

Linguistic Causes of Rape Culture on College Campuses

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a growing epidemic on college campuses around the nation, and universities are struggling to maintain a safe environment for their students. The problem does not lie with the usual suspects—alcohol, fraternity and sorority life, or violent music lyrics. Instead, latent linguistic factors within our dominant language contribute to a hostile environment that we have internally socialized for centuries. Sexually violent humor, including rape jokes, myths, and offensive metaphors, are contributors to this aggressive mentality and normalize it within society. Ambiguous definitions of what constitutes rape and consent make it difficult for victims to decide whether they should report the situation to the police or not, and victims are often silenced and shamed for coming forward. Opening a campus-wide conversation about sexual assault and violent language is the first step in breaking down the intangible rape culture that has led to unsafe environments on college campuses.

Keywords: sexual assault; violence; college; rape; language

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Purpose

Traditional school songs and chants filled with lyrics about sexual violence and murder, detailed instructions from fraternity leaders telling their members how to target vulnerable girls, and color-coded systems that make it easier for men to drug women at parties are all extreme examples of sexual violence that occur on college campuses in the United States. A veiled epidemic is spreading throughout college campuses around the nation and we are choosing to ignore it, even though we look it in the eye everyday. Every two minutes someone in the United States is raped (Burnett et al. 465) and between 20-25% of women and 3% of men will experience an attempted or completed sexual assault in college (Chemaly). This prevalence is alarming and these are only estimations because rape is notoriously underreported, due to women who are afraid of the repercussions when coming out as a victim. The purpose of this research is to explore how sexually violent and offensive language contributes to the presence of rape on college campuses and how linguistic factors cause rape to become normalized among college age students. The combination of non-communication, ambiguous definitions of rape and consent, a dominant language system, offensive language, and the silencing of victims all contribute to the perpetuation of a rape culture. Such linguistic explanations of behavior are obscured behind manifest factors that the media spells out as the main culprits of violence, including alcohol, fraternity and sorority life, video games, music, and pornography. Society tends to blame alcohol because it is increasingly part of the college culture, and it is often found in places that breed risky situations; alcohol is not at fault, but the mentality associated with it is. Greek life has also been a source of suspicion in sexual assault cases because fraternities may provide opportunities for risky behavior by having alcohol at parties for sororities and non-Greek affiliates. In addition,

media outlets like movies, TV shows, music, and pornography, are often accused of influencing society to normalize violent sex and rape behaviors. Though these all may be contributors to the greater rape culture, what lies underneath is a dominant language that has been socialized in our culture for centuries. Latent linguistic factors are at the root of rape culture and they need to be analyzed before we can address the obvious concerns and problems occurring on campuses.

Defining Rape

It is sometimes difficult for victims to determine if they were raped or not based on the confusing and varying definitions of rape that are tossed around, including ambiguity about consent and sexual negotiations. The definition of rape has been long contended and there are several variations found in the legal definitions between states. Virginia law states that a person is guilty of rape if he or she has sexual intercourse with a complaining witness against their will, by force, threat or intimidation; or if the complaining witness is mentally incapacitated or physically helpless (“Rape”). The FBI recently updated the definition of rape in the Uniform Crime Report to expand sexual intercourse to include penetration by objects, oral penetration, and penetration in the vagina or anus no matter how slight (Mallicoat 72). It is now being recognized that sexual assault can include a variety of things but it is still possible for both victims and offenders to misunderstand the definition of the crime. Rape can be viewed as a “communication phenomenon, in which communication about sex and rape, the possibility of rape, the negotiation of consent, the rape itself, the aftermath of rape, and the reaction to date rape, are central to defining a rape culture on campus” (Burnett et al. 466). When there is no open conversation about rape and sexual assault on college campuses, then students feel embarrassed, alone, and confused about what constitutes sex as a crime. The question of consent also raises an important issue because it is difficult to find the thin line between rape and

drunken consent. Incapacitated rape occurs when a victim voluntarily consumes drugs or alcohol and an unwanted sexual act occurs (Mallicoat 77); substance use increases risk and decreases the ability to resist advances. Around 5% of rapes are considered incapacitated (Mallicoat 77) and victims who are voluntary incapacitated are more likely to be blamed by society and in court.

A study was conducted on a Mid-western college campus to determine what students knew about sexual offenses and what preventative strategies they could take to avoid such incidents from occurring. Moderators were placed with groups of diverse students to facilitate conversations about definitions of rape, reasons for rape, the prevalence of rape on that campus, the role of alcohol in rape, etc. The results revealed that there was ambiguity about what constituted rape and consent, which means there is little communication and discourse about the topic on campus. Students were asked to give a definition of date rape but campus culture did not provide them with one so “neither male nor female students could clearly pinpoint what consent meant in regard to date rape” (Burnett et al. 474). This uncertainty confuses victims, and females especially are faced with rationalizing and deciding for themselves what constitutes rape, which makes the definition open for debate. Addressing the ambiguity of the definitions of rape and consent is crucial for developing confidence in victims so that they report their assault and receive justice.

Dominant Male Language

On a sociological level, norms and culture are ingrained in a society and they slowly evolve to accommodate the changing mentality of the people. Angelone et al. explains the concept of an organizational culture, which refers to symbols and norms within a group that determine behaviors in a certain context (188). Further, “the particular environmental norms established within the organizational culture influence the organizational members’

interpretations of acceptable and unacceptable sexually oriented behaviors” (188). Men have been the dominant social group for centuries and patriarchy is the norm in numerous societies, leaving women as the co-culture or the muted, subordinate group. The dominant group decides on a communication system and in order for the co-culture to fit in, it must adapt and use this communication method as its own. Women have different experiences and intrinsic qualities than men, but “if they want to participate in discourse, women must adopt the male communicative system,” and this has the potential to mute the co-culture (Burnett et al. 469). Women are often muted in society through male-controlled media and institutions, as well as through the objectification of their bodies. Male sexuality is also viewed differently than female sexuality, with a more lax attitude toward males. Gender norms are socialized beginning at childhood and men are encouraged to have sex early and often, whereas women are supposed to stay innocent and naïve until marriage. This mentality is detrimental to rape victims, especially females, because sexual assault can stain the reputation of a woman and society often views victims as impure or dirty.

The dominant language system used by both males and females reflects rape myths, places women in a subordinate position, and indicates, “that men’s dominant place in society has allowed them privileges to create and control the language and belief system regarding date rape” (Burnett et al. 474). Examples of dominant language include the use of the word “bitch” to refer to someone in an inferior position, calling rape victims “sluts” who were asking for it, and applauding men for having sex frequently by calling them “real” men. When women unwittingly use the dominant language, they are accepting their secondary position to men and are muting the date rape situation. Poor communication is at the heart of the date rape problem, as a “breakdown in the communication of consent based upon ambiguity and mutedness” (Burnett et

al. 476) and this usually causes rape. After a rape occurs, victims are unsure of how people will react once they report it so they tend to avoid relating the experience to others. Females were more skeptical of telling their story to administration or to the courts if such a situation were to arise, while men were more trusting in the system and felt the institutions could “confirm the reality of rape because it speaks their dominant language” (Burnett et al. 480). By staying silent, females are supporting the dominant framework and letting the perpetrators get away with a crime and “the expression of skepticism supports the notion that the dominant communicative system is insufficient to articulate the female experience with date rape” (Burnett et al. 479). Communication is key and developing a new “language” to talk about sexual assault and rape is necessary to eradicate degrading language used by the dominant culture.

Sexually Violent Humor

Rape Jokes

Humor can also be used to express dominance in a group or to enforce norms. Rape jokes, myths, metaphors, and offensive comments are common forms of sexual harassment that we inadvertently use to perpetuate rape culture. Chemaly argues that rape jokes increase tolerance for rape, create a hostile educational environment for women on college campuses, and negatively impacts their ability to move freely. At the University of Vermont, a fraternity asked potential members in an interview who they would rape if they had the chance, and men at another school released a video that joked about raping girls and rating them based on looks and promiscuity. Numerous Tweets, photos, posters, and t-shirts are made throughout college campuses depicting women in degrading ways, often naked or in compromising positions. These examples normalize sexism and violence and reinforce a “dangerous dominant heterosexuality” (Chemaly), especially on college campuses.

Researchers Ryan and Kanjorski based their study on Freudian theories to determine whether a man's enjoyment of sexist humor can lead to rape supportive attitudes. Freud described two types of humor. Non-tendentious humor "includes 'innocent' jokes that involve word play, substitution, absurdity, and the like" (Ryan 744). Tendentious humor has a sexual or hostile aim and can be used on potential sex partners to express desires or can be used in a hostile way to attack an individual or a group. One example of a joke used in the study was, "Why did the woman cross the road? —Hey!! What's she doing out of the kitchen?" (Ryan 747). Another example is: "What's the difference between a woman and a light bulb? – You can unscrew the light bulb" (Ryan 747). It has been found that men prefer these tendentious hostile forms of humor that target women, especially if the man shows aggressive tendencies. Rape jokes intensify the hostility and aggression intrinsically found in men and these feelings are directed toward women. However, men and women are equally likely to tell sexual and aggressive jokes with the target of the joke being women or gay men (Ryan 745). It is suggested that men bond through sexist humor because it is seen as erotic and not aggressive. Women tend to laugh at sexist jokes but it may not be because the jokes are actually funny; not laughing at a sexist joke could imply that the woman lacks a sense of humor and is being defensive (Ryan 746). At the conclusion of this study, it was found that even though women enjoyed the sexist jokes significantly less than men, they were not less likely to tell the joke. This demonstrates that women are using the dominant language to fit in with societal norms and to prove their equality alongside men. Women are conditioned to think that offensive jokes are acceptable and funny, and when they tell these jokes, they are accepting the vulgarity and violent words used against them. Women might not be offended by some raunchy jokes because they may hear them all the time on a college campus—they are acclimated to the humor of college age students. This shows

how rape jokes are normalized in today's youth culture and how getting rid of the sexual harassment culture will be a group effort that begins with one person positively influencing another.

Changing the mentality of college students and young adults proves to be challenging because this kind of humor has been ingrained in them since childhood. Parents and grandparents passed on this humor because they grew up in a time where women were subordinate and not treated with respect. The humorous slang may have evolved but the point behind it remains the same—women are sexually objectified and put down as the subject of jokes. This language is damaging to women because it limits their perceived potential of being able to have any job they want, limits their behaviors in fear of being labeled, and makes them think they deserve less respect than men.

Offensive Metaphors

Metaphors are another type of offensive language and they are used to display hidden feelings and thoughts in everyday conversation. According to Eisikovits and Buchbinder, metaphors are seen as “mental constructs emerging in the mind of the constructor(s) to introduce and frame experiences” (483). Common metaphors heard on college campuses include: “That test raped me”, telling people to “go f*** themselves”, and “let's get f***ed up” when referring to alcohol consumption. These metaphors represent a violent way to look at sex, causing people to think that force is normal in a relationship. Mainstream media has been promoting damaging themes that contribute to a rape-prone culture, like rape being humorous when it happens to men, sex as an uncontrollable urge for men, and getting girls to the point where they are too drunk to consent.

When a violent man uses a metaphor to rationalize his actions, we can analyze the structure of it and the hidden meaning he is giving to intimate violence. It was found that battering men minimized the frequency and severity of violence, minimized the consequences it had on women, and also denied responsibility and intent of violence. They also tended to blame the victim for provoking violence or blamed environmental factors such as intoxication or unemployment (Eisikovits 483). In order to diminish rape, men and women use violent metaphors that become conventional and mundane. The intervention of our language and metaphors could lead to less violent thoughts and help us to rationalize actions in a more effective way.

Rape Myths

The dominant language also contains rape myths, which are “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Mallicoat 75). The acceptance of rape myths leads to victim blaming and it provides justification for offenders. Some victims blame themselves and are less likely to report because they accept these justifications, leading them to believe they were not actually assaulted. A common myth about rape is that the offender is usually a stranger, when in reality the victim generally knows the offender. If there is a personal relationship with the offender, then the victim is less likely to report to the police because he or she does not want to start trouble. Society also views acquaintance rape as less serious than stranger rape, or “real rape” (Mallicoat 77), which causes the victim to self-blame.

Underreporting of Sexual Assault

The problem of underreporting rape and sexual assault occurs as a result of the silencing and muting of victims. Rape is not a topic that society likes to talk about and we tend to brush it

under the rug. Fewer than 5% of sexual offenses are reported to law enforcement according to a national survey of college women, and “low rates of reporting may mark existing rape culture and perpetuate it, since not reporting protects the perpetrators and creates a sense of tolerance toward rape” (Burnett et al. 467). On a college campus the presence of alcohol is common, and this makes rape victims more hesitant about reporting the crime because they do not want to be blamed. When college students engage in sexual experiences, they rarely define boundaries with their partner beforehand, resulting in confusion and obscurity about whether it could be considered rape or not. Alcohol can also blur the recollection of whether one gave consent or not. Tolerance for rape and sexual assault comes from underreporting because criminals are getting away with their crimes, leading them to falsely believe that they can recidivate and not get caught.

Conclusions

Rape and sexual assault is a human rights issue, not solely feminist. In order for campuses to be safer, society has to be taught that everyone deserves the same rights and respect. Some initiatives to change rape culture on campuses include sex education, lectures about what constitutes consent, and national movements to help universities better deal with sexual assault. Opening a campus-wide conversation about rape needs to begin with the freshmen population, who are new to the university and have yet to acclimate to college life and norms. By educating them about consent, the definition of rape and sexual assault, and the consequences of such crimes, there is a greater chance that sexual assault rates will decrease. Schools should provide resources to students who are victimized and encourage them to talk to authorities and counselors who can help.

On the Virginia Tech campus, campaigns like “Take Back the Night” and the “Red Flag Campaign” are opening up conversations about sexual assault that make students more comfortable in reporting such incidents. Although there is no general presentation about sexual assault to students during freshman orientation, the local Women’s Center has a resource booth and orientation leaders are trained to answer any specific questions that a student or parent may have about sexual assault and the available resources for victims. Creating a presentation for freshman students would be a significant first step in approaching the subject, and if our local police officers or university president could give it, this would generate a thoughtful environment on campus. Facts and statistics that come directly from school authorities and officials about sexual assault and the safety of the college campus would decrease rumors and speculations by students. The police department and the Virginia Tech President are well respected by the university so the student and faculty population will trust that what they are saying is valid and worthwhile. The presentation could include information about safety features located around campus, statistics from the Clery Act about the previous year’s crime rates, strategies to reduce these rates, and victim resources available to the students. The Virginia Tech Police Department puts the annual Jeanne Clery Act Report online for the public to read, which is the campus security and fire safety report for the Blacksburg campus. It includes detailed definitions about what constitutes sexual misconduct and consent, as well as the combined crime rates for the year. However, this information is not widely acknowledged or advertised, and if these definitions were made known to the student population, ambiguity could be reduced. By reading these definitions to students during freshmen orientation and making it known that these are available online for anyone to access, students will learn firsthand how to differentiate between consent and sexual assault.

Miscommunication on the victim's part and the perpetrator's misconception of the situation or language can lead to rape, so direct verbal communication is key for prevention. Hosting workshops and interactive lectures on campus for classes and groups about what they think constitutes rape and how to have a conversation with a partner about their intentions will be a small step towards opening the line of communication. Starting at the root of the problem using a proactive technique would be the most efficient way to prevent rape, instead of taking a reactive approach. Men need to realize that their language and culture can have adverse effects on women and talking it out with them will have positive outcomes, especially if the person leading the discussion is someone they respect. One place to start would be to address the fraternities on campus and have an older alumni or a police officer come in to educate them on the hidden culture that they unwittingly perpetuate through their behaviors and attitudes. The lack of communication also plays a part in perpetuating rape culture by silencing victims and hindering discussion about how to prevent dangerous situations. Getting rid of the stigma surrounding rape will help victims be less embarrassed about coming forward and friends of victims could ideally aid in a positive way. Confidential support groups for victims should be made widely available as they should have a safe environment where victims can relate to each other.

Violent communication in the form of rape jokes, myths, and metaphors degrade women and contribute to an overall rape culture by maintaining their subordinate position to men. Preventative techniques are more effective than reactive ones when dealing with rape cases; getting to the root of the problem by altering our intrinsic vocabulary instead of banning fraternities from campus or rallying against provocative movies is the key to forming a new language that is accepting and nonviolent. When hearing these jokes, we should let people know

that they are offensive and not at all funny instead of just laughing along with them. By accepting and telling these jokes, we are condoning rapists and letting them know that we approve of what they are doing. Rallying against such hate speech and consciously choosing to think about what we say before we say it will lead to less tolerance and inactiveness. Although it is difficult to provide concrete solutions to eradicate the imperceptible rape culture from campuses entirely, the key is to be conscious of our expressions, behaviors, and jokes and focus our energy on positive forms of communication.

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