

The Existential Threat Posed By Sexual Violence

By Madison Thantu

Entering college is a daunting task for any student. Placed in a foreign environment and surrounded by strangers, even the most enthusiastic and optimistic of people can find the transition nerve-wracking. Just like my peers, I was extremely anxious to venture into higher education, but not for the universal reasons that every other student finds anxiety-inducing. What I found truly terrifying was the pervasiveness of rape culture and fraternity culture in U.S. higher education.

Rape culture is a term used to describe the social context in which sexual assault is both pervasive and normalized. In this climate, social institutions such as legislative politics, heteronormative nuclear families, public education, and the mainstream media, excuse and even encourage, acts of gender violence. This is reflected in cultural tendencies towards victim blaming, which is the act of holding survivors of crime accountable as opposed to the perpetrator. Fraternity culture at American universities can be characterized by the Greek institution's strong association with binge-drinking, hazing, and the culmination of masculinity that emerges from male camaraderie and "brotherhood." In recent years, the rape culture that is embedded in frat culture has gained recognition in both academia and the media; however, this is not to say that the intimate relationship between male Greek life and rape culture is a new phenomenon.

In the face of rampant rape culture and toxic masculinity, I was plagued with severe anxiety over my impending college experience. I felt this for myself, my close friends, my peers, and all soon-to-be college freshmen who had to navigate these new and treacherous waters. This is a feeling that I know many are familiar with, and for many this anxiety and impending sense of danger only continues to develop, depending on an individual's early experiences in college and how their university handles sexual assault.

Statistics paint a daunting picture, and I struggled to grapple with the fact that 23 percent of female undergraduate students are said to experience sexual assault at some point during their time at college. To me, this meant that out of myself and seven closest friends, two of us would experience sexual assault at some point during our undergraduate experience – a notion that continues to haunt me.

This feeling of anxiety culminated into one of hysterical fear, vulnerability, and powerlessness, which defined how I saw my upcoming college experience. I feigned excitement to my family and friends, but when I was alone, all I could think about was how to grapple with constantly needing to stay safe and secure.

Sexual assault is one of, if not the most, violating and violent forms of assault. Historically, rape has been used as a tactic of war to degrade and subjugate populations. In the article "War and Rape: Analytic Approaches," (WILPF International, 1992) Ruth Seifert explores the social and cultural context in which the role of rape underpins the ritualized "game" that is war. Rape has long been considered a "rule of war" and a spoil of the victors, where the "ritual that [is] the right to exert violence against women is primarily granted to the victor during campaigns of conquest or in the immediate post-war period." In committing gendered violence, soldiers are not seeking sexual encounters, but rather violent sexual exploits that serve "as the ultimate symbolic humiliation of the male enemy." The ritual of gendered violence in wartime exemplifies the mechanism by which sexual assault dehumanizes individuals.

Sexual assault strikes at the core of one's existence, and launches a direct attack on self-autonomy. The thought of such an intrusion can elicit intense existential anxiety, as rape is the pinnacle of vulnerability and powerlessness. The Shadow of Sexual Assault hypothesis addresses this anxiety, arguing that women's fear of sexual assault heightens, or shadows, their fear

of other types of crime – in particular violent crime. This hypothesis directly addresses how the implications of gendered violence can affect women's perception of their own safety and security. Scholars in this field illustrate sexual assault as "a master offense among women," which heightens their fear of other victimizations.

The Shadow of Sexual Assault Hypothesis stems from the perplexing data that, while women statistically face lower rates of victimization than men, they are far more fearful of falling victim to crime. Despite the higher likelihood of men being the victim to crimes such as burglary, murder, and physical assault, women have significantly higher levels of fear. Many scholars explain this gender gap in perceived risk as a result of the fact that women associate crime with sexual assault, meaning that crime in any form can hold the possibility of sexual assault. This gap is further exacerbated by victim-blaming and other cultural phenomenon that marginalize survivors.

This trend was originally supported by Mark Warr, a professor at University of Texas, in his study "Fear of Rape Among Urban Women," which was published in 1985. Warr's data demonstrates women's significant association between fear of rape and an increased fear of crime in general. This study also concluded that gender was the most important predictor of fear, as when the fear of sexual assault was eliminated as a potential third variable, the differences between men and women normalized drastically.

Additionally, there is a marked discrepancy in women's fear of crime and their perceived risk, meaning how likely an individual believes they are to being subjected to a particular crime. Kenneth F. Ferraro, who is currently a professor of sociology at Purdue University, published a study in 1984 entitled "Women's Fear of Victimization: Shadow of Sexual Assault?" which examined the effects of sexual assault on female subjectivities. His findings indicated that the sample of women were more afraid of rape than murder, and sexual assault was associated with low levels of perceived risk but high levels of fear. Moreover, Ferraro's data indicated that this phenomena was independent of whether the woman had been personally victimized or not in the past.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the Sexual Assault Hypothesis are grim. The theory attests the unique form of victimization that women face in relation to sexual assault, a crime that shadows other forms of victimization. The ramifications of this deleterious fear are omnipresent in a woman's life, creating ongoing fear and worry that an individual often time shapes its life through precautionary measures that lead to a reduction in the overall quality of life. In its very nature, sexual assault is an existential threat to women. Sexual assault represents one of the most stigmatizing forms of victimization, with the power to affect every domain of life and personhood. The crime itself and the fear that is associated with it has the power to shape an individual's life and become an integral component of one's existence. It is the pinnacle of vulnerability and powerlessness, launching a direct attack on self-autonomy.

As statistics prove, intimate partner violence and sexual assault are the only forms of victimization that occur more frequently among women as opposed to men. However, the demographic most largely affected by the fear and experience of such crimes are young women, in particular those who move often and are introduced into foreign environments. Thus, the correlation between college women and sexual assault is clear, as this demographic fits the most at risk prototype.

The American university system has been marked by the insidious problem of sexual assault. The culmination of rape culture, fraternity culture, and misogyny have cultivated an environment that puts students in a position of vulnerability. That is not to say that all fraternities perpetuate rape culture and sexism, but Greek culture has been historically marked by traditional gender

scripts and inequality. Rape culture is a result of gender norms that illustrate men as aggressive and sexual, while women are perceived as passive and compliant. The fusing of rape culture and fraternities create a predatory environment that historically and persistently endangers students.

According to UCLA's annual Crime Report, 2017 was marked by 31 reports of rape, an increase by over 200 percent from the 15 reports of rape in 2015. It is important to recognize that reported instances of sexual assault do not equal the number of sexual assault occurrences because not all survivors are able to come forward about their experiences. Because of the discrepancy between the occurrence and formal reports of sexual assault, lieutenant Scott Scheffler of the UCLA Police Department attributes UCLA's two fold increase in sexual assault reports to the expansion of educational and outreach programs on the university's campus. This interpretation of the statistics paints a positive picture, highlighting the efficacy of programs such as Campus Assault Resources and Education center, or better known as CARE. However, it does not seem as positive when paired with UCLA's 2012 ranking as the most dangerous college in America, according to Business Insider, or its 2013 spot on CollegeStats.Org's list of the most dangerous schools for women.

In January 2018, a UCLA student and fraternity member was arrested and charged with assault with the intent of committing rape. In the wake of this incident, the UCLA Interfraternity Council implemented an indefinite ban on in-house fraternity events where alcohol was present. Throughout the ban, Westwood's Landfair Avenue, also known as "frat row," was deserted in comparison to the usual hordes of people walking from house to house in the middle of the night.

Preceding the lifting of the ban, fraternities were required to rewrite their bylaws and implement certain cautionary methods, including checking college IDs and age, hiring third-party bartenders and security, and preventing unlisted attendees from entering the upper floors of the houses. However, less than a week into fraternities reopening, it was clear that many of these rules were ignored. Less than two weeks after the ban was lifted, I experienced the blatant aggression that embodied my expectations of a frat party prior to arriving at college. A fraternity member offered me alcohol upstairs, and when I asked if my friends could join us, he immediately said no and looked at me as if I were crazy. His direct rebuff of my attempt to surround myself with friends made it clear that his "invitation" was not solely related to alcohol.

It is instances like that that set my anxiety ablaze and remind me about the insidious nature of the culture in which I am both immersed and partaking in. There is a sexual assault epidemic occurring within the American collegiate institution – one that is characterized by coercion, archaic gender norms, and vulnerability.

I have heard so many heart-breaking stories from powerful and resilient women during my time at UCLA, and continue to be made proud by the strength of each and every individual who has grappled with the unimaginable. UCLA has taken significant measures to combat sexual assault, and institutions – such as CARE, the Title IX office at UCLA, and student organizations such as Bruin Consent Coalition – expend incredible amounts of time and labor to create a more safe and inclusive community. It is imperative that the roots of the problem be addressed, and fostering dialogue about sexual assault and consent are the first steps. Beyond that, the socio-cultural foundation of privilege, gender roles, and violence is the true and final behemoth that must be taken down.

