when a peer expresses discomfort surrounding this unspoken standard, he risks being derided, challenged, and excluded by peers through questioning his masculine identity. To avoid derision, a male individual will often accept the group’s decision about where “the line” stands. As a result, the “anything goes” standard is maintained through communal silence and complacency.

Further elaborating on the use of potentially offensive language to bond the peer group, the prevalence of “rape jokes” emerged as a social practice among males beginning as early as age 12 and spanning throughout adolescence and early adulthood. A rape joke is a contextual comment that trivializes the various factors and impacts associated with rape and sexual assault. Participants reported that these “jokes” are normal, everyday, and common in the peer group setting;

however, they were also able to articulate that the jokes are used only in a specific context with other male peers and not with those that may be offended (that is, women, those who have experienced sexual violence, authority figures, and so on.). As one participant stated:

If a girl's in a room and they feel uncomfortable already, and someone makes a rape joke to make her feel more uncomfortable or it happens, that's kind of sexual violence or I guess it is. Yeah, if you're in a group of guys and someone says, "Oh, I'm gonna rape you," like, a guy to a guy, I don't think there's much harm done there. It's kind of making light of a situation, which is not good. It's kind of like, if I made a joke about 9/11 and Muslim terrorism or something, it would kind of roll off my tongue, maybe some people would laugh and stuff, and I wouldn't think about it. But if I found out, like, that the guy sitting next me, his dad died in 9/11, my whole mood would change, like, "Oh, my god, I just fucked up." It's the same thing with that, right? If someone's been raped or a girl that already feels uncomfortable, like, that's not okay. If it offends someone, that's the line. Yeah, that's where it goes bad, I think.

The "line" that divides an appropriate context for a male individual to say a rape joke from an inappropriate setting is here based on the visibility of potential consequences. Young men in the present study appear to perceive gender identity and inferred personal experience as cues to censor their language in fear of suffering social consequences, which might include being challenged by those the comment offended, getting 'in trouble' through authority figures, and facing social exclusion. The comparison between rape jokes and "9/11 jokes" is interesting as it emphasizes the link between participants' social locations of privilege and their subsequent ability to "make light of" systemic oppressions. As participants were white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, and of a higher socioeconomic status, they may not see the potential impacts of "controversial" humor on the subject as it does not directly challenge their social locations. Contextual humor is then contingent on perceived proximity of the relationship, visibility of differences in social location, and risk of potential consequences.

It is important to note that sexual violence is invisible, thus complicating participants' asserted system of determining who might be impacted by rape jokes; in other words, it is impossible to know who has been affected by sexual violence and who would be hurt by comments that deride rape. Participants appeared unable to recognize that young men in their peer groups may have been affected by sexual violence, thus creating a platform for them to be hurt, offended, or uncomfortable when a rape joke is made. For instance, one participant stated:

Like, in a friend group or whatever, guys will make them [rape jokes] all the time. I have before, I'm not gonna lie. I think if it stops at a joke and it's not publicly made, where it's not something where you're shaming someone or you're trying to put someone down or hurt someone, when it stays within closed doors kind of thing, it's not okay, but it's something that you can just eliminate and sometimes it is a joke.

The ability to identify when a rape joke might be interpreted as inappropriate or offensive maintains an awareness of its implications, yet it is contingent on the perceived risk of suffering consequences, such as "getting in trouble" or being socially ostracized by others. Moreover, the "line" is communally determined to be

drawn when an individual is intending to shame another; this suggests that *intention* or *meaning* is used as a justification for certain types of language. The assertion that sexually violent humor can be used “behind closed doors” as long as it does not intentionally offend someone is troubling as it neglects to recognize how their social positioning allows them to make such a decision. This unspoken value system within the peer group perpetuates a culture of silence, protection, and complacency.

The Inevitability of Sexual Violence

The staggering percentage of sexual violence on campus, paired with anecdotal experiences of hearing about instances of sexual assault, emerged as a platform for reinforcing the belief that sexual violence is inevitable. When one participant was asked to elaborate on why he perceived on-campus sexual violence as inevitable, he provided an intriguing and disturbing metaphor to describe the logic behind his perspective. He stated:

It’s like when you go into a pool of ducks and you shoot a shotgun. You’re likely gonna hit some, as opposed to a pond of two ducks. It’s just, like...batting average [...] It’s just a time when your hormones are going, so, like, I think it’s inevitable.

The violent analogy maintains several troubling conceptions of how sexual violence can occur in the university context. Firstly, the obvious comparison to a “sitting duck” image is disconcerting as it here suggests that young women, who are overwhelmingly represented as victims in on-campus sexual assaults, will inevitably experience sexual violence with little protection. Moreover, the use of a hunting metaphor perpetuates the notion of young men as predators and young women as prey, which was continuously reflected in participants’ language and overall experience in seeking sexual encounters. The combination of these images creates an overall dehumanizing effect reducing both parties to animals that are at mercy to predetermined fates, with young women inevitably being prey and young men frequently becoming predators. Taking up these roles then becomes prescribed and dissolves a sense of agency within young men and women, thus allowing them to become mere statistics, such as “batting average.” Another participant elaborated further on the belief that on-campus sexual violence is inevitable, stating:

When you put a bunch of young adults into one place where they live together and alcohol is always available, and binge-drinking is, like, the norm, I just think sexual violence is bound to happen. It’s just, like, the worst scenario for it to occur. You know, there might be a weird guy on your floor a few doors down who tries to hit on you at a bar, and you can’t escape him. And it just gets so much worse with, like, binge-drinking and all that. Like, bouncers at a club aren’t going to stop it from happening and there’s no one else there to make sure hook-ups are, like, consensual.

The contextual aspects that are frequently present in the university context, here being binge-drinking and proximity in living arrangements, are described as catalysts that increase the likelihood and inevitability that sexual violence will occur. The lack of a regulating body or authoritative presence is also referenced as a factor that exacerbates the contributing aspects as discussed that put the university population at risk of experiencing or perpetrating sexual violence.

Being a Man vs. "Be a Man"

Participants were asked to reflect on what "being a man" meant to them in a personal and social sense. An intriguing debate emerged based on the context and interpretation of the idea; specifically, participants identified a tension between personal and societal definitions of "being a man." As one participant articulated, "When I think of 'be a man,' I don't think of 'respectful,' and I don't think of being a gentleman and stuff. You know, to me, that's what it is, but I don't think that's what it is in society." The difference between "being a man" and being told to "be a man" was discussed as a factor that exacerbates internal tensions in navigating personal and social expectations to assert a masculine identity. Moreover, perceived traits that are markers of "being a man" were also identified as potential contributors to participating in or perpetuating patterns that facilitate sexually violent ideas, language, and behavior.

The statement "be a man" was described as a common concept articulated in different ways while participants were growing up. One participant indicated:

I mean, like, when people usually say, "be a man," it's, like, you're at a bar, you're nervous about going to talk to a girl, and it's like, "man up, go talk to her!" You're nervous to play a hockey game against a good team: "Man up, go play them!" You know, you're in these scenarios and you're feeling nervous or second-guessing or sad, and "man up" just means, like, your skin turns into fucking, you know, steel or whatever, and you've just got to do it.

In the participants' responses, the formation of a masculine identity is constructed as the embodiment of emotionlessness, strength, individuality, aggression, dominance, and control. Additionally, "being a man" is the absence of passivity, softness, emotionality, and compassionate thoughts and language, which are traits that are often associated with traditional femininity. This combination—the rejection of all things feminine and the reinforcement of quintessential masculinity—manifests in young men feeling pressured to conform and meet a specific standard of behavior. Other men around them, which participants noted were their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, peers, and coaches, then evaluate asserted masculinity through observation of their language, behavior, skill, and overall persona. If a young man is assessed to have not met the standard, terms like "be a man," "man up," or other variations are used to enforce traditional masculinity while simultaneously extinguishing perceived femininity.

Considering the role of socially constructed masculinity in shaping identity and behavior, participants were urged to consider how traditional traits imposed upon them through the "be a man" narrative might act as a catalyst to facilitate and promote sexually violent ideologies and behaviors. As one participant noted:

How we just talked about in society, like, the man is dominant, so I guess that contributes to the whole sexual violence thing. The man's dominant so it's the man who's taking charge and committing the act of sexual violence. It's, like, always the man who has done this, done that, whatever, so I think that could also play a part because, like, it's always been the man who is so involved, so now it's the man who took control and, like, stepped over the line. Maybe just that idea that men are always in charge, so maybe that gave them the original idea that it was fine for them to commit an act of sexual violence. Something like that.

Here, participants suggest that societal expectations surrounding “being a man” potentially create a platform for sexual violence as men are expected to initiate sexual encounters with unwavering confidence and prowess. The gendered conception that men are “dominant” and “in control” thus shapes sociosexual interactions where he must assert himself, initiate a sexual encounter, and test potential boundaries.

Participants voiced a clear distinction between society’s expectations of “being a man” as compared to their own personal definitions of the term. As one participant aptly summarized:

Realistically, that’s just a stupid statement. Like, ‘be a man.’ What does that even mean? [...] I think it should just be about being a good person. I feel like being a man isn’t really any different than being a woman. We’re all just people, right?

This response was promising and reflected an emerging conceptualization of masculinity that is less confining, demanding, and dichotomous. It is important for young men to challenge existing epistemology that links masculinity with specific behaviors, such as aggression, dominance, and arrogance, and each participant took the time to question the intention behind being told to “be a man.” Participants frequently noted that their personal conceptualization of “being a man” included respect, kindness, emotionality, support, considerate, and embodying a leadership role through the promotion of these traits. Although it is significant that participants perceived identity as being decidedly non-gendered, we must still consider the existing force of traditional ideas of “being a man” that continue to shape and influence the construction of masculinity while also deliberately fostering the creation of different, personal definitions as described by participants.

Discussion: Moving Forward

This study validates its theoretical underpinnings, including social norm theory and male peer theory. Participants indicated that the formation of their beliefs, attitudes, and language around sexual violence and consent were influenced by perceptions of their peers’ beliefs and actions; however, upon reflection, each participant emphasized that their beliefs and attitudes were different from what their peers perceived. Furthermore, male peer theory was visible in the findings as participants articulated the potential adverse impacts of “locker room talk” and “rape jokes” within the male peer setting. In this process, resources provided by the male peer group risks endorsing, euphemizing, and justifying sexually violent ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and language, which was frequently excused by participants as a significant and inevitable part of interactions with other young men. However, the “anything goes” standard that was established in group settings appeared to deviate from their own personal understandings, perceptions, and feelings around consent, sex, sexual violence, and performing masculinity, which suggests that the male peer group misperceives each members’ intentions, feelings, and experiences of these topics.

Despite the absence of fraternities and highly publicized collegiate athletics in the Ontarian university context, the influence of the male peer group emerged as a significantly influential organizing body in constructing participants’ understandings of sex, consent, and violence at its intersections with a male identity.

A frequent assertion from participants was that sexual violence prevention and education need to be implemented into earlier stages of development, specifically in elementary and high school settings. One participant noted that since sexual activity among young men and women can begin as early as pre-teen years, attempting to teach consent and sexual violence in university is simply "too late." All the participants indicated that they attended school in the Catholic education system throughout their childhood and/or adolescence, which significantly limited their knowledge and understanding of sex, consent, and sexual violence. Although participants applauded the university system for presenting important information in consent and sexual violence prevention presentations, they emphasized the need for early education to better equip youth approaching sexual activity.

In the current context, participants indicated that they often would turn toward media and peers for information about sex, which then instigated inaccurate beliefs and ideas about these topics. For instance, participants suggested that media was a primary source for education about sex while growing up, and that many television and film depictions of sexual activity involved problematic understandings of consent (that is, kissing a partner when they are angry or saying "no," token resistance, seduction, and so on.). Additionally, they would supplement this (mis)information with peer understandings and perspectives of sexual activity, which was often informed through media, pornography use, and anecdotal experiences of sexual interactions. As mentioned previously in this study, the male peer group frequently provides an unsupportive and highly critical environment for young men to negotiate their sexual development as they risk derision and exclusion if they do not meet the unspoken standards present (that is, being highly sexually active with many physically attractive young women at a relatively young age). The combination of these illustrations and perspectives of sex may then have an adverse and dangerous effect on how young men develop an understanding of consent and sexual violence.

Participants contextualized this argument supporting consent-based sexual education for younger peoples and further elaborate on why they feel it is needed by stating:

I think starting a little younger with the whole knowledge of consent and stuff will probably make it easier to talk about when you're older and go into more detail. Not once did I hear in elementary school, like, about what the hell consent is, so I feel, if it was brought to your attention younger, it'll be a lot easier to elaborate on and go into more detail and specific when you're older, and you'll be more comfortable talking about it.

Participants emphasized the importance of educating men and women at a young age as it will foster the development of healthy attitudes toward sex and consent. Failure to discuss these topics risks instigating and reinforcing misinformation, misunderstandings, and potentially problematic attitudes and behaviors surrounding sexual violence. Moreover, if the conversation around consent and sexual violence is normalized in elementary and high school curriculum, participants believe that this will enhance knowledge and comfortability surrounding the issue and thus facilitate a safer space for conversation. Additionally, this might reinforce behaviors to support survivors and establish prevention methods among the younger population, thus creating a culture that is collectively against rape and its ideological characteristics.

Although improved and developmentally relevant education is necessary in the school system, sexual violence prevention efforts should be employed by engaging the male peer group to address the influences of social norms. The Calgary-based WiseGuyz program is an example of a seemingly successful prevention effort by connecting dialogue and information about sexual health, violence, and gender to interacting with male peers (Claussen, 2017; Calgary Sexual Health Centre, 2013).

As discussed in this study, the peer group's influence appears to eventually supersede parental and authoritative influence, particularly following puberty, which indicates the importance of engaging the peer culture that perpetuates social norms and misinformation about sex, sexual violence, and masculinity. This study further emphasizes existing research's findings regarding how young men understand consent, sexual violence, and peer interactions; however, it grounds it in the Canadian context with specifically white, heterosexual, university-aged men.

Conclusion

The present study sought to use phenomenological qualitative methodology to fill existing gaps in narrating male-identified students' perspectives of sexual violence on university campuses. Several important themes emerged, examined through social norm theory, including: nonverbal negotiations of consent as the norm, the creation of a "grey area" between consent and sexual violence through alcohol usage, the influence of the male peer group in developing perspective, on-campus sexual violence as inevitable, and the divide between personal and societal understandings of "being a man" in gendered socialization processes. The influence of the socialization of traditional masculinity, that remains prevalent today despite some steps in changing the status quo, emerged as a powerful force that shapes males' perspectives of violence against women and the reinforcement of the ideological traits of rape culture. This impact, in combination with a lack of early, relevant, and thorough sexual education, then governs young men's behaviors, attitudes, language, and ideas about sex, consent, and sexual violence. Further research into this area and continuing to bring young men into dialogue about their role in perpetrating and perpetuating existing cycles of sexual violence, the overrepresentation of men as perpetrators of rape, and how to become allies in sexual violence prevention efforts is significant as it will reveal different ways of approaching this issue. Sexual violence must be recognized as a systemic and pervasive issue in the Canadian university context and we must hold ourselves accountable for its continued presence on and off-campus. Working with men is an important step toward dismantling rape culture fostering healthy, supportive attitudes toward survivors, prevention, and creating a safer space.

Limitations and Transferability

Due to the limited time allotted for the pilot undergraduate research to be completed, only seven participants were interviewed to ensure that the project met time requirements and stayed within its restrictions. Participants were white, identified as heterosexual, and were cis-gendered, which limits the ability for the data to be transferable to university-aged men as a general population as it does not account for variation in two-spirited, gay, bisexual, queer, and/or trans men. However, working with white, university-aged men is important as they represent multiple facets of privilege that might manifest in entitlement and a lack of willingness to engage in sexual violence prevention strategies. Male perspectives of sexual violence on and off campus is a significant topic needing further elucidation, as they are an intricate piece in creating effective sexual violence prevention methods.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author extends her deepest appreciation of and thanks to McMaster University's Office of the Vice-President, McMaster University's Research and International Affairs, McMaster University's Faculty of Social Sciences, the McMaster University's Research Ethics Board (MREB), and McMaster University's Office of Experiential Education (EE). I am beyond grateful to have had this opportunity to pursue a dream I have had for some time. I would also like to thank my faculty supervisor, Dr. Saara Greene, for her support, belief in me, encouragement, guidance, and endless patience throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. Ameil Joseph for encouraging me to submit my work for academic publication and for instilling confidence in me to follow through. Thank you to the external community consultants that gave me a sense of direction and continuously reminded me of the purpose of this study. Lastly, a special thanks to the participants in the present study for being so open and engaging. Without all of you, this project would not have been possible. *Dignity* thanks the following people for reviewing and commenting on this article: John Foubert, Dean, College of Education, Union University, USA; Robert Jensen, Professor Emeritus, Journalism, University of Texas, USA; and Jody Raphael, Senior Research Fellow, Emerita, DePaul University College of Law.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Maddie Brockbank is a Master's of Social Work candidate at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Ms. Brockbank's undergraduate and graduate research, practice experience, and community organizing initiatives have been in the area of engaging men in sexual violence prevention. She was awarded the YWCA Hamilton's Young Woman of Distinction Award (2019), the President's Award of Excellence in Student Leadership (2019), and the Canada Graduate Scholarship (CGS-M, 2019) for her academic excellence, contributions to research, and leadership in the community.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Brockbank, Maddie. (2019). The myth of the "gray area" in rape: Fabricating ambiguity and denial. *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 4, Issue 4, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2019.04.04.02> Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol4/iss4/2>.

REFERENCES

- Angelone, D. J., Mitchell, D., & Grossi, L. (2015). Men's perceptions of an acquaintance rape: The role of relationship length, victim resistance, and gender role attitudes. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *30* (13), 2278-2303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088626051455244>
- Basile K.C., Smith S.G., Breiding, M.J., Black M.C., Mahendra R.R. (2014). *Sexual violence surveillance: Uniform definitions and recommended data elements*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e721362007-001>
- Beres, M. A. (2007). 'Spontaneous' sexual consent: An analysis of sexual consent literature. *Feminism & Psychology*, *17*(1), 93-108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507072914>

- Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., Stevens, M. R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 summary report. Retrieved from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf .
<https://doi.org/10.1037/e621642012-003>
- Bohner, G., Pina, A., Tendayi Viki, G., & Siebler, F. (2010). Using social norms to reduce men's rape proclivity: Perceived rape myth acceptance of out-groups may be more influential than that of in-groups. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 16(8), 671-693. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316x.2010.492349>
- Brown, A. L., & Messman-Moore, T. L. (2010). Personal and perceived peer attitudes supporting sexual aggression as predictors of male college students' willingness to intervene against sexual aggression. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 25(3), 503-517. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260509334400>
- Calgary Sexual Health Centre. (2013). Re-Imagined Masculinities: Unfolding the Meaning and Effect of the WiseGuyz Program.
- Claussen, C. (2017). The WiseGuyz Program: Sexual health education as a pathway to supporting changes in endorsement of traditional masculinity ideologies. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 25(2), 150-167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826516661319>
- DeKeseredy, W. S., & Schwartz, M. D. (Eds.). (2013). *Male peer support and violence against women: The history and verification of a theory*. Northeastern University Press. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010 (2013).
- Ford, T. E., & Ferguson, M. A. (2004). Social consequences of disparagement humor: A prejudiced norm theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(1), 79-94. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0801_4
- Foubert, J. D., & Cremedy, B. J. (2007). Reactions of men of color to a commonly used rape prevention program: Attitude and predicted behavior changes. *Sex Roles*, 57(1-2), 137-144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9216-2>
- Foubert, J.D., Garner, D.G., & Thaxter, P.J. (2006). An exploration of fraternity culture: Implications for programs to address alcohol-related sexual assault. *College Student Journal*, 40, 361-373. ISSN-0146-3934.
- Gidycz, C. A., Orchowski, L. M., & Berkowitz, A. D. (2011). Preventing sexual aggression among college men: An evaluation of a social norms and bystander intervention program. *Violence against Women*, 17(6), 720-742. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801211409727>
- Grazian, D. (2007). The girl hunt: Urban nightlife and the performance of masculinity as collective activity. *Symbolic Interaction*, 30(2), 221-243. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2007.30.2.221>
- Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1580-1589. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(14\)61683-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61683-4)
- Jozkowski, K. N., & Peterson, Z. D. (2013). College students and sexual consent: Unique insights. *Journal of Sex Research*, 50(6), 517-523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.700739>
- Jozkowski, K. N., & Sanders, S. A. (2012). Health and sexual outcomes of women who have experienced forced or coercive sex. *Women & Health*, 52(2), 101-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2011.649397>

- Katz, J. (2006). *The Macho Paradox: Why some men hurt women and how all men can help*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.
- Kimmel, M. S. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. New York: Harper.
- Lambert, N., & Black, B. M. (2016). Bystander sexual violence prevention program: outcomes for high-and low-risk university men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 31*(19), 3211-3235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515584346>
- Loh, C., Gidycz, C. A., Lobo, T. R., & Luthra, R. (2005). A prospective analysis of sexual assault perpetration: Risk factors related to perpetrator characteristics. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*(10), 1325-1348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260505278528>
- Muehlenhard, C. L., & Linton, M. A. (1987). Date rape and sexual aggression in dating situations: Incidence and risk factors. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 34*(2), 186. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-0167.34.2.186>
- Muehlenhard, C. L., & Kimes, L. A. (1999). The social construction of violence: The case of sexual and domestic violence. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3*(3), 234-245. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_6
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2015). *Statistics About Sexual Violence*. Retrieved from http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf.
- Orchowski, L. M., Berkowitz, A., Boggis, J., & Oesterle, D. (2016). Bystander intervention among college men: the role of alcohol and correlates of sexual aggression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 31*(17), 2824-2846. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515581904>
- University of Michigan Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center. (n.d.). *Understanding the perpetrator*. Retrieved from <https://sapak.umich.edu/article/196> .
- Voller, E. K., & Long, P. J. (2010). Sexual assault and rape perpetration by college men: The role of the big five personality traits. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 25*(3), 457-480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260509334390>