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'Rape is a man's issue:' gender and power in the era of affirmative sexual consent

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ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement has shined light on sexual harassment and assault, creating new avenues for survivors to seek justice, outside of the justice system. People (mostly men) accused of sexual assault or harass

o enders includes familiar figures: Justice Kavanaugh, US Vice President Joe Biden, Dr. Larry Nassar, television host Matt Lauer, movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, actor Bill Cosby, and musician R Kelly, among others. As the list continues to grow, concerns about a lack of due process for the accused have made many uncomfortable, including US President

se, 2013). Instead of shaming women or
d in sex, a r mative consent intentionally
ple in sexual encounters, no matter their
have an active and eager role in their own

ve consent continues to be debated for its
practical (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Halley, 2015)
pushed back, seizing upon false narratives
and falsely accuse men of sexual assault if
To prevent men from being victimized by
n evidence (Belknap, 2010; Lisak, Gardinier,

good intentions commit sexual assault (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

Weitz (2015) explored the link between protection and hegemonic masculinity, or the ultimate, most dominant form of masculinity in society at any given time (Connell, 1987). Weitz explains that, historically, masculinity in the US has been shaped through expectations of men defending the nation and serving as guardians over women. By enacting the role of protector, men access a higher level of status within society. Protectors are given permission to assert dominance over women and other men through physical violence and the close monitoring of others (Weitz, 2015).

The gender frame of men as protectors has currency because women are assumed to be in constant danger (Weitz, 2015). But, where does this danger come from? Ironically, it comes from men. Sexual coercion of women by men has been normalized in the US. This is especially clear on college campuses in the 'Greek' or fraternity scene. Hattery and Smith (2019) explore this phenomenon within fraternities in which beliefs about consent are frequently manipulated and distorted. Hattery and Smith explain that there are multiple methods in which men use coercion while claiming that the sexual experience is consensual because they eventually get a 'yes'. These methods include 'ri ng, working a "yes" out, and rape baiting' (27–28). The ri ng strategy refers to a technique in which men talk their way into a situation where they will be able to have sex with a woman. Working a 'yes' out refers to ways that men try to 'seduce' women after they refuse to have sex with them the first time, such as by giving them something else to drink (27). Finally, men use rape baiting – or strategies to increase their probability of having sex – to identify women with whom they can easily talk into having sex, such as speci cally targeting naïve first-year

participants to answer questions openly while also giving interviewers the ability to direct the flow of conversation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2012, p. 474). This method was particularly useful in this project for the following reasons: First, face-to-face interviews allowed for students to give in-depth, highly detailed descriptions of their sexual encounters and their understandings of consent. Second, we were better able to understand the processes through which students developed their understanding of consent over time. Third, these in-depth interviews revealed experiences with non-consensual sex and sexual violence that students possibly had not self-identified as such outside of the interview context.

The interview guide was five pages long, and questions

hotlines for those who felt any distress after completing the interview. We assured participants that interviews would be confidential. Each subject created their own pseudonym.

All researchers conducted interviews over the course of the study, but no one interviewed a subject with whom she had a personal or professional relationship. For the larger study, we interviewed a diverse group of students: 27 identified as women (one a trans woman) and 18 identified as men. They had different majors and academic backgrounds. Most participants (N = 39) were undergraduate students. Three were graduate students, and three had recently graduated. The overall sample was diverse along several other dimensions, as well. The average age of participants was 23.8, ranging from 18 to 47 years old. Racially, 22 subjects identified as white, 9 were Latinx/Hispanic, 7 were Black, four identified as bi-racial, and three participants were Asian-American. Rather than asking participants to categorize their sexuality, which may be fluid, we collected data on the reported gender of their sexual partners (Manning, Longmore, Copp, &

against students or prevent them from accessing resources that may be crucial for dealing with sexual violence. As such, our debriefing process involved an educational component.

Findings

Based on our systematic analysis of data, we found that men in this study had learned the lessons of affirmative consent training. Receiving the message that 'rape is a man's problem', men reported changing their approaches to sexual encounters. Some men understood that men can stop rape by not raping women. However, many more conceptualized rape as a man's problem through a hegemonic-gendered frame. These men operationalized rape as a man's problem in three ways: 1) men need to protect women; 2) men need to avoid being accused of rape; 3) men need to protect each other from being accused of rape. We found that participants' understandings of consent reinforced – rather than destabilized – hegemonic systems of power within sex. Men used their understandings of affirmative consent to display their dominance over women and other men, while also appearing to

If they say, "yeah," and they show up to my house, then I take that in the context of consent. But, at any point in time- that's why the hang out period is so important too. At any point in time you can like – I wish people would understand that they have the right and ability and all that stu to say, "Nope this is not for me, I'm fucking leaving."

Jason asked for consent via text before meeting up with his hook-ups, but he never verbally

Ryan was not sure his worry was 'legitimate,' but he thought men's decisions were affected, nonetheless.

The need to protect potential victims of false accusations was reiterated in many ways throughout the study. For example, Ghost (age 36, White) explained that while he was in the US Navy, he and his colleagues attended intense training courses on affirmative consent and sexual violence protection, so that when they had opportunities to hook up with women while bar-hopping, service members would be sure to get affirmative consent. Ghost also said:

There was a lot of times when there was a possibility of taking someone home from the bar but, to me, there were very little coherences in our conversations. So, to me . . . it sounds bad [chuckles] but it was more of a cover-my-own-ass situation, right? If I'm not going to get a clear and concise "okay" with this, [then I'm not going

22) described parties at which he observed his friends talking to women who seemed too drunk to consent to hooking up. He explained:

Like if ... one of my boys is dancing with some girl who was getting heavily intoxicated then we're going to let him know, like "yo, bro chill ... relax, she's drinking. Her

Maddie thought fraternity men cared about protecting women who attend their parties. Eric, a fraternity member himself, surmised that men sought

