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Blue Lights and Pepper Spray: Cisgender College Women's Perceptions of Campus Safety and Implications of the "Stranger Danger" Myth

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ABSTRACT

Through a case study including focus groups with 32 cisgender women and document analysis of campus newspaper and websites, we highlight ways college women navigate multiple and conflicting messages about campus safety and sexual violence on campus. Although students are aware of statistics indicating most sexual violence happens between two people who know each other, they still engage in safety strategies related to stranger danger. We highlight implications related to messaging about campus safety and sexual violence on campuses.

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Women's socialization to fear rape inhibits their daily behaviors and restricts movement in their day-to-day lives (Dobbs, Waid, & Shelley, 2009; Fisher & Sloan, 2003; Kelly & Torres, 2006; Steinmetz & Austin, 2014). In fact, women's fear of rape is so strong that it makes women afraid of all crime because women are socialized to believe that all crime can lead to rape (Dobbs et al., 2009). On college campuses, women report not studying at the library late at night because of fear of their safety in returning home after studying. College women also report not participating in student organization meetings in the evenings because they fear walking home at night after the meetings (Kelly & Torres, 2006). The restriction of daily activity and participation in campus events results in college women not having an equitable collegiate experience with their peers who are men.

Given the increased attention to more effectively addressing sexual violence on college and university campuses (Jessup-Anger, Lopez, & Koss, 2018), administrators and educators must consider the ways misperceptions of crime influences campus strategies for addressing sexual violence. For example, one of the most significant challenges of addressing women's fear of and actual experiences with crime is that their fear of crime revolves around fear of strangers while their actual risk of crime is more likely to be committed by someone known to them (Fisher & Sloan, 2003). This

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mismatch in perception and reality likely influences college students' strategies for safety and potentially even their risk of sexual violence.

Using a critical feminist approach (Gannon & Davies, 2012), the purpose of this study is to illuminate ways cisgender college women navigate conflicting information and messages about campus safety and sexual violence. Most women in this study indicated they understood that perpetrators generally target victims they know; however, when discussing campus safety, the same participants described strategies for protecting themselves from stranger assault. They also described frustration with victim-blaming messages they received at orientation, yet described ways they subscribed to these same victim-blaming messages through their behaviors and treatment of other women. Through an examination of the contradictory nature of espoused knowledge and behavior related to sexual violence, we highlight the complex nature of educating college students about sexual violence and describe the cyclical nature of myths about sexual violence. We conclude with implications and recommendations for campus educators related to messaging about sexual violence.

Conceptual framework

Literature on rape myth acceptance, college women's fear of crime, and campus messaging about sexual violence comprise the conceptual framework for this study. We use the term *conceptual framework* to describe the literature that helped us conceptualize and make sense of the data for this paper. Because an exhaustive review of the literature about campus safety and sexual violence is impractical with the amount of literature that exists, we believe it is important to distinguish between a conceptual framework and a literature review. The theoretical framework, critical feminist epistemology, is examined in the methodology section of this paper.

Additionally, as we move forward, a note on gender identity and sex warrants space in this article. Unfortunately, the vast majority (99% of articles reviewed in one content analysis study) of literature about sexual violence examines gender using a binary, failing to account for the ways in which gender non-binary people experience sexual violence (Linder, Grimes, Williams, Lacy, & Parker, in press). In fact, people who identify as non-binary or transgender experience higher rates of sexual violence (Stotzer, 2009) and likely have a greater fear of crime than their cisgender peers because of the staggering rates of sexual violence directed toward trans people. Additionally, although most literature uses the language of "women" and "men," it does not specify whether the populations included in the study include *trans* men and women or just cisgender men and women. For the purposes of this paper, we use the language used by the authors of the studies when describing their participants, recognizing that this language is incomplete and potentially inaccurate.

Fear of crime and rape myth acceptance

College students subscribe to rape myths at alarming rates (Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016). Rape myths are "generalized and false assumptions about sexual assault that trivialize a sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not occur" (Franiuk, Seefelt, & Vandello, 2008, p. 790). Rape myths include things like women are asking for sex based on the way they are dressed and that women owe men sexual intercourse if they lead them on or have had a previous sexual encounter (Flack et al., 2016; Hayes, Abbott, & Cook, 2016).

Myths about sexual violence on college campuses are also rooted in historical and current misperceptions about who victims and perpetrators of sexual violence are (Harris & Linder, 2017). Rape myths include an assumption that rape must be physically violent to be real and that rape only happens to innocent and "perfect" (pretty, White, cisgender, heterosexual, pristine) college women (Harris & Linder, 2017; Hockett et al., 2016). Additionally, most people's perception of perpetrators of sexual violence is that of a male stranger jumping out of the bushes or lurking in a dark alley waiting to prey on unsuspecting women (Franiuk et al., 2008). Given the history of racism and sexual violence, people often see rape as a crime committed by Black men directed toward white women (Patton & Snyder-Yuly, 2007), which is further perpetuated by current media coverage of campus sexual violence (King, 2016).

Rape myth acceptance contributes to increased rates of sexual violence. Blaming victims or putting the onus on potential victims to stop sexual violence results in a failure to hold perpetrators accountable, giving them additional license to rape (Franiuk et al., 2008). Additionally, failing to consider victims beyond heterosexual cisgender white college women from wealthy families results in ineffective strategies for addressing sexual violence because prevention strategies focus on one type of victim, rather than examining power as the root of sexual violence (Harris & Linder, 2017; Linder, 2018). Finally, the myth that perpetrators of sexual violence are primarily strangers and/or men of color results in potential victims, juries, and bystanders failing to consider nice, white college men as potential perpetrators, resulting in increased risk of sexual violence because prevention and response programs do not address *all* perpetrators, only those who match the master sexual assault script identifying strangers and men of color as perpetrators (Patton & Snyder-Yuly, 2007).

Overcoming these myths proves difficult as socialization about safety begins at an early age and includes strong references to fear of strangers (Flack et al., 2016). It is difficult to determine where to break the cycle of addressing stranger danger myths on college campuses as college women are socialized to fear crime, specifically rape, throughout their entire lives. Even if not the direct victims of violent crime, including rape, women are socialized to fear rape and take a number of preventative strategies to protect themselves from being raped (Fisher & Sloan, 2003). Closely tied to the fear of rape for college women are

the victim-blaming messages they receive and the acceptance of rape myths by most everyone in mainstream U.S. culture, which includes students, their parents and peers, college and university administrators, and campus police, all key players in addressing sexual violence on college campuses.

Many prevention strategies continue to focus on "target-hardening" approaches to addressing sexual violence (Franklin, Jin, Ashworth, & Viada, 2016, p. 356). Target-hardening strategies include addressing sexual violence by making "it difficult for potential perpetrators to select victims they deem as easy targets" (Franklin et al., 2016, p. 356). On college campuses, target-hardening strategies include changes to the environment—installing emergency phones, increased lighting on campus, and removing excessive bushes and trees in which perpetrators might hide. Despite the documentation that the vast majority (over 90%) of sexual violence on college campuses happens between two people who know each other (Black et al., 2011), many of the strategies employed by campuses administrators continue to focus on stranger danger, which perpetuates the notion that women should be fearful of strangers. Target-hardening approaches are rooted in rape myth acceptance, placing responsibility for addressing sexual violence on potential victims, rather than potential perpetrators.

Campus messaging related to sexual violence

In addition to studies indicating that students subscribe to rape myths on college campuses, emerging research has begun to examine the messaging in campus environments related to sexual violence (Pryor & Hughes, 2013). For example, one study examined the location of information about sexual violence on college websites. Most universities have information about where to go after experiencing a sexual assault (82%), and some institutions have information about training or educational programs related to sexual assault (43%). Most institutions also include their sexual assault policy on their website (83%), yet fewer than 30% defined consent (Lund & Thomas, 2015). Similarly, another study examined the messages related to prevention on university websites. Researchers found that prevention tips were hosted on campus security websites and that 80% of the tips were directed at women. The tips placed a lot of emphasis on potential victims, specifically women and assumed that victims were women and perpetrators were men. The tips often insinuated that alcohol caused sexual violence, resulting in a victim-blaming message that if a person is assaulted when they are drunk, that it must somehow be their fault (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015). In this research, we seek to advance previous scholarship about campus messaging and sexual violence by highlighting the inconsistencies in messaging and how these messages impact college women's safety strategies. Specifically, when college students' perceptions of campus safety are inconsistent with the reality of their risks, they may experience higher risk of violence because they do not have accurate information about how crime actually occurs on campus.

Methodology and methods

Grounded in a critical feminist epistemology (Gannon & Davies, 2012), we explored cisgender college women's understanding of messages they received about their gender in college through a case study (Yin, 2018). Although we did not seek to specifically talk with cisgender women, participants in the study all identified as cisgender, therefore, we explicitly name this so as to not perpetuate the problem of portraying our research as being about *all* women. A critical feminist epistemology centers gender and power in knowledge construction processes, specifically seeking to illuminate ways in which power and gender intersect to create taken-for-granted behaviors (Gannon & Davies, 2012). For example, women frequently restrict their behaviors to protect themselves from sexual violence (Fisher & Sloan, 2003; Steinmetz & Austin, 2014), yet these behaviors have become so ingrained, most women do not even realize their behaviors are restricted compared to their male peers (Steinmetz & Austin, 2014). To illuminate problematic power structures, we examined the following research questions: What messages do college women receive about their gender in college? How do they interpret those messages in the context of their daily experiences on campus? For the purposes of this paper, we explicitly focused on the discussions related to safety, including sexual violence.

A case study research design (Yin, 2018) allowed us to use data collected in a variety of ways, including focus groups (Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011) and document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) over an 18 month period. The research team included a faculty member (the principle investigator), doctoral students, master's students, and undergraduate students. Research team members were involved with designing the study as well as collecting and analyzing data; consistent with feminist research, the researchers engaged in on-going discussion to deconstruct and understand power structures embedded in the research process (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). The research team met on a bi-weekly basis during data analysis and discussed what we observed as we engaged in data collection and analysis. For example, we discussed the over-representation of white women as participants in focus groups and organized focus groups specifically in the multicultural center on campus to address this challenge. Chris, the principle investigator, trained members of the research team to conduct focus groups and coordinated the data analysis process, training members of the research team on coding and analysis procedures consistent with a critical feminist epistemology (Gannon & Davies, 2012).

Researchers as instruments

Although it is impossible to completely describe the ways researchers' experiences influence data collection and analysis processes, we describe the identities of the two authors here as a starting point for reflexivity and authenticity

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Chris is a faculty member in a higher education graduate program and identifies as a cisgender, queer, white woman from a mixed social class background. She has been studying campus sexual violence for the past three years and spent 10 years as a victim advocate prior to becoming faculty. Marvette identifies as a queer, Black, cisgender, non-disabled woman from a working-class background and has the goal of eradicating interpersonal violence through scholarship and practice. She currently serves as the director of a campus-based women's center staff where much of her work is informed by her personal experience of being a survivor of childhood sexual trauma.

Members of the research team engaged in a variety of data collection techniques over a period of 18 months, contributing to an in-depth exploration of college women's experiences on college campuses. We started by gathering campus newspaper articles related to gender by downloading articles about gender or women on campus; over the course of one academic year, we collected 70 newspaper articles. At the same time, we conducted eight focus groups (Rodriguez et al., 2011) with 32 cisgender women representing a variety of social identities. Although we started by collecting the newspaper articles, we did not use those articles to guide our focus group discussions. We chose not to explicitly connect the two data collection strategies to as a way to observe the consistencies and inconsistencies in campus messaging was. Questions discussed in the focus groups included: How has your gender influenced your experience in college? How have your experiences in college matched (or not matched) your expectations going into college? As a strategy to recall memories of their experiences, we also asked participants to draw pictures about the messages they received about their gender in college. We did not separately analyze the pictures they drew, rather, we used them to prompt discussion about how they navigated those messages in the focus groups.

As we reviewed the newspaper articles and focus group data and decided we wanted to examine the data with a specific focus on messages about sexual violence, we decided to collect information from university websites about sexual violence by typing the words "sexual assault" into the university's homepage search box and downloading the first ten articles that that came up through this search, which were added to our data analysis process, described below.

We recruited participants for the focus groups by partnering with a variety of student affairs offices on campuses including the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center; the Multicultural Center; Residence Life; and Fraternity and Sorority Life. Focus groups took place in these spaces to attempt to create an environment in which participants knew or knew of each other as a strategy to ensure participants could share experiences that differed from the experiences of women with dominant identities (straight and white), which are frequently centered in literature about sexual violence.

Additionally, we specifically invited cisgender and transgender women to participate in the study through our recruitment materials, and all of the people who chose to participate identified as cisgender women. Given that our study focuses on issues related to safety, which is frequently a part of cisgender women and girls' socialization from a very young age, it is important to name that the participants in this study all identified as cisgender women. Trans women's experiences navigating safety related to sexual violence are likely different than cisgender women's experiences, so to avoid making cisgender women's experiences the default experience for all women, we specifically name that we are discussing the experiences of cisgender women in this study. Future research should specifically examine transgender women's experiences with campus safety and sexual violence.

The study took place at a large research institution in the Southeastern region of the United States. During the time of the study, this institution enrolled over 27,000 undergraduate students, 57% of whom identified as women and 73% as white. Of the participants, 21 (66%) identified as white, five (16%) as African American, three (9%) as Latina, two (6%) as Multiracial, and one (3%) as Asian American. The students were overwhelmingly either first year students (12) or seniors (13) and ranged in age from 18–27, with the majority of the students falling in the 18–21 category. In terms of sexual orientation, 18 (56%) identified as heterosexual and the remaining 14 students identified as something other than straight, including bisexual, lesbian, queer, questioning, and pansexual.

Data analysis

During research team meetings when we discussed what trends we noticed as we collected data, several members of the research team identified safety strategies as something that came out in their discussions with cisgender women in the focus groups for this study. As we continued to discuss this through a critical feminist lens, we noticed the ways in which these strategies frequently focused on stranger danger, and even more specifically, sexual violence committed by strangers. Despite the fact that most sexual violence occurs between two people who know each other (Black et al., 2011), participants in the study seemed to be focusing their energy on protecting themselves from strangers. We wanted to further examine ways cisgender college women think about safety to illuminate strategies for campus sexual violence educators to better inform college students about the realities of sexual violence.

For the purposes of this paper, two members of the research team reviewed the focus group transcripts, newspaper articles, and campus websites (Saldaña, 2016), with specific attention to discussions about safety strategies and sexual violence, specifically as they related to power, informed by our critical feminist lens. We started with a broad view of the data, highlighting pieces of text in the focus

groups, newspaper articles, and campus websites that related to sexual violence or "safety." After identifying these broad areas, we read and reread the data to identify themes that emerged from the data (Saldaña, 2016), with explicit attention to noting the influence of power on participants' experiences. Specifically, we coded the data using open, in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2016), which resulted in 18 codes like "socialization," "family influence," "never walk alone," "downtown," "alcohol," etc. We then reviewed these codes and came together to discuss how these codes related to power, and organized our discussion of the findings into two major categories: participants' description and understanding of the variety of messages they receive about campus safety and sexual assault and their personal safety strategies. Consistent with our critical feminist framework (Gannon & Davies, 2012), as we reviewed the data, we specifically looked for ideas and themes that may vary among women with additional minoritized identities (e.g., women of color and queer women), and the themes in this study emerged across identity groups. Although women of color and queer women unquestionably experience sexual violence differently from straight and white women (Harris & Linder, 2017), in this study, messages related to "stranger danger" and "campus safety" resonated across identities.

Authenticity and trustworthiness

To contribute to the authenticity and trustworthiness of the study, we share the researcher perspectives of the two authors involved in the data analysis specific to this manuscript, highlight the use of expert reviewers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and describe strategies for crystallization of the data (Ellingson, 2009). Additionally, college women are the experts on their own experiences and consistent with the critical feminist framework, we engaged in on-going dialog with undergraduate and graduate women students throughout the data analysis process, seeking feedback from co-researchers about our interpretation of the data. For example, at research team meetings, we consistently discussed the safety strategies participants described, asking student members of our research team for their responses to our interpretation. Student researchers consistently acknowledged that they gleaned similar insights from the focus groups they conducted and reviewed.

Finally, crystallization refers to looking at the data from a variety of angles to better understand the data in a holistic manner (Ellingson, 2009). As described above, when we began to note the data related to personal safety strategies not matching the realities of sexual assault on campus, we collected further information about sexual assault on campus through the university websites. Further, we stayed engaged in the data over a long period of time, considering the focus groups, newspaper articles, and website information in relationship to each other, resulting in further crystallization of the findings related to campus safety.

Findings

Participants in this study described cognitive dissonance as it related to campus sexual violence. While they clearly understood and knew the statistics about sexual violence primarily happening between two people who know each other, rather than strangers jumping out of bushes, they also primarily described safety strategies that focused on "stranger danger." Participants received confusing messages about campus safety from a number of sources, including their campus publications and experts, peers, and family members. In the following section, we discuss the contradictory messages related to campus sexual assault and the safety strategies participants regularly employed.

To set a context for how students navigate these confusing and contradictory messages, we share Jessica's clear description of her experience navigating violence on campus as an example of the ways a number of participants discussed violence. Although we did not ask participants directly about their understanding of or experiences with sexual violence, some women discussed their experiences with sexual violence when describing their gendered experiences on campus. Specifically, participants described a complex relationship with harassment and violence, and provided examples of men catcalling them, touching them without permission at parties and bars, and making them "uncomfortable" in a variety of settings. Jessica described a particularly complex experience navigating safety on campus over her three years on campus, illuminating many of the challenges that college women navigate,

> Honestly, each year the dynamic [related to campus safety] has been very different for me; for example, my first year I had no friends that were girls and I also walked around at night more often because I didn't care. And nothing happened to me … . And then last year it was more of not feeling safe inside my own home because I was sexually assaulted in my room. And that was the beginning of the semester, and that was really hard. So I didn't go out at all — at night, especially. I didn't do anything. I always had my door closed and I was always inside my room because I guess I was just scared of having someone else walk in, so I wanted to monitor who was coming in, who was coming out. And then this year I would say because of my job, I have to walk out at night, and certain times … . But I was, for the first time, catcalled by a car. And the second time I was followed by a truck. And I did call the police on the second one but on the first one I didn't because it was just stupid. But yeah, I guess I'm all of a sudden now feeling less safe but still, I don't care. I'm just more angry and because I'm angry, I tend to do the same thing or do it even more because I'm like, "No. Fuck you. I can do what I want." And so I just continue doing what I do.

Jessica's experience illustrates the complexity of cisgender college women's experiences attempting to keep themselves safe from sexual violence. She walked around alone and "nothing happened to her," then she was assaulted in her own home by an acquaintance, which made her feel unsafe there. She then started walking around by herself again and felt fear based on catcalls

and a truck following her. In many ways, Jessica illustrates the paradox of women's safety—they are not safe, or do not feel safe, no matter what strategies they choose to protect themselves.

Contradictory messages related to campus safety and sexual assault

Students reported receiving messages from a variety of sources about campus sexual violence—namely, campus publications and experts, their peers, and their families. Unfortunately, these messages often presented conundrums for the participants, contradicting their own experiences and realities. In fact, some messages from a variety of well-intended sources often contradicted with each other. Specifically, students are explicitly told that most sexual assault happens between two people who know each other, but then the safety strategies recommended by experts focus on protecting themselves from strangers.

Messages from campus publications

The campus newspaper and websites presented paradoxes related to campus sexual violence. Although the campus newspaper frequently quoted professionals (e.g., the chief of police, the community rape crisis center's executive director, and a campus sexual violence educator) highlighting statistics indicating that most sexual assaults took place between two people who know each other, recommended strategies from newspaper articles also frequently focused on target-hardening strategies like not walking alone at night and taking self-defense courses. For example, the police chief described how most sexual assault happens between two people who know each other, then taught women "fight-to-flight" techniques of self-defense, which are virtually never used in acquaintance sexual assault situations because of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. This passage from a newspaper article illustrates the paradox of people being unclear how to educate students about protecting themselves from acquaintance assault,

> Male and female [institution] students met separately on Wednesday and Thursday nights to learn crime safety tactics as well as the importance of consent before sex. [Police chief] taught female students how to defend themselves against rape on Wednesday.
>
> Society has taught that the rapist is normally the "guy hiding in the bushes, lurking in the dark, who jumps out and attacks," [police chief] said.
>
> "But the reality of the fact is, in the majority of sexual assaults that occur in our country, you know the person," he said.

The article continued by explaining that the police chief "taught the women 'fight-to-flight techniques,' meant to cause immediate pain and allow the victim to run away." Although a potential victim could certainly use a "fight-

to-flight technique" in an acquaintance rape situation, the chances are slim. The dynamics of sexual violence between two people who know each other often involve at least some consensual sexual activity, which would make self-defense tactics which "allow the victim to run away" impractical.

Similarly, we searched "sexual assault" from the main website's search function and one of the first 10 websites that came up was called "personal safety for women." In addition to the website specifically focusing on women as victims and men as perpetrators (which warrants its own analysis), the website also sent mixed messages about how sexual violence happens. Despite the fact that the website said, "Rape is not always a dark alley crime. Over half occur in a residence." and "In over half of rapes, the victim knew the rapist," the prevention tips focus on stranger danger. Specifically, "tips for safety" included things like, "Keep the outside of your residence well lit" and "Never walk alone, use the 'buddy system.'" While these may be important strategies for people to keep in mind related to personal safety, they do not address the very significant problem of sexual assault between two people who know each other and engage in some consensual sexual activity. There is no information on this website (or any of the other first ten websites, save the campus policy) about consent and sexual assault. Consistent with previous scholarship, the websites on this campus also put the burden on potential victims (women, specifically), rather than perpetrators for ending sexual violence (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015).

Messages from experts

The chief of campus police on this campus came up in numerous focus group discussions. Specifically, participants discussed the messages he had given in public spaces, specifically at orientation and a "coffee chat" with students related to alcohol and sexual violence. The participants described his message as victim-blaming and contributing to "rape culture." Sally describes her experience at orientation,

> The police chief, in his speaking basically said that, "you are college kids so don't go downtown and get drunk. If you get drunk we will have to arrest you." And that was the extent of any campus safety. From my experience there was no mention of rape, no mention of consent, there was no mention of what do you do if you do get raped, what are reporting procedures here. There was none of that.

She continued by sharing about the chief's discussion with students at a "coffee chat,"

> So the police chief has coffee with students once a year to hear their concerns and voice his opinion … in trying to talk about sexual assault on college campuses [he] said, "Rape is not caused by rapists. Rape is caused by women getting drunk." And, then he tried to backpedal his way out of it and I understand that he was trying to say that the majority of rapes happen while somebody is under the influence of

> alcohol. However, that in combination with the complete lack of anything at orientation shows that … our campus safety is saying, "Girls don't get drunk because if you get drunk we are going to have to arrest you. Rape is caused by girls getting drunk." So I think that contributes a lot to the rape culture.

Sally's experiences with orientation were consistent with what participants in other focus groups shared. Participants in this study got the message loud and clear that alcohol plays a significant role in sexual violence and various messages from the police chief and other experts in the campus newspaper further illustrated this point. An article about sexual assault awareness week events reports the following,

> Downtown [city] has a "lighthouse effect," [police chief] said, attracting the majority of assaults, batteries and robberies in [city] between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. "Downtown is a great area for food and entertainment," he said. "It's an area, too, for the person who wants to commit a crime to look for people they think are an easy target."

In a different newspaper article about the "red zone," which is a time at the beginning of the academic year where risk of sexual violence is thought to be higher (Cranney, 2015), an excerpt reads,

> Police are concerned at the beginning of every semester that all crimes will increase, including sexual assault. This is partly because students spend more time in downtown [city], [police chief] said, as many have fewer academic responsibilities at the start of the school year. "The beginning of the fall typically lends that environment more," he said. "You don't have papers due, you really haven't started being tested. By the end of the semester, we can tell by crowd size that people are trying to finish up their academic responsibilities."
>
> Incoming freshmen can also be at a higher risk during the red zone because of a new environment and access to alcohol, [professional sexual violence educator] said. "I think that there's many factors that might play a role in this time-frame of increased vulnerability," she said. "Primarily, incoming students who are acclimating to a new environment, possibly students experiencing new freedoms and responsibilities, learning and choosing what people and situations to trust and not trust and possibly increased behavior choices that may put people at more risk."

Discussions about the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence are important. College students must understand that people cannot consent to sex if they are under the influence of alcohol and it is important for college students to understand that perpetrators of sexual violence use alcohol as a weapon to sexually assault people. However, framing alcohol or college women's consumption of it, as the problem results in further victim-blaming and removing responsibility from perpetrators of sexual violence.

Messages from peers

Participants described particular places on campus they were told to be "afraid" of. Specifically, two high rise residence halls near the edge of campus

that house a large number of first-year students came up over and over as a "scary" place because of the lack of light and the bushes near the buildings. Cee shared, "I was told during orientation–I lived in [building], and they're like, 'Don't walk through these certain bushes, because girls have been known to be attacked there.'" Similarly, Lisa shared being afraid to walk to and from her residence hall next door to Cee's because it was not "well lit."

Several participants discussed their feelings of fear walking around campus at night, and the impact it has on their experiences. Consistent with previous research, participants in this study described being afraid to study on campus late at night for fear that they may be attacked when walking to their cars or residence halls (Kelly & Torres, 2006). Jenny's experience provides a particularly poignant example of this restriction, "I wish there was a way for me to feel safer so I could study alone at night."

Jenny's comment led to a discussion about blue lights, which came up in almost every focus group as something students believed was missing from this campus. Blue lights are large, visible lights spread throughout many campuses. If a person feels in danger, they can push a button on the blue light, which alerts the police in the area that a person is potentially unsafe and campus security comes to the blue light. In two focus groups, students examined the complexities related to blue lights and the reasons they "heard" the university didn't have blue lights. Lily shared, "There used to be emergency phones everywhere and then they were like, 'No one used them, so we took them away.'" Similarly, another focus group included a student, Lane, who was highly involved in student government and she shared that they were taken away because they "cost too much and not enough people are using them." She continued by problematizing this, "but then also how do we quantify a person's safety and how do we quantify how safe they feel even when they don't need to use it and how does that deter people but all those things taken into consideration—there are not enough people who use it and it costs too much." Students navigated confusing messages from their peers and other "urban legends" about safety on campus, including the effectiveness of blue lights.

Messages from family

Participants were socialized from a young age to be cognizant of the danger associated with their gender based on societal norms. Alexa discussed how her father's girlfriend made her more aware of the connection between her gender and safety,

> My dad's girlfriend … has definitely made me a lot more aware of what my identity means for my safety. And you know, sometimes I want to roll my eyes at her and be like, "You're using these stereotypes from a time when I wasn't even born yet," but I look at the real world and I'm like, oh, wait — that might actually be true. And she's doing it in a nice way and we talk about how we recognize that

> it's wrong but she's been the person to most open my eyes toward sort of what my gender identity means to others.

The women noted that these conversations included the assumptions that women must constantly be on guard for any potential sexual threats. Rory explained her experiences with her parents and friends' parents regularly having discussions about women and safety,

> And we talk about this all the time that it's assumed that young men are sexually active … and that women … should protect themselves against men who can't control themselves … My dad has always sat me down and like, "Anything ever happens to you, you tell me. You don't feel bad about doing whatever you need to do to get out of that situation." All that stuff. You know? With that assumption that, yeah, if that happens you've put yourself there or things like that. And I think that's particularly hard for women to deal with.

Participants shared that discussions about safety became more common when they prepared to enter college. Mara described her experiences with her "relatives or family saying, 'oh, you need to take pepper spray or take a self-defense class before you go.'" Claire told a story about her little brother and his care for her safety while she was away at college,

> The day before I left [for college] … my 12 year old brother came up to me and he gave me a little card and then he gave me his pocketknife, and it said, "stay safe" on it. So I thought it was adorable and everything, but the fact that my 12-year-old brother knows about stuff like that and I mean he's homeschooled too, where is he learning this? It was crazy. How do you even know about this?

Similarly, Marilyn described the weapons that her father bought for her, "he bought me a taser, he bought me two tiny pepper sprays and then he bought me two of the ones that spray eight feet and I was like, 'this is intense.'" Rory described a similar expectation from her mom when she first started college,

> Or when I first started college my mom was kind of — because [institution] is a really big school — like, "Do you need pepper spray?" I'm also the only child so my parents are always very concerned; like, I have to call them every night. I don't know, I guess they watch news so there's stuff they want to make sure but I never carry pepper spray around.

Similar to Rory, many participants described their parents' fear and stories about how other women were treated as motivation for their awareness related to safety. Mary described how her mom feared for her safety on campus based on news stories,

> I'm a pretty independent person so I do a lot of stuff on my own. I'll go shopping by myself. I'll head to the library by myself. That stuff scared my Mom so she's like, 'don't do this and don't do that.' There is a story on the news where a girl just went missing right off the street so it's like stories like that where my parents will be

> really forceful about not being out walking by myself because you never know what is going to happen.

Participants had strikingly similar experiences with to socialization related to safety growing up and while in college. Well-intended parents frequently warned their daughters about stranger danger and provided them with weapons to protect themselves, yet participants did not describe instances of their family members discussing consent and healthy relationship boundaries with them. Messages from campus publications, experts, peers, and family members followed women to college where they engaged a variety of safety strategies to protect themselves from danger.

Safety strategies

In the focus groups with students, we learned that they understood that most sexual violence took place between two people who know each other, yet they primarily described strategies for protecting themselves from strangers as potential perpetrators of sexual violence. These safety strategies were incredibly consistent among the groups and consistent with the messaging on university websites we reviewed. Participants in this study described not walking alone at night and carrying pepper spray as two primary strategies for protecting themselves from harm.

> Lisa shared her strategies for "staying safe" when she walked to her residence hall, Late at night, 'cause there are spots that aren't well lit — I would pretend to be on the phone with my mom or I would call my mom or my roommate and say, "Okay I'm on my way home right now. Stay on the phone with me until I get there."

In addition to using the buddy system, participants frequently discussed being aware of their surroundings as a strategy for protecting themselves from harm. Kierra shared, "I have been hanging out downtown a few times, and I do always make sure that I stayed with the people who I came with just to make sure that nothing happens, but I don't necessarily feel unsafe being out and around." Rory described always going somewhere "prepared" and that she uses the "buddy system." She continued, "I think I'm talking about downtown because on campus during the day, I feel pretty safe, really. I go about my business." She explains that when she goes "downtown," she always shares with her friends where she is going so that someone always knows where she is.

In addition to being afraid of being on campus late at night, participants also discussed their fear of "downtown." Throughout the discussions in the focus groups, it became apparent that when students were talking about "downtown," they were describing going to bars where people were heavily intoxicated. Consistent with messages from university police, campus newspaper articles, and campus safety tips, participants in this study were highly

aware of the correlation between alcohol and sexual violence. As Rachel described, "I was just talking to my roommate and she was saying, 'You know, I would never drink in public just to not even risk it.' Just the fact that we have to be constantly worried about … it's a lot of pressure."

In all of the focus group discussions, only one person, Mara, explicitly described a strategy related to minimizing her risk for sexual assault committed by someone known to her,

> I mean this is probably going to sound a little messed up but like I really try not to get too close with any of the guys on campus because I think it's something like 90% of all rapes are by someone you know and the campus rape rate is at an all-time high so I'm just kind of like cautious about that especially since when you're getting to meet someone or know someone like for the first time it's just — even if it's just as friends, you never know.

Mara's strategy of distancing herself from all men on campus is impractical and limits her ability to engage effectively in campus environments, albeit in different ways from women who restrict their engagement based on fear of strangers. Consistent with previous scholarship, college women in this study describe a number of ways they restrict their engagement on campus as a strategy for protecting themselves from sexual violence. College and university educators and administrators may interrupt this behavior by providing accurate information on campus sexual violence as examined in the next section.

Implications and discussion

Examining findings of this study through a feminist, power-conscious lens illustrates the importance of two primary strategies for preventing campus sexual violence: 1) providing accurate information to students about the dynamics of sexual violence and 2) focusing on perpetrators and potential perpetrators in strategies to end sexual violence.

Providing accurate information

College students' socialization to sexual violence warrants increased attention. Students receive mixed messages about the dynamics of sexual violence and ways to end sexual violence as illustrated by the participants in this study. While students understand that most sexual assault happens between two people who know each other, the strategies they learn to protect themselves primarily focus on stranger danger. While it should never be potential victims' responsibility to prevent sexual violence, if college and university administrators must continue to provide risk reduction strategies for potential victims, they must do so responsibly. Failing to consider the complexity of sexual violence and failing to implicate perpetrators as the cause of sexual violence only further perpetuates the problem

of sexual violence (Iverson, 2006). Further, given that socialization to fear stranger assault happens well before cisgender women students come to college (Dobbs et al., 2009), college and university educators must be cognizant of their responsibility to interrupt myths about sexual violence and re-educate students about the dynamics of sexual assault perpetration on college campuses. However, educators must use caution when interrupting these myths as subscribing to rape myths and the safety strategies associated with them are frequently coping strategies for cisgender women navigating a sexist environment (Franiuk et al., 2008). One strategy for managing oppression is developing a sense of control over experiences and environments. By believing that they can stop sexual violence from happening to them, women create an environment in which they can live comfortably because they believe that sexual violence only happens to "bad" girls who do not take proper precautions. If they take the "right" precautions, then sexual violence will not happen to them, resulting in them more easily navigating the sexist environment in which they are expected to thrive.

Further, using safety strategies geared toward stranger danger as a coping strategy also explains why college women and their parents want universities to engage in protective strategies that are not necessarily "protecting" them or their students. For example, the cisgender women in this study wanted the institution to implement blue lights on their campus to keep them safer. Because they had seen/heard about blue lights on other campuses and because they subscribed to the notion that they were at greatest risk for danger when walking on campus by themselves at night, participants wanted blue lights on their campus. This false sense of security is a coping strategy for managing the violent environments in which we live.

Women in this study subscribed to the notion that they were vulnerable and susceptible to sexual violence, a form of sexism perpetuated by university policies and practices (Allan, 2003). Despite the fact that they *knew* through personal experience and statistics that perpetrators are more likely to target people that they know, the women in this study doubted their own knowledge and realities and continued to focus on stranger danger as a primary form of violence. Continuing to frame women as weak and vulnerable, rather than having agency and power in their lives, contributes to the dominant narrative that women should always be afraid of men strange to them (Iverson, 2006).

Focus on perpetrators and potential perpetrators

The safety strategies and attention to alcohol presented in this study and in the literature make perpetrators virtually invisible in sexual violence. Target-hardening strategies like the ones discussed here focus is on what potential victims should be doing to protect themselves (Franklin et al., 2016). Further, these strategies focus on what victims are doing that makes them more

"vulnerable" to "attack." Continuing to place responsibility on potential victims, rather than potential perpetrators, to stop sexual violence further perpetuates victim-blaming and fails to prevent sexual violence. Because perpetrators are the only people who can stop sexual violence, by focusing on risk reduction strategies, we are merely teaching people to reduce their risk of sexual violence, rather than taking steps to end sexual violence (Hong, 2017). Certainly, risk reduction strategies remain important until sexual violence is eradicated in our society. However, the current study indicates that both cisgender college women and the people supporting them (parents and college and university educators and administrators) are focusing *only* on risk reduction strategies.

Additionally, it is clear from our conversations with participants in this study and reviewing campus newspaper articles and websites that knowledge does not necessarily translate into behavior. For example, even though participants in our study (and people quoted in newspaper articles) can articulate that most sexual assault happens between two people who know each other, this does not necessarily translate into changes in behavior. Further, only one participant in the study indicated that she was cautious in her relationships with her male peers because of her understanding of acquaintance sexual assault. Although we would not advocate that students fear each other, we do believe it is important for students to be cognizant of the ways they trust people who do not fit their description or understanding of a who a perpetrator is. Myths about sexual violence perpetuate the notion that sexual violence is most likely committed by a "stranger" or someone "different" than the victim. For cisgender white women on college and university campuses (who are frequently centered in discussions about campus sexual violence), this often translates to men of color and/or "scary" men who hang around campus late at night, rather than their peers. ailing to understand the dynamics of sexual violence, including perpetrators, actually increases the risk of sexual violence because potential victims do not consider the people close to them as potential perpetrators (Franiuk et al., 2008; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010).

All of this leads to the significance of asking new questions when examining sexual violence on college campuses. Rather than *only* asking, "What should victims do to keep themselves safe?," why don't we also ask, "What are the patterns of perpetrators of sexual violence on college campuses?" If we could identify those patterns, we could more effectively intervene with potential perpetrators and provide more accurate information to potential victims about how to reduce their risk of acquaintance sexual violence.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we recommend educators assess their campus environments for messages about campus safety. Educators would be well suited to better understand the messages portrayed through official

campus outlets, including campus police, sexual assault education programs, campus policy, and campus websites. By ensuring that the messages across these venues were more consistent and accurate, students may have a more accurate understanding of the dynamics of sexual violence and be better prepared to intervene with perpetrators of sexual violence.

For example, information available on police safety websites frequently focuses on stranger danger strategies, while at the same time naming that sexual assault most frequently happens between acquaintances. Although stranger danger safety tips are often easiest to practice and sometimes used as a coping strategy for cisgender women, they are not enough. Even if it is uncomfortable for cisgender women to think of their cisgender male peers as potential perpetrators of sexual violence, they must. Further, safety tips directed toward potential victims also contribute to the victim-blaming narrative surrounding sexual violence on college campuses. Making victims responsible for stopping crime results in continued myths about sexual violence, which results in perpetrators not being held responsible for their actions. To address this issue, educators should assess all of the information available on the university website related to sexual violence and ensure consistency and accuracy. Simply naming the reality that many of the tips are geared toward safety from stranger violence would be beneficial. Additionally, providing information on what is known about acquaintance assault and how to watch for patterns of behavior related to ignoring personal boundaries may help students to recognize and listen to their gut feelings when they find themselves in situations that make them uncomfortable. Finally, describing consent, including how one gives and gets consent, is vitally important for campus sexual violence education. The fact that virtually no information about consent existed on this university's website when searching "sexual assault" is indicative of the problem.

Next, in addition to educating victims about safety, educators must educate potential perpetrators about consent and sexual violence. Sexual violence is certainly a crime rooted in the exercise of power, yet this power does not look the same in all cases. In some cases, a perpetrator sets out to cause harm; in other cases, the perpetrator may not set out to cause harm, but to have sex with someone of his choosing no matter the costs (Gray, Hassija, & Steinmetz, 2017). These are two different scenarios and require different interventions and education. Treating them the same results in some perpetrators not being reached through sexual violence education.

Another important recommendation is to consider new ways of getting information about campus perpetration. It is extraordinarily difficult to talk with perpetrators of campus sexual violence about their motivations. Lisak and Miller (2002) work illustrates some patterns of campus perpetrators, and research similar to this should continue. However, advocates for survivors of campus sexual violence likely have significant, in-depth knowledge about the patterns of perpetrators of sexual violence. There is likely no group of people on campus that hear

more stories of sexual violence than sexual assault advocates and counselors. Asking people in these positions to keep a log of survivors' stories of sexual violence and the patterns they notice in these stories would likely yield significant insight into the patterns of campus perpetrators. Although the ethics of a study based on advocate and counselor knowledge would have to be carefully considered, a study of this nature would likely provide important information for educators and administrators.

Conclusion

Although campus administrators and educators have positive intentions when it comes to educating students about campus sexual violence, the strategies they employ may not be the most effective. The fact that most cisgender college women in this study understood campus sexual violence to be an act that happens between two people who know each other, yet they still engaged primarily in safety strategies to protect themselves from stranger danger illustrates the depth of socialization to fear stranger rape. Not only does this fear restrict college women's access to a full educational experience, but it may also increase their risk for sexual violence because they are not equipped to identify patterns of perpetration by acquaintances. Further, the stranger danger myths put all people at greater risk of sexual violence because perpetrators of sexual violence are not being held accountable because their behaviors do not match the myth of rapists on college campuses.

Disclosure statement

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