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Binge-Drinking College Women's Engagement with the 'Slutty' Discourse and its Implications for Sexual Violence

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the co-constitutive and dynamic engagement of late adolescent, binge-drinking women with the 'slutty' discourse and its implications for the risk (and experience) of sexual assault, which is one aspect of gender construction in the context of campus party culture. Using data from in-depth interviews with 31 undergraduate women who self-identified as frequent binge drinkers from a large, elite, public, Midwestern University. I show how the women I interviewed engage with a discourse of "sluttiness" in the sexualized campus party culture. I discuss several implications of the particular form of engagement undertaken by the women I interviewed, and provide suggestions for intervention into feminist theory and anti-sexual violence practice.

In the fall of my senior year in high school, two of my closest girlfriends and I left the large, Midwestern, city we lived in and drove an hour south to tour an highly elite, private liberal arts college. This school was consistently ranked by the *US News and World Report* in the top 5 liberal arts schools in the country, and widely considered the "best" school in the region. Being smart and career-minded young women with close ties to family, friends, and boyfriends in the city we lived in, we all hoped to like it.

While on the tour with 10 or so other high school juniors and seniors –and a few parents – also visiting the school, I asked the tour guide about rape on campus. From my experiences in high school and feminist politics I knew/believed that sexual assault was widespread and pervasive, however this particular school had experienced a well-publicized rape the previous year, and I was curious to see how she would respond to my question. The tour guide responded by telling me about rape whistles, showing me the lights that lit nearly all corners of the small,

isolated campus. She then told me, in a dismissive tone, that, besides, the only sexual assault cases they had involved alcohol.[1]

This incident left a powerful impression on me. At the time, I thought that was a ridiculous response. I remember sarcastically commenting to my friends that as there was no alcohol on campus we would all be safe. At the time, my assumption was that the tour guide's response was her way of providing a quick answer to a difficult question, while simultaneously managing to reassure the parents on the tour that their children could be safe at that school as long as they chose to avoid (being around) alcohol. It was not until later that I began to think about the implicit devaluing of (the experiences of) the women/girls who chose to drink and/or be around others drinking; girls who chose to participate in campus party culture.

This paper is a study of those girls – the ones who choose to participate in campus party culture – and their perceptions of the risk of sexual violence.[2] The larger project from which the data for this paper is drawn explores the co-constructions of gender and partying through the mechanisms of peer culture, same and cross-gender relationships, bodily experiences of alcohol and drug consumption, sexuality, the pleasures and dangers of partying – including the risk of sexual violence, and their variations along different identity dimensions (such as race, ethnicity, class, sorority status). The focus of this paper is on one particular aspect of gender construction in the context of partying: the co-constitutive and dynamic engagement of late adolescent, binge-drinking women with the "slutty" discourse and its implications for the risk (and experience) of sexual assault.

[1] Neither my friends nor I applied to this school.
[2] Throughout this paper I use the phrases 'sexual assault' and 'sexual violence' interchangeable. They are intended as terms which include unwanted sexual contact. Legal definitions of sexual assault or rape or criminal sexual conduct, vary from state to state. At no point in the interviews did I define sexual assault or sexual violence, instead purposely leaving the terms vague and open to the interpretation of the interviewee.

Through analysis of data from 31 in-depth interviews, I show some ways in which the binge-drinking college women who I interviewed engage with a discourse of "sluttiness" in the sexualized campus party culture. I begin by demonstrating the pleasure women associate with partying, and that partying is constructed with a particular element of sexuality; providing one possible answer for why women participate in the traditionally masculine domain party culture with well-publicized risks. I then show that the popular conception of a "slut" as a woman who has sex with many different men in a relatively short period of time without a necessary or strong emotional attachment to the men involved (Stombler, 1994; Armstrong et. al, 2005),[3] is not the definition of slut at work in the culture of the women I interviewed. I conclude by discussing the implications of binge-drinking college women's engagement with the "sluttiness" discourse for, a) the real and perceived risk of sexual violence, b) the mental and psychological well-being of (the many) women who are sexually assaulted, and c) the "othering" of women who are labeled as "slutty."

Background

There is an extensive, and overwhelmingly quantitative, literature documenting the prevalence of sexual violence on campus and its frequent relationship to partying (Abbey, 2002; Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2005; Boswell & Spade, 1996; Corbin, Bernat, Calhoun, McNair, & Seals, 2001; Handler, 1995; Martin & Hummer, 1989; Stombler, 1994; Ullman, Karabatsos & Koss, 1999). Prevalence rates of sexual violence on campus, very often accompanied by alcohol consumption, constitute college women as a "high risk" group that experiences sexual assault at substantially higher rates than the general

[3] The entry for "Slut" in the interactive, web-based encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is as follows: is a pejorative slang term of disapproval or denigration for a person who has more sexual relationships, especially multiple affairs, or gives the appearance of being more sexually accessible, active or demonstrative, than is deemed socially acceptable. In this sense it is an offensive term connoting someone (usually a woman) who will do things for sex that others would not, such as illicit affairs or multiple partners. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slut (Last accessed, December 14, 2005)

population. One research team (Sorenson, Stein, Seigel, Golding & Burnam, 1987) found that college women are at *three times* greater risk of sexual assault than the general population of the same age and gender.

In 1987, Koss developed the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) to study rape and sexual assault on college campuses. It is now a widely used and validated measure. Items on the SES ask about specific unwanted sexual behaviors. Included in these items is a question about unwanted sexual contact while under the influence of alcohol.[4]

In a nationally representative sample of 6,159 college women using the SES, Koss (1987) found that approximately 54% of college women had experienced at least one instance of a sexual assault of any kind, 15% had been raped and 12% experienced attempted rape. Later replication studies have produced similar findings (Finkelson, & Oswalt, 1995 Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997).

It is important to acknowledge that any attempt to quantify incidence of rape or other sexual assault must be viewed with a critical eye. There are many social and psychological imperatives to deny, minimize, or "re-frame" one's own experiences with interpersonal violence to fit a more culturally or socially acceptable script (Campbell, Sefl, & Aherns, 2004; French, 2003). In addition, the phrases "sexual assault," "sexual violence," and "rape" are loaded terms with contested meanings for which there is no common consensus. Despite my critique of the possibility of accurately quantifying the incidence of sexual assault on college campuses, there seems little doubt that it is a frequent occurrence. Thus it is deserving of the attention of scholars and activists. Particularly necessarily are qualitative studies on making meaning out of sexual violence.

[4] The inclusion of this variable, despite its consistency with most state sexual assault laws, has brought Koss' work to the center of backlash debates on feminism and sexual violence (Roiphe, 1993; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999).

Given the astounding prevalence of sexual violence on college and university campuses, many researchers have devoted their careers to explaining this phenomenon. The vast majority of the work has focused on quantifying individual level variables such as how much the victim and/or the perpetrator had been drinking, did the victim or perpetrator have physical, sexual or emotional abuse history, to what extent did he/they adhere to rape myth beliefs, etc (Adams-Curtis, & Forbes, 2004; Armstrong, 2005; Littelton & Axsom, 2003; Carmody & Washington, 2001). [5]

Academic work on campus sexual violence has been primarily, although not exclusively, quantitative. Despite an early and on-going emphasis on individual-level factors such as those listed above for sexual violence, by the late-1980s work on sexual violence on college campuses began to incorporate insights from qualitative methodology and from sociology. This methodological, and to some extent disciplinary, analysis brought analysis of situational or contextual aspects, such as the organization of fraternities, (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Martin & Hummer, 1989) on sexual violence on campus.

In Martin & Hummer's important article on fraternities and rape (1989) they argue that the structure of fraternities, of which hyper-masculinity, excessive drinking and partying, "scoring" with women, and devout loyalty to the brotherhood are important elements, creates an atmosphere (particularly at parties) that facilitates and encourages rape. They conclude that sexual violence on campus is not likely to be reduced until the culture and social organization of fraternities change. In the mean time, they call for more monitoring of fraternities, particularly their use of alcohol, by campus officials.

[5] Rape myths include, for example, "She was wearing a short skirt, so she was looking for sex/rape", "I was so aroused that I couldn't help my self", "Once a woman has said yes, she can't say 'no', and 'You can't rape a prostitute'.

Armstrong et al. (2005) expanded this existing analysis to construct a theory of campus sexual assault that is simultaneously rooted in both the structural organization of the University and the specific practices of (groups of) individual students. They call their approach to theorizing campus sexual assault the "social organization and peer culture approach". Their analysis expands upon previous research in two important ways. First, it acknowledges that fraternities are large contributors to the rape-supportive structure of a University's social life, but they are not the only culprits. University policies such as the manner and extent to which alcohol use is restricted, the organization of non-Greek housing (dorms, primarily) and the limited interaction between first year and more advanced students, all contribute to a pro-rape college culture.

Secondly, Armstrong et al. (2005) emphasize the role of individual actors, and groups of actors, in shaping a college culture that enables party rape. Their analysis of the peer culture of college women, along with that of Handler's (1995) study of sorority women, provide some of the only attempts to explain the active participation of women in dangerous party scenes. Based on ethnographic observation and interviews with college women at a large Midwestern University, Armstrong and her colleagues argue that the peer culture of college women creates a situation in which choosing not to participate in the (specifically Greek) party scene would mean "social death." Their research, in addition to that of Stombler (1994) and Holland and Eisenhart, (1990) suggests that attention they get from men (which Young et al. (2005) and others have argued can now be gained from participating in heavy drinking) is so important to college women's social status and sense of self-worth that they are willing to risk the potential threat of sexual assault to get it. In other words, within the peer culture of these young women, the risk of sexual violence that is associated with partying is worth it.

This study expands on the existing research in three important ways. First, the focus of this study is on binge-drinking undergraduate women. It is not primarily a study on first year students and/or sororities, which is where much other research focuses. Second, this study uses in-depth qualitative interviews to better understand the meanings and co-constitutive processes people attach to sexual violence. Third, this study focuses on the engagement of binge-drinking undergraduate women with the "slutty" discourse and attempts to manage the risk of sexual violence within the context of campus party culture. All of this is done under the a framework of co-constitutivity and gender construction.

Data and Method

The data for this study are 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place on the University campus from May to July of 2005 (May through July). I conducted interviews with women aged 18-24 who were undergraduate students at a large, elite, Midwestern University and who self-identified as frequent binge drinkers and participants in campus "party culture."[6] This particular University, as described by Armstrong et al. (2005) is one to which students come to experience a "quintessential" American college experience. Students come largely from the local region, with a sizeable contingent from the Mid-Atlantic States, particularly the New York and Washington DC metro areas. There is a numerically small but strong Greek presence on the campus, which many students indicate has a powerful influence on the social life of the campus (Martin, 2005). Frequent binge drinking – partying – is normative on this campus.

Greater racial/ethnic diversity was represented in this project than across the campus at large. Of the 31 interviews, 18 (58%) women identified themselves as white or Caucasian.

[6] As I was interested in exploring how people understood "party culture" I did not provide any definition for it, instead choosing to leave that definition to interviewees or potential interviewees.

Eleven (35.5%) women identified themselves as Asian or Asian-American, and two (6.5%) identified themselves as Black or African-American.[7]

Socio-economically, participants were less diverse than the general campus population. Participants were asked to record their estimation of their family household income.[8] Only two participants indicated that their families' annual household income was less than $50,000, and only six (including those two) reported annual household incomes of less than $75,000. Twenty-six participants indicated that their mothers' had at least a college education (10 had graduate degrees). Twenty-five participants reported that their fathers' had at least a college education with 17 of them having graduate degrees. Two participants (not the two with the lowest household incomes) reported that their fathers' were not involved in their lives.

The sexual orientation of the women I interviewed was also very homogenous. They all identified as straight or heterosexual. The only variation was one woman who wrote "heterosexual (more nonspecific)."

The participants in this project differed from those in many other studies of campus sexual assault in two ways; age and sorority status. While many studies of campus sexual assault focus on the experience of sorority members (see, for example, Martin and Hummer, 1989; and Boswell and Spade, 1996) the participants in this project were not largely members of sororities. Only four participants (12.9%) were Pan-Hellenic sorority members.[9] Interestingly, this is likely an over-representation of sorority members when compared to the campus as a whole, as only 8.5% of first year students anticipated joining a fraternity or sorority (http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/StudentProfileData2004.pdf.).

[7] University data indicate that 78.5% of the first year class in 2004 was White, 14.4% were Asian/ Asian-American, and 4.4% were African-American/Black. Over half (51.1%) of this class came from families with household incomes between $75,000 and $199,999, and nearly 20% (19.5) had family incomes above $200,000.
[8] I am skeptical of students' ability to reliably estimate their annual household income.
[9] One was a member of a Non-Pan Hellenic Chemistry service fraternity.

I recruited participants for this via flyers that I posted in three coffee shops on the University's central campus, and in two large classroom buildings. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, flyers were posted both on designated posting spots and in the stalls of women's restrooms in all locations. The flyers announced a University sponsored study on women's experiences with partying and requested the participation of people who were interested in talking about their experiences with partying (including their perspectives on the risk of sexual assault while partying) and who met the following criteria: 1) female undergraduate students at the university between the ages of 18-25, 2) had at least 4 drinks in a setting at least three times in the last two weeks or 15 times in the last 6 months, and 3) participate in party culture (as defined by participants). Tear-off tabs with my name, email address and phone number were located at the bottom of the flyer. People who were interested in participating were invited to contact me by phone or email. In part because recruitment began just as the traditional academic year was ending and I was concerned about having a difficult time recruiting participants and also because I wanted to be respectful of peoples' busy lives, potential interviewees were offered $25 for being interviewed.

I soon realized that despite my earlier concern, I was not going to have trouble recruiting people to be interviewed. This is largely due to the active academic schedule (a large number of classes offered) of the spring and summer terms. Thus although the population of undergraduates is substantially lower in the spring/summer than it is in the fall, there are still a sizeable number of undergraduate students who stay on or near campus over the summer.

I conducted all of the interviews and followed the outline of an interview schedule with questions about experiences with partying, campus party culture, social relationships and interactions, identity, and risks of party culture, and sexual violence. In keeping with the tradition

of qualitative interviewing, all interviews covered all topics, but not every question was asked to every interviewee and interviewees were often asked questions that emerged from the flow of the interview. I began every interview by having participants fill out an informed consent form that described the project and explicitly stated that participants would be asked about their perceptions of the risk of sexual assault (as did the recruitment flyer).

Most of the interviewees appeared excited about being interviewed about their experiences with partying. They commented that they thought it was important for such a common, every-day experience to be studied and analyzed. Binge drinking and using other drugs is unconditionally stigmatized in many segments of society, and was illegal for many of the interviewees (those under age 21). However, partying is such a common and culturally accepted behavior for college students at Universities such as this one that I believe most interviewees felt comfortable talking about their experiences with me. Additionally, we did the interviews in a school building, a place where many students talk with their friends about their social lives and experiences with parties, which might have contributed to their feelings of comfort with the topic.

My location as an interviewer was similar to what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) describes as an *outsider within.* I was approximately 10 years older than most of the interviewees. I had recently had a baby, who some of them saw me interact with as they were waiting for the interview to begin, and I was marked (via my rings) as married. These identities (older, married, a mom) marked me as a "grown-up" and as distant from the youth that they embodied and that is central to their identities as college students. As such, they were salient in the interview setting. Some similar, if somewhat removed, identities were also salient. Most obviously, I am a woman,

as were all of the interviewees.[10] Both the interviewees and I were students, albeit I was a student in a doctoral program and they were undergraduate students. Additionally, and perhaps most salient to this project, I also was a frequent binge drinker and participant in party culture as an undergraduate student, although the setting was different both contextually (a small, politically progressive, liberal arts school) and temporally.

This past experience, in addition to academic literature and professional work, provided the "context of discovery" for this project and shaped the questions I explored with interviewees. The interview questions largely remained the same throughout the course of the interviews, with some minor adjustments made to reflect the language of the participants. For example I began asking interviewees about their experiences and relationships with the men they partied with. I changed that language after the first few interviews when I received puzzled looks from interviewees who said, "oh, you mean my guy friends." I realized that the word "men" to these college women implied an older "grown-up," distinct from their age/developmental identity of late adolescence. I then changed my language in interviews and used the word "guy." I also followed the interviewees guide as to whether they referred to them selves as women or as girls.

After we had gone through my questions, I asked participants if they had any questions for me after completing the interview. Many of them reiterated that they were glad the issue was being studied and asked what I thought I would find. I responded that I believe participating in party culture is an experience or behavior that shapes our senses of identity, particularly our identity of ourselves as women. Related to that I expected that our perception of the risk of

[10] Although I can not document this, I think it is possible that some of the interviewees saw me as representative of one of the possible paths their lives might take. Some of the ones who saw me with my baby asked me questions about how I balanced working/going to school and having a baby, and if I thought having a baby in graduate school was a good idea.

sexual assault also impacted the way we understand our experiences with partying and our identities and sense of ourselves as women.

Following the completion of the interview, participants were asked to complete a demographics form requesting general background information such as age, year in school, socio-economic class, race, location and type of high school, and sorority membership. They were also offered a list of resources giving contact information to mental health, substance abuse, and sexual violence services. At the very end of the interview I handed participants an envelope with their incentive money, $25 in cash, and told them they could contact me with any additional questions. I also told them that if they had requested I would send them a summary of my findings from the project.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and 45 minutes. Twenty-eight of the 31 interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed for analysis. Extensive field notes were taken on the three interviews that were not recorded, and then transcribed for analysis.

I analyzed the data using a method of open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). I initially read through transcripts and field notes from all 31 interviews. On a second read-through of the data I began thematic coding, using NVIVO software.

I began coding with a list of themes suggested from the literature and from my personal and professional experiences. While using these pre-existing themes as a starting-off point, I simultaneously sought out themes that were emerging from the data, making coding an iterative and dynamic process. Anticipated themes included slutty, safety, risk/danger, and heavy drinking. Emergent and unanticipated themes included issues of control, the pleasure of feeling/being sexy within the party scene, and slutty-as-drunk.

Not far into the process of coding, I decided sacrifice breadth for the hope of comprehensible depth (Hurst, 1999), and thus to focus my first paper out of this data on the connections between the "slutty" discourse and perceptions of the risk of sexual assault. To do so I narrowed my general research question from "*how is gender constructed among frequently binge drinking women within the campus party scene?"* to the more focused questions of "*how do college women construct the discourse of 'slutty'"?* and *"What is the relationship of that discourse to their perception of the risk of sexual violence?"* However, given the initial impetus of this project, a framework of gender construction shaped my thinking, coding, and analyzing of the data. A different, though not a more "true" or "accurate," paper might have been written by someone else, or in a different time. This paper is not meant to provide a definitive truth or answer to the questions I posed. Rather, it is meant to provide an additional source of information, perspective, and analysis of the co-constitutive dynamic of binge-drinking college women's relationship to the "slutty" discourse and the risk of sexual assault.

Party Culture is Sexualized

Armstrong et al. (2005) and Young et al. (2005) argue that despite the well-known dangers that research and conventional wisdom associate with partying, undergraduate women gain pleasure from participating in party culture. My data supports that claim. When asked to name some reasons why women drink every single interview mentioned – without prompting – that partying is fun.[11]

Partying is a normative and highly visible institution at this University. For the women who were interviewed for this study, it is the context in which much of their social lives take place. They describe partying as a strategy for meeting people, a way to lower their inhibitions

[11] Drinking alcohol, and interacting with people, are necessary and sufficient (although not exclusive) conditions which must be met for "partying" to take place.

and allow them to interact freely with people (particularly "guys") they do not know well, and as a vehicle for bonding with their friends.

Sexuality was both a component of partying and source of fun for the women I interviewed. That there is an element of sexuality associated with partying is such a naturalized assumption that it is difficult to find explicit evidence of it. Barring direct statement of the conflation of partying and sexuality, I found evidence of it in two places; 1) the efforts to which women described going in order to create the desired sexy appearance for "going out," and 2) the frequent linkages made between partying and "hooking up,"[12] hoping to meet someone, and/or trying to "get laid."

When describing how she and her friends get ready to "go out"[13] at night, Melissa[14] said "when women get ready to go out, in general, not all women, they want to look cute, they wanna look sexy."[15] Alyssa talked about enjoying, and planning for, the sexual attention she received from men while "out" partying.

> *What do you do to get ready to go out?*
>
> Shower, find cute clothes, the sexy ones, the tighter jeans. Do your hair, put makeup on. I'm also usually drinking (she laughs).
>
> *Do you how do you decide what to wear?*
>
> It depends. I have, like, my going out clothes so they're my cuter jeans. They're probably tighter, they look better. Sometimes they're my longer jeans so I can wear like my taller shoes if I want. Like, my cuter, more expensive shirts that have funny sayings on them. I guess things that get a guy's attention (laughs).

The description Sara provided of "getting ready", or at least her feelings behind it, varied somewhat from most of the other interviews. It was reminiscent of both Bartky's (1990) and

[12] "Hooking up" is a frequently used and purposefully vague, slang term for a wide range of sexual interactions.
[13] To 'go out' means to party – usually at a bar, house party, or occasionally to a fraternity party.
[14] All names are pseudonyms.
[15] I often edited the quotes for clarity; removing filler words such as *like*, *um,* or, *you know*. In no case does this clarifying editing change the meaning of the speakers' words, and I made every possible attempt to maintain the tone of the speakers' words when I edited.

Fenstermaker and West (2002) conception of femininity, and the accompanying heterosexuality, as an achievement or accomplishment to which others hold women. She described a similar process of getting ready to go out, but attributed the way she was constructing her appearance to expectations place upon her. "If I'm going clubbing, then it's like a skirt or like a tight shirt or something like that…I feel like they expect you to dress more like provocatively. And it's kind of there's like definitely a sexual element to it." Anne expressed a similar sentiment:

> *But how do you think your experience with party culture is shaped by being a woman?*
>
> There are certain things girls are expected to do maybe. One, if you're at a party and there's dancing, there's a certain way of the provocative dancing or whatever.
>
> *And that's kind of expected? Like, it would be weird if you were dancing and not doing that?*
>
> Yeah.

Among the women I interviewed, whether explicitly acknowledged or implicitly suggested, partying is constructed as a combination of alcohol and (hetero)sexuality. Much of their mental energy regarding partying is focused on whether they are going out to try to meet someone, if they will "hook up" with someone that night, and how to read the sexualized attention they receive from men. The following words from Mary demonstrate the foregrounding of sexuality within party culture:

> I think a lot of guys view girls as partying as automatically being open to like I guess advances by them. And, I just feel like when you go to the bar, guys assume that you're there to like meet people or to hook up no matter like—I mean they can know that you have a boyfriend, they can know that you're dating someone or that you're just there to have a good time. And guys will still try to—like there's still that impression that you're there to hook up with someone.

The discourse of heterosexualized interaction and partying is an important, and neglected, site of gender (re)production. My data show that women who participate in party culture conceive of (and thus construct) guys as being more focused on "hooking up" than women.

> A lot of things for guys (laughs) especially my friends it seems their goal of going out to a party is to hook up with somebody. That's what they talk about. And most girls, that's not really what they do. They're not like, "Dude, I'm going to get so wasted and hook up with some guy." But for guys, it's kind of like associated with partying. Like, "Yeah, I'm going to get laid tonight." So that's different. (Katie).

Julie explained this by stating that many guys "have an agenda," as Clarissa said, with a laugh, when guys go out they "plan on getting drunk and plan on getting laid."

Armstong et al. (2005) theorize that college women who participate in the party scene interpret their knowledge and familiarity with the "givens" of party culture as a skill of which they should be proud. Similarly, I found that being able to navigate the party scene, in which it is expected that men are partying with the intention or goal of "getting laid" implies a level of sophistication. This can be seen in the apparent nonchalance of Dana, a long-time (since early high school) participant in party culture and a graduating senior:

> I'm conscious of the fact that I guess bars are kind of like a sexual environment or that people are trying to hit on each other or pick up on each other who's looking at you, who's I don't know. I don't know if guys think of it that way. I guess guys are more on the prowl than girls are.
>
> *How do you deal with guys being on the prowl at the bar?*
>
> It doesn't offend me or anything (laughing). I think it's kind of like funny and fun and kind of a game. I don't know. I think it's kind of expected so it doesn't really offend me in any way.

Her repeated and unprovoked insistence that the behavior of "guys on the prowl" does not offend her is notable; suggesting that not being offended by the sexually aggressive behavior present in party culture may be a skill in which she is accomplished, and of which she is proud.

Taken together, the individual data from these interviews demonstrate that within the social/peer context of those who participate in party culture, the relationship between partying and sexuality is naturalized to such an extent that sexuality appears to be inherent within party culture. Within this context, sexuality and partying can be understood as co-constitutive. They are separate institutions whose meaning is constructed through interaction with each other. The

constitutive link between sexuality and partying is strong, and it provides fertile ground for the "slutty" discourse.

The Slutty Discourse

The discourse of "sluttiness" is important to conceptualizations of female sexuality. Sexuality scholarship indicates that women and girls of a variety of race, nation, and class backgrounds, actively work to construct their own identities and sexualities in opposition to being "slutty" (see, for example, Martin, 2005; Schalet, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler, 2003; and Stombler, 1994). "Sluttiness" is the negative referent against which respectable and controlled sexuality is compared.

College women who participate in party culture must negotiate the powerful, pervasive, and stigmatizing cultural assumption that "drunk girls are slutty." Consistent with the literature on sexuality, the most common way the women I interviewed engaged with the "sluttiness" discourse was to define themselves in opposition to it. Calling upon the stereotype of sorority girls as "sororowhores" or "sorostitutes", and distancing themselves (or groups to which they belong) from behavior attributed to girls "like that" was a common method of engagement with the "slutty" discourse. Examples of this run through my data. The following illustrates a few versions of this stereotype:

> I have different feelings for different groups of women, and I think that I have a hard time feeling very respectful of women, and this is totally just a stereotype of mine, but, it seems particularly in the Greek system, the stereotypical girl doesn't wear a lot of clothes when she goes out, and she goes to the certain bars in this area that I sorta look down on. (Laura)

> Like with my friends, I hang out with mostly Asian kids and I think you don't really see the Asian girls get totally drunk or anything like that. So I think it's a different view. It's mostly, like, the sorority girls who don't have, like, the best reputation about going out and partying. And I think they make up most of the party scene, too. There's like a huge population of sorority girls on this campus. So just wherever you go, you're going to run into them —but not all of them are- just, like, a vast majority.

> *Okay. Anything else about perceptions of women who drink or women who party?*
>
> No, that's about it. Just kind of like that sluttiness, especially of the sorority girls. (Kim)

That the women I interviewed would participate in the construction of women – particularly sorority women – who participate in party culture as "slutty," was an unsurprising finding. Also unsurprising was that the women I interviewed explicitly distanced themselves from that which they understood as "slutty." What was surprising, was that data from these interviews suggests a necessary (for this population) component to slutty – "too much" or "excessive" drinking.

Although "slutty" has typically been defined as a woman who has sexual relationships with many different men in a short period of time, and/or engages in sexual activity with men without emotional involvement, data from this paper show a different definition in operation among the binge drinking college women I interviewed. The women I interviewed interact with and construct a definition of "sluttiness" that is based on a combination of a woman's sexiness and "too much" or "out-of-control" drinking. Sexiness (which, as the previous section of this paper demonstrated, is constructed as always present in both party culture and the women who participate in party culture) combined with "too much" drinking creates "sluttiness." In another form: (DRINKING) + (sexiness) = Sluttiness.

This construction of sluttiness as conflated with drinking or partying "too much" can be seen throughout the data. Anne's words demonstrate engagement with the "slutty" discourse in two ways. She both participates in the construction of partying as constitutive of "sluttiness," and others "those" girls who are in the crowd that parties a lot who –
unlike she and her friends – are "sluts."

> I guess I would put them [women who party] into two categories because I party and my friends party but I know that we're not, like I mean, there's that

> crowd that does totally party a lot. There are girls like that. With my crowd, we—we drink (pauses) in moderation (laughs). Kind of. But some—I mean, there's definitely the bad stereotype about girls that party too much and them being sluts. (Anne)

Helen articulated a more internalized and self-referential perspective regarding the relationship between alcohol and "sluttiness" that was rooted in her Korean background.

> I would never pour a shot for a guy. Just because, like, I come from a Korean background and a long time ago only prostitutes would pour drinks to guys and just that idea I guess stuck with me because I've heard it from so many different people. And I don't want to feel degraded when I'm pouring people shots. (Helen)

In contrast to Anne, Kim, and Laura, in this quote Helen is not explicitly distancing herself from other women in her peer group who she defines as "slutty." When differentiating herself from women with stigmatized identities and sexualities, Helen has two reference groups; the "slutty party girl" one that she shares with Anne, Kim, and Laura, and (perhaps particularly Korean) prostitutes. Helen is participating in constructing an additional group of women – prostitutes – as "other."

Importantly, as a Korean-American college student, Helen is shaped not only by images and messages from her Korean cultural background, but also by those from her active participation in campus party culture at a prototypical "American" college. As such, and as is demonstrated in the following quote, she must engage with the "slutty" discourse that is dominate within campus party culture. Her words here show her interpretation, and construction, of partying primarily, and (assumed) sexual behavior secondarily, as constitutive of "sluttiness."

> Some people could label them as being wild girls or someone could say that if they're not being responsible about their work and they're just having fun, then they're not goal oriented or focused on their lives but they just want to do whatever they want to do. Or (pauses) to a higher degree, they could be labeled as sluts – if they tend to be trashed all the time or if they go home with other guys from going to parties a lot. (Helen)

An informative account of the perceived relationship between women (particularly sorority women) who party, sluttiness, sexuality, and vulnerability can be seen in Jen's words. In

a few phrases she makes clear the connections the elements of campus party culture that create the context of danger for women who party. Her words also illustrate the way in which women who party – and are thus themselves vulnerable to the same stereotypes being applied to the sorority women – distance themselves from the "sororowhore" image and "other" those who fit that description.

The following excerpt is Jen's response to one of the questions I asked every interviewee "*What do you think, in general, of women who party?"*[16]

> If they don't have control over themselves and they're irresponsible about it, I mean with anybody, but I kind of disrespect it more with women because they're more vulnerable.
>
> *Can you say more about that?*
>
> I know a lot of girls dress very provocatively, like, with the mini-skirt and the low cut tops and they look like they're out for more than just drinking. And some girls maybe just want to look good. But I think because of that, they're more vulnerable if they've been drinking… Other women, like a lot of my friends, they don't dress the way sorority girls do. Like, I probably dress more provocatively just because it's how I dress. Not necessarily to be like, "Hey, let's hook up." I mean, I'm not like that. My shirt may be more low cut but it won't be, like, sexy (laughs). So I guess it's more respectable.
>
> *So it's more respectable to not dress sexy?*
>
> I guess I respect them because they don't make themselves have—don't put themselves in a vulnerable position should they just drink too much. But I don't disrespect girls who dress provocatively if they are responsible.
>
> *What would be "being responsible" mean?*
>
> Limiting how much you drink, being conscious of how much you drink, knowing who's getting your drinks and having a friend or someone you trust do it.
>
> *And just to kind of clarify, when you say people are more vulnerable, what are they more vulnerable to?*
>
> Having sex.
>
> *And both of those things you think: the combination of kind of the provocative dress that a lot of people wear when they go out, and drinking—makes women more vulnerable?*
>
> Yeah.
>
> *And so a way to kind of limit your vulnerability there is to watch how much you're drinking?*
> Yeah.
>
> *Okay. Sort of along the same lines, do you think that there's any stigma associated with women partying?*
>
> Not really. There's stigma—they classify it as like "the sorostitute" (laughs) or "sororowhore" stigma where if you're wearing a mini-skirt or a really tiny shirt or something like that, even if you're not in a sorority, people will automatically assume you are because they think you're out to just get some or just get too drunk to where you can't take care of

[16] This excerpt is quoted at length because of the complexity and interconnections it illustrates.

> yourself. And I know a lot of my friends just, if you're in a sorority, they just don't really respect you.

The richness of Jen's words lend themselves to more in-depth and focused analysis. Jen framed initial response to my question of what she thought of women who party in a negative tone. She did not call up positive images of fun, attractive women bonding with close friends, being social, or relieving stress. Instead she operated from what social work refers to as "a deficit perspective," calling forth a particular – and negative – vision of women who party as irresponsible women who do not have control over themselves. Jen explicitly stated that although she disrespects this lack of control in anyone, she holds a particular place of disrespect for women who lack control "because they are more vulnerable."

Her disrespect of vulnerability – particularly in women – can be seen mid-way through the excerpt of her interview when she sets up a juxtaposition between women who are "responsible" (the ones she respects) and those who are not (the ones she does not respect). According to Jen, women who dress provocatively (except for her) put themselves in danger because they might drink too much. This contrast is targeted less toward women who do not dress provocatively than she does to women who do not drink. She specifically says "I don't disrespect girls who dress provocatively if they are responsible." And she defines responsible by "limiting how much you drink, knowing who is getting your drinks, and having friends or someone you trust do it [get the drinks]."

It appears that she believes dressing provocatively (or "sexy") by itself is not necessarily risky. She also appears to believe that there ways to drink that are not necessarily risky. It is the combination of both drinking (particularly "too much" drinking) and dressing provocatively that she believes is truly productive of vulnerability for women. Too much drinking combined with

too much sexiness (dressing provocatively and participating in party culture) is dangerous for women.

Jen uses – exactly – the same language to construct vulnerability among women who party that I used earlier to describe the construction of "sluttiness" engaged in by (for example) Helen, Anne, Kim, and Laura. For Jen, DRINKING + sexiness = Vulnerability. This is an interesting and important similarity. "Sluttiness" and vulnerability are constituted by the same elements. As such, they are largely conflated within campus party culture. Perhaps more accurately, within campus party culture "slutty" is code for "vulnerable."

Sluttiness and the Risk of Sexual Violence

When I asked Jen to clarify what she believed drinking and dressing provocatively made women vulnerable to, she responded without hesitation, "Having sex." This choice of words is very telling. Throughout the process of interviewing women for this study I heard many references to women being vulnerable, or "getting into bad situations" or having "something bad happen." When pressed for clarification they most often looked at me as though they were somewhat irritated at having to say the words, or perhaps even think them at all, then eventually said "sexual assault", or, sometimes "rape." Jen, however, said "having sex."

It is possible that she really meant "having sex" was what women who dressed provocatively and had "too much" to drink were at risk for. Mainstream substance abuse prevention in schools, and in public service announcements on television, radio, billboards, etc., does teach people that good judgment is a casualty of having too much to drink. Perhaps she was thinking that the ability to make good judgments is what normally prevents women from having sex, and therefore loosing the ability to make good judgments would prevent women from being able to decide not to have sex. This seems highly unlikely.

It seems much more likely that what Jen was thinking when she said women are made more vulnerable to "having sex" was "being raped." For Jen, "vulnerable" is code for "rape-able." By simple extension of logic, if "slutty" is code for "vulnerable" and "vulnerable" is code for "rape-able," then "slutty" is code for "rape-able." To return to equation form: If Slut = Vulnerable, and Vulnerable = Rape-able, then Slut = Rape-able.

Melissa explicitly made this connection in my interview with her. When asked what she thought, in general, of women who drink, she responded by saying:

> Some women that drink, they just like, you know, I just think of [a major street on campus]. You just see a lot of girls in, like, short skirts, slutty, wasted, and like, they're just like prey for a predator. I've seen guys who are like, "keep her drinking, keep her drinking…its just, I mean, there's the stereotype of, like, drunk girls are easy. Especially the way that some women dress, can be more tempting to men, drunk or sober. Especially following them around, you could see up their skirts. I mean I don't really know what would be attractive for a man. But just that they're easy also. Or easier, rather."
>
> *Like it looks like they're easier, or?*
>
> Yeah, if they're like drunk and stumbling, you might think, well, it might be easier to have sex with her, than like, the assertive sober girl over here. You know, a little sweet talk, and you're all set. (Melissa)

As with the earlier excerpt from my interview with Jen, this section of my interview with Melissa is incredibly rich, and draws connections between phenomena often only suggested through subtext and insinuation. Melissa unhesitatingly calls upon dominant discourses regarding the causes of sexual assault, namely that men can be so "tempted" by attractive ("temptingly" dressed) women that they "can't stop themselves" from raping women, or that women are responsible for being raped if they wear short skirts (are dressed like a slut.) The causal link between appearing to be slutty and the risk of sexual assault was also acknowledged by Cassie, who described consciously strategizing to make her self less sexy in attempt to be safer.

> I don't think guys have to worry so much about how they look either. They don't have to like strategize what they're going to wear, to think, "What is this going to get if I wear a low cut shirt? Is someone going to grab me? Is someone

> going to say something?" I mean they have it all around easier. (Pauses). One time I was going to a party and I was like, "Okay." Before I went out I was like, "Well I'm going to wear a big huge sweatshirt and jeans and a hat and I'm going to be so unattractive and no guy are going to try to talk to me." Opposite was true. This guy kept trying to kiss me in front of his friends and I didn't want to so he picked me up in the air. And like the thing that surprises me, too, is like I am a big girl and I think that that is also a reason why I have not ever tried to lose weight is because it makes me feel like I have some arena of protection or something. (Cassie)

As Cassie and Melissa articulated so well, there is a culturally constructed image that women who appear "slutty" are at risk of rape. "Slutty" *is* code for "rape-able." This connection to risk of rape is likely one reason for the persistent and powerful stigma attached to "sluttiness." It also provides an explanation beyond (or in addition to) reputation-management (Stombler, 1994) for why women who party engage with the "slutty" discourse by "othering" each other. They do so to construct a paradigm in which they are not at risk for sexual assault.

As I have shown throughout this paper, in the data from interviews with Helen, Anne, Kim, Laura, Jen, Melissa, and Cassie, the women I interviewed actively constructed "slutty" girls as "other" from themselves. They defined themselves and their activity in opposition to that (and those girls) which they perceived to be "slutty." I believe they did this in part to feel safe from the risk of sexual assault, and safely distant from the women who were at risk for or were actually sexually assaulted.

Sexual assault is both an individual and cultural a phenomenon; one that Catherine MacKinnon has likened to terrorism. In the introduction to *Feminism Unmodified,* (1987) she wrote the following:

> I have come to think that the unique effectiveness of terrorism, like that against Jews in Argentina, is that it is at once absolutely systematic and absolutely random: systematic because one group is its target and lives knowing it; random because there is no way of telling who is next on the list. Just to get through another day, women must spend an incredible amount of time, life, and energy cowed, fearful, and colonized, trying to figure out now not to be on the list. Learning by osmosis what men want in a woman and trying to give it to them, women hope that being the wanted image will alter their odds. Paying attention

> to every detail of every incident of a woman's violation they can get their hands on, women attempt not to be her. The problem is, combining even a few circumstances, descriptions, conditions, and details of acts of sexual abuse reveals that no woman has a chance. To be about to be raped is to be gender female in the process of going about life as usual. (p.7)

The language used by the women I interviewed is, fittingly, somewhat modified from that used by MacKinnon. They use code language of "vulnerable" and "slutty", but the process and the result is the same as described by MacKinnon. Jen says that she disrespects women who drink excessively and who wear provocative clothing such as short skirts and tight, low-cut tops, because that makes women "more vulnerable." And Melissa talks about girls who are "slutty, wasted, and… prey for a predator." Jen and Melissa, as MacKinnon suggested, have been using the information available to them through dominant discourses to understand who is at risk for rape, and they are attempting "not to be her."

Another way in which women attempt to define themselves away from being at risk of rape is to engage with the "blaming the victim" discourse in which victims are blamed and held responsible for the crimes that are perpetrated against them. The following words describe the process Amy went through after learning that a friend had been raped.

> And then we had another friend who like got raped in our hall last year by a guy in our hall. And it was like technically a rape on all levels, but she didn't report it and then she ended up sleeping with him again, and we were like, "rape victims don't sleep with their rapist." And she was like, "I just wanted to know what it was like." But, she's not our friend anymore.
>
> *Is it kinda related to that? Why she's not your friend anymore?*
>
> Yeah, like I lived with her this year, and like, it was miserable. She was really different. She's on a lot of medications, anti-depressants. And she's on Zoloft, she has anxiety. Etc. Like the list goes on. So I mean that could play a part in it, especially if she feels like she has low self-esteem and such.
>
> *Right. Um. After those, like after those things happened, do you feel like you changed how you partied?*
>
> Um, no not me personally. Because, I'm very independent and I like know what's going on around me, so, I wouldn't put myself in that situation.

The end of this quote from Amy is an excellent example of the "blaming the victim" discourse. When Amy says the she has not changed how she parties because she "know[s] what's

going on around her" and thus "wouldn't put [herself] in that situation," she is framing herself in contrast to her friend who *was* raped. Amy is thus implicitly blaming her both for putting herself in a situation where she was vulnerable to being raped, and for being raped. Again, Amy uses code language by stating that she wouldn't put herself "in that situation"; avoiding using the word rape when she refers to herself.

Erin provides another example, another perspective, of how women blame each other for being victimized.

> I think a lot of the times we are viewing women as being sexually victimized when—I don't know. I mean for the most part like we choose to put ourselves in those situations. And I can't obviously speak for everyone but I have a lot of trouble buying the like innocent party victim always (she laughs).

In slightly different ways, both Erin and Amy are attempting (to use MacKinnon's analogy) to make the random appear systematic. They are, as are most of the women I interviewed, attempting to delineate the types of people, circumstances, and behaviors in which rape does or does not happen. If, as Erin says "we choose to put ourselves in those situations" then we can avoid rape by choosing not to put ourselves in "those" rape-producing situations. We can also explain why some women (who are/look/act differently than we do) are raped. This process creates an image of rape as systematic and not random. And it allows some women to feel safe from the risk of rape.

Safety

One of the reasons that the women I interviewed judged other women and/or blamed them for being sexually assaulted was that these other(ed) women did not adhere to unstated (and remarkably uniform) rules of safe partying. Women utilized many different strategies for maintaining safety, or as they would say "avoiding bad situations" in the context of partying. They identified strategies such as monitoring their alcohol intake, holding on to their drinks (to

avoid "roofies" or date-rape drugs), and regulating what they (and their friends) wear to certain parties or bars. These were all common strategies. However, two "rules of safe partying" emerged from the data as nearly universal. The first was to party with friends and/or people they knew. The second was to watch out for each other.

Party with Friends

Despite a generation of sexual assault prevention and education that has stressed the far greater likelihood of being raped by a close friend, family member, or acquaintance, the myth of the predatory stranger rape has not been dispelled. The women I interviewed consistently said they felt safe because they partied with their friends and people they knew, but many said they were afraid when walking home after dark. These two contrasting views of safety and danger are presented below. First, Aditi expresses her fears of walking home alone at night.

> There's safety issues too. Like I know a lot of times, I've walked home by myself from a bar and, um, it's just been a case where I wanted to leave and maybe I was a little bit drunk or something like that, which is not always the wisest thing, but, you know, I carry, I always carry pepper spray with me. (Aditi)

Next Soon-yi articulated the more commonly voiced perspective that described safety as being around friend(s):

> *Many people say that women who drink are at greater risk of being raped or sexually assaulted. What do you think about that?*
>
> Yeah, I could see that. I mean I could see that. But more I think when you're partying with less people or just the girls and you're at more strange place, like clubs, they're all about people that you know are strangers or something. But not so much—I don't know. I guess from my experience not so much with me because usually we party with our friends and people we know and usually at like a neighborhood bar or a friend's apartment actually. We drink there, too. And that even parties, I feel like—I don't know. I don't think it's—I don't really see that.
>
> *It's not something you're worried about?*
>
> I'm not worried about it because I don't party with strangers. (Soon-yi)

Although in a different context, Anne articulated a similar sense of safety because she parties among friends. She gave the following response to my query regarding her thoughts about whether women who party are at increased risk for rape and/or sexual assault

> *Many people who say that women who drink or who party are at a greater risk of being raped or sexually assaulted. What do you think about that?*
>
> I would agree with that because of the whole thing with kind of not realizing what you're doing or what other people are doing. And then blacking out doesn't help because you have no idea what's going on. Or just passing out. I mean people can take advantage of you that way, too. But then again, I think it depends on where you're at, too. If you're at a random bar and a stranger tries to assault you or something like that or if you're at a party where you don't know anybody. Because with me I don't feel that at risk just because it's usually all my friends or all people I know.
>
> *Anything else about that?*
>
> (Pauses). Not that I can think of. Just basically that probably I think strangers are more likely to do it. But I know it—it depends on the crowd you're with. If it's somebody you know that's not really your friend, they could do it to you, too. But I've never really felt in danger that way. (Anne)

Both Anne and Soon-yi explicitly say that they do not feel at risk of sexual assault because they only party with their friends, and/or they do not party with strangers. They appear to make the assumption that only strangers – never friends – might assault them. If they do not party with strangers then they will be safe from sexual assault. Two things are interesting about this perspective. One is that it is (if one believes the statistics) inaccurate that people are at more risk from strangers than friends or acquaintances. Instead, many studies have demonstrated that women are at much greater risk of sexual assault at the hands of people they know and/or trust, than they are of stranger rape (Koss, 1995; DeKeseredy, 1995.)

Begging the question of what consequences might arise from women utilizing a strategy to stay safe, and assuming a safe space, that in reality could conceivably put her at higher risk of assault. As a member of a tight-knit club on campus, Jen gave me an example of that potentially problematic sense of safety in (small) numbers. She told me she does not feel at risk from sexual assault.

> Not necessarily because it [sexual assault] doesn't really happen I think because it is a smaller community. In that if a guy does take advantage of one of the girls, I mean either she's going to talk about it and everybody's going to know or he's going to tell one of his friends. (Jen)

Jen believes that no one within her "smaller community" of people who are in this club would assault a woman in the club, because the social cost too him would be too high. She appears to assume that if one of the guys in the club assaulted one of the girls in the club, that other people in the club would find out – and that they would care and/or do something if they did find out. In addition, her assumption is contrary to Koss's (1985) work in which she found that 42% of people who identified as being a victim of sexual assault on her survey had *never* told anyone else.

The second interesting issue regarding safety and partying with friends is the way in which the women I interviewed conceived of "friend." For the purposes of partying and feeling safe while partying, the women I interviewed seemed to conflate the concept of "friend" with anyone who fell within a network of friends who are friends and/or acquaintances with each other.[17] And for the women I interviewed, that network of friends often seemed to cover most of the people who participated in campus party culture – quite a wide network. People who were considered not safe to party with generally were older, or not students, or "townies" who are not affiliated with the university.

. Watch out for each other

In addition to strategizing for safety by partying with friends and acquaintances, nearly every woman I interviewed talked about using a strategy of "watching out for each other." This most often took one of two forms, either watching who friends talked to at the party or bar, and preventing friends from leaving the party or bar with someone

[17] By this I mean a friend of my friend's friend is identified as my friend.

deemed inappropriate. In the first case, friends would watch out for each other by monitoring who friends were talking to at a party or bar, and for how long. This allows friends to intervene into a conversation if it appeared that another friend was talking with someone they did not want to be talking with. This was seen as an act of assistance in terms of being able to get away from men the women I interviewed (and their friends) did not want to talk to at a party or bar. It was also seen as a safety precaution that would help keep friends from getting in to "a bad situation" with a strange (unknown) guy. As Erin said, "I have really good friends that would stop you or stop each other from talking to some sketchy guy in the corner." Very often the women I interviewed had elaborate systems of communication with their roommates and friends to signal their need for assistance in extricating themselves from a conversation at a party or bar. These signals included eye signals, minor head gestures, waves, and the very common grabbing of a friends' hand and pulling while saying "will you come to the bathroom with me."

The other form that 'watching out for each other' took was intervening if a friend appeared to be leaving the party or bar with someone she was not "supposed" to leave with. This could include ex-boyfriends, ex-"hook-ups," or – the worst possibility – strangers. This intervention was sometimes described as 'the buddy system' in which people who went to the party together agreed to leave the party together – unless something (the right guy) came up. Monica describes this phenomenon, including the hierarchy of who it would be appropriate for a friend to leave a party/bar with in the following quote.

> We always had, like, a buddy system. We always made sure that we were like leaving with each other or knew who we were leaving with if it wasn't who we came with. Like if it was another friend or something.
>
> *Like what would happen if one of your friends like wanted to go home with*

> *somebody?*
>
> Like that we didn't know?
>
> *Or, say both.*
>
> well, if it's someone we did know, we'd probably be OK with it, and let everyone else know like so and so's going with this person. But if we knew that that person was probably a bad idea, and they would regret it, we'd probably say something to them, like are you sure you know what you're doing? Um. If it was a complete stranger, we would definitely not let it happen. (Monica)

Despite the quotes here from Erin and Monica that suggest an effective method of "watching out for each other" that helps keep women who party safe, this strategy and ones like it are ultimately not very helpful or effective. The watching out for each other strategy falls apart quite frequently. As often happens when combined with (often heavy) drinking, a friend could step out of sight to get a drink, or go to the bathroom, or pursue their own social/sexual agenda at a party or bar, and then not be around to fulfill the social requirement to "watch out" for another friend.

Similarly, as I said earlier, partying with friends and staying away from strangers is likely a similarly ineffective strategy for avoiding rape and sexual assault. Research strongly suggests that friends (and family) are often the very people one must "watch out for" the most, for they are the ones most likely to commit sexual assault.

In addition, both of these "safety" strategies that were most often offered up as options by the women I interviewed, place a great deal of blame and responsibility on the victim. This is logical, if problematic. If one is to blame for a situation occurring, it implies that there was something, and is something in the future, that the person could do to prevent it from happening again. Unfortunately, these strategies largely ignore the impact of larger social structures – likely because changing the larger social structure appears much, much more difficult than making small individual level change. The result is that women are (sometimes unintentionally) held to blame for their own actions, for the

actions of the people who assaulted them, and for the larger social structures that support gender-based inequality and violence.

This has tremendous costs to women who are sexually assaulted. When the predominant reaction to rape and sexual assault is to blame the victim for allowing (or asking for) it to occur, a hostile and unsupportive environment for victims exist. In 1999 Schwartz and Leggett published findings of a study showing that the single best predictor of whether a rape victim develops traumatic symptoms (symptoms that meet the DSM-IV definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) following the rape, is the reaction of her social support network – her (usually female) friends. Women whose friends and family suggest that they might have been in some way responsible for causing the assault, or at least for not preventing it, are far more likely to experience emotional trauma than are people who received instant support and encouragement from their friends and family. There are consequences for women of living in a world where women denigrate other women and blame "slutty" women for being raped in attempt to define themselves out of danger.

This is not a new problem. In writing of the tendency of women to distance themselves from victims of rape and sexual assault by othering victims, Catharine MacKinnon writes: "The problem is, combining even a few circumstances, descriptions, conditions, and details of acts of sexual abuse reveals that no woman has a chance." She eloquently, if somewhat pessimistically, argues that the lines in the sand that women draw to distinguish themselves from rape victims are ineffective, because the slightest change to those lines causes the distinction between safe and not safe to disappear. As

Dorothy Allison wrote in 1984, "No one is safe, because we have not made each other safe."

Conclusion

Four important findings emerged out of the data for this study. The first is that sexuality has been socially constructed to appear as a natural and inherent and invisible component of sexuality. This information allows for better understanding of what 'partying' means, and the ways in which participants in party culture receive pleasure from participating in it.

This initial finding is related to the second, and perhaps most important finding. This finding has to do with a clarified and specific conceptualization of "slutty." Through analysis of data from my 31 interviews it became clear that the popular conception of a "slut" as a woman who has sex with many different men in a relatively short period of time without a necessary or strong emotional attachment to the men involved (Stombler, 1994; Armstrong et. al, 2005), is not the definition of slut at work in the culture of the women I interviewed. For the women I interviewed, drinking is a necessary component of "sluttiness." In fact, for those women involved in party culture, with the presumption of sexuality as a natural and obvious component of party culture, drinking – particularly drinking too much – is what makes a woman slutty.

This study also shows that the binge-drinking undergraduate women who participate in party culture, construct and are thus constructed by, the image of sluttiness as both a result of drinking "too much" and a risk of sexual assault. For the women I interviewed, drinking is sluttiness, and sluttiness ***is*** the risk of sexual assault. "Slutty" is code for rape-able.

As a reaction to the risk of sexual assault associated with "slutty" women, slutty women and those perceived to be slutty women are constructed as 'other.' The women I interviewed engaged with the 'slutty' discourse by actively distancing themselves from the "slutty" party

girls – particularly the sorority girls. They also distanced themselves from rape victims by creating unspoken rules for partying which, if obeyed, would theoretically protect women from rape. Those who did not follow the rules were stigmatized.

Finally, there is a high cost to the practice of blaming rape victims for being raped, and for creating flawed mechanisms (such as unspoken rules for partying) in which women can imagine they are safe from the risk of rape and sexual assault. The consequences of 'othering' women who appear at risk for sexual assault creates a tremendous burden for women who are actually sexually assaulted and high rates of psychological and psychic distress.

Implications

This study has direct and important implications for feminist theory and practice. Perhaps most obviously, this study shows the desperate need for feminist theorizing on the experience of partying. The area is on rich theoretical grounds, with potentially insightful and expansive connections to be drawn to gender identity, sexuality, sexual violence, the body, and the classic pleasure/danger debate. There is a deafening silence around issues of partying in feminist and sexuality theorizing. Theoretical activity in that area could enrich and expand the scope and reach of feminist theory.

The implications of this study for feminist practice and intervention are equally rich. This study shows a disturbing conflation of the stigmatized label of "slutty" and perception of the risk of sexual assault. Relatedly, this study expands our understanding of the processes, causes, and consequences of women's judgment of women who are, or appear at risk for, sexual assault. This process of othering should be deconstructed and incorporated in all anti-sexual violence prevention and training. It seems possible that including making people aware of the active role they play in stigmatizing victims of sexual assault, and the reasons that they do so (to attempt to

feel safe from risk of sexual assault) might reduce stigma, ultimately resulting in a more supportive environment for victims of sexual assault.

Finally, this research suggests the need to disentangle the concepts of partying and 'sluttiness'. We need to work to promote a cultural image that being drunk does not mean being always already willing for sex. There is no reason that this message should not be as important in promoting healthy sexuality and sexual assault prevention as the recent anti-date-rape-drug campaigns that remind women to always know where their drinks are. It is evidence of the stigma associated with partying, and use of alcohol and drugs, that feminist scholarship has not taken up these issues. I believe active feminist engagement with issues of partying, sexuality, and sexual violence could make the world safer and more fun for us all.

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