Abstract. The author devised a classroom activity that facilitates discussion and increases awareness about sexual assault. Students read scenarios involving sexual situations that varied in ambiguity, then labeled whether the situations involved a sexual assault. Students also gave their definitions of sexual assault and completed an evaluation of the activity. Results showed that students have difficulty labeling certain situations as sexual assault even though they meet the legal definition, and that their definitions are significantly more accurate after activity and discussion.

Keywords: classroom activity, legal definition, sexual assault

Data from the National Violence Against Women Survey (U.S. Department of Justice 2000) showed that almost one in every twelve women in the United States will experience sexual assault at some point in her life. Although women are susceptible in almost any situation, a college campus has unique elements that contribute to higher rates of sexual assault than noncollege locations. These elements include the prevalence of alcohol, the proximity of men and women in their living and sleeping quarters, and increased exposure to others having sex (Worcester 2002). In a survey of more than three thousand college students, Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) found that more than 50 percent of the women had experienced some form of sexual victimization and that 15 percent had experienced what meets the legal definition of rape. Recent studies have confirmed these alarming rates among college students (DeKeseredy 1997; Franiuk 2005). Although men can be victims and women can be perpetrators of sexual assault, the overwhelming majority of these assaults are committed by men on women and will be presented as such in this article (U.S. Department of Justice 1999, 2003). Promoting discussion and improving education about sexual assault are essential for reducing it on and off college campuses. This article presents a classroom activity that generates discussion and imparts knowledge about issues of sexual consent.

In most states, the legal definitions of first- and second-degree sexual assault involve nonconsensual sexual contact and/or intercourse. When applying this legal definition to real-world situations, it is difficult to label many gray areas as sexual assault. Most people rate sexual situations involving explicit nonconsent as sexual assault because they clearly meet the legal criteria (Franiuk 2005; Goodchilds et al. 1988; Sawyer, Pinciaro, and Jessell 1998). However, people are less likely to label scenarios involving acquaintances (versus strangers) and scenarios without explicit nonconsent as sexual assault (Franiuk; Goodchilds et al.; Sawyer, Pinciaro, and Jessell 1998). The former is especially problematic considering that “stranger rape” accounts for only 15 percent of all rape cases (Koss 1990). Intoxication of the victim also introduces uncertainty in recognizing sexual assault. Although in all states a person is legally unable to consent while intoxicated, cases that involve drug or alcohol consumption...
are difficult to prosecute—after all, can the victim accurately remember the events that transpired? Many other factors create ambiguity in consent and culpability, including nonpenetration and coercion. Consent is the key issue in cases of sexual assault, and research shows that many people do not fully understand this term in the context of sexual situations.

Research consistently shows that sexual assault is underreported. Official estimates are thought to be ten to fifteen times less than the actual number of assaults (Koss 1992). Victims who do not report sexual assault may want to forget the experience, may not want to risk accusations of dishonesty, or may blame themselves for the incident. Further, underreporting is heightened when the perpetrator is someone the victim knows, as in most sexual assaults. Finally, most women do not label their experience as sexual assault even though it clearly meets the legal definition (Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987). Their failure to label it as sexual assault may stem from sexual scripts that suggest that women are sexual prey and men are predators (Byers 1996; LaPlante, McCormick, and Brannigan 1980). Many women see assault experiences as fitting their perception of how sex is supposed to be between men and women.

Given students’ lack of knowledge about sexual assault and its prevalence on college campuses, researchers have noted the importance of educating college students about sexual victimization and sexual relationships (Godow and LaFaye 1979; Shrum and Halgin 1985). Madison and Shoda (2002) demonstrated the success of a classroom activity that promotes understanding of sexual harassment with scenarios tailored to address situational ambiguities relevant to the issue. Although the underlying causes of sexual harassment and sexual assault are undoubtedly related, different elements typically distinguish behaviors that constitute sexual harassment and sexual assault. Therefore, an activity designed to address sexual harassment would not be appropriate for discussing issues relevant to sexual assault. The activity presented here includes a range of scenarios that students may or may not label as sexual assault; some do not meet the legal definition and contain factors that intentionally create ambiguity. The purpose of this research was to assess the extent to which students perceived these scenarios as sexual assault and to discuss the factors that make these judgments more or less clear. More specifically, this activity was designed to challenge students to think about the questionable and coercive elements present in many sexual situations.

Method
Participants

Participating in the activity were sixty-one students (fifty-six women and five men) from two sophomore-level Psychology of Women courses at a midsize midwestern university. They participated in the activity toward the end of consecutive semesters within the context of a two-week discussion of relationship violence. In addition, students were assigned to read the chapter titled “Violence Against Women” from their class textbook (Crawford and Unger 2000).

Materials and Procedure

Prior to the activity, students provided informed consent to participate. They gave a written definition of sexual assault in as much or as little detail they felt necessary, then read eight scenarios (listed below) and rated whether or not they believed each constituted a case of sexual assault. They were given ten to fifteen minutes for this portion of the activity. Students then discussed their judgments with the rest of the class for the remainder of the class period (about thirty minutes). After the class discussion, students again wrote their definition of sexual assault, on a separate piece of paper.

Activity Scenarios

Scenario 1. Fran and Larry have gone on a couple of dates and get along very well. They have kissed a bit after each date but have not gone any further physically. One night at the end of a date, Larry invites Fran into his apartment. They begin kissing on his bed and start to go further. Their clothing is off, and Fran tells Larry that she does not want to have sex. He ignores this, gets on top of her, and has sex with her. Fran continually asks him to stop but he does not.

Scenario 2. Angela and Joe have been dating for four months. They have already had sex on many occasions. One night when Angela and Joe are having sex, Angela changes her mind and does not want to continue. She tells Joe several times that she wants to stop, but he continues.

Scenario 3. Matt and Kate are talking at a party. Matt goes to get Kate a drink and puts a drug into her drink that will likely make her feel very drunk very quickly. After having the drink, Kate is feeling very dizzy and agrees to go up to a bedroom with Matt. Kate and Matt begin kissing on the bed, and Kate is clearly intoxicated. Matt has sex with Kate.

Scenario 4. Phillip and Irene have been dating for two years. They have been physically intimate but have not had sex. They have fought several times over Irene’s reluctance to have sex. One night, while having a very heated argument about this topic, Phillip punches the wall. Irene is scared of what Phillip might do if she does not agree to have sex with him, so she has sex with him.

Scenario 5. Tina and Jeff are studying for their chemistry final on Jeff’s bed. They are friends and seem to be attracted to each other. Jeff kisses Tina, and she kisses him back. As they start to take off each other’s clothing and get more intimate, Jeff asks Tina if she wants to have sex. Tina responds, “I don’t know.” Jeff starts to have sex with Tina, and she begins to cry. Jeff continues to have sex with Tina.

Scenario 6. Michael and Melissa have been dating seriously for a year. They have been physically intimate but they have not had sex. One night at Melissa’s house, Melissa tells Michael that she does not believe he loves her. He insists he does, but she says that if he loved her, he would want to have sex with her. She begins to cry and says she has considered breaking up with him. Michael does not want to hurt her feelings and does not want their relationship to end, so he has sex with her.

Scenario 7. Janeen and Ryan meet at a party and seem to hit it off. Janeen has had a lot of alcohol to drink and is not capable of driving home. Ryan offers to drive her home because he has had very little to drink. Upon arriving, Janeen invites Ryan up to her apartment. Janeen is clearly intoxicated. Ryan has sex with Janeen.
Scenario 8. Peter and Lindsay meet for the first time when out with mutual friends at a bar. Neither of them has had any alcohol to drink. Lindsay lives within walking distance of the bar and invites Peter to come back to her house. At her house, they have sex. The next morning, they both feel very awkward and regret that they had sex. (Because this scenario was added later in data collection, \( N = 32 \). For scenarios 1–7, \( N = 61 \).) 

Class Discussion

In the class discussion, students indicated by a show of hands whether they thought each scenario constituted a case of sexual assault. If they believed a scenario represented a case of sexual assault, they identified the elements in the scenario to justify their decision. If they did not believe it was a case of sexual assault, they identified the elements present or missing that precluded their decision. Students were then given the legal definitions of first- to fourth-degree sexual assault in Wisconsin, where the research took place. (Although they are similar, state-to-state sexual assault statutes vary. According to Wisconsin law, scenarios 1–5 meet the legal definition. Because of a 1996 amendment to Wisconsin sexual assault statutes, scenario 7 meets the legal definition in every state except Wisconsin.) Finally, students filled out a six-item evaluation of the classroom activity and discussion on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). At the end of class, students were given an information sheet with campus and community resources for sexual assault victims.

Of particular importance for class discussion is pointing out the differences between scenarios that some students labeled sexual assault and others did not. Scenarios 1 and 2 allow for a discussion about when nonconsent can occur. Scenario 8 is an example of a situation lacking criteria necessary to be labeled as sexual assault. However, scenarios 3–7 are likely to generate the most discussion. First, scenarios 4 and 6 allow for a discussion about the gender of the aggressor and victim. Second, it is important to break myths about the meaning of force and discuss ways intimidation can take away a person’s consent. Scenario 5 often leads to a discussion of how one may express nonconsent. It is important to make sure students understand that consent is not the lack of nonconsent (e.g., “I don’t know”), and students often point out reasons a person may cry during sex other than to express nonconsent (e.g., overwhelming positive emotions). However, at this point I remind students that explicit consent is still absent from the scenario. Finally, it is extremely important to address the similarities between scenarios 3 (drugged drink) and 7 (drinking alcohol), although students will be much more likely to label scenario 3 as sexual assault. This comparison draws by far the most discussion. Students who fail to label scenario 3 as sexual assault typically assign blame to the victim for choosing to become intoxicated. The important message to communicate to students is that intoxication reduces a person’s ability to consent regardless of his or her role in becoming intoxicated. Given that the majority of sexual assaults on college campuses involve intoxication of at least one of the people involved (Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004), it is essential that students understand the relation between consent and intoxication.

Results

Defining sexual assault

An independent rater evaluated students’ definitions of sexual assault on a scale from 1 (not at all accurate) to 7 (completely accurate) compared to the legal definition of sexual assault (i.e., sexual contact or sexual intercourse without consent). The rater was blind to the pre- or post-activity nature of the definitions. Students’ post-definitions of sexual assault were significantly more accurate \((M = 4.86, SD = 1.33)\) before activity; \(M = 6.69, SD = .93\) after activity; \(t(28) = -6.22, p < .001\). Before the activity and discussion, only 10 percent of the students wrote definitions that explicitly discussed issues of consent. After the activity and discussion, 86 percent of the students wrote definitions that mentioned consent.

Labeling scenarios

As seen in table 1, students’ ratings of the scenarios as involving sexual assault varied with the ambiguity of the situations, with a situation involving explicit nonconsent labeled sexual assault by all students and sex while intoxicated labeled sexual assault by less than 25 percent. Students were much more likely to attach this label if a situation involved intoxication from a drugged drink than if it involved self-intoxication \((z = 12.02, p < .001)\), and students were more likely to label a situation involving physical intimidation as sexual assault than one involving emotional intimidation \((z = 1.56, p = .12)\). Also, no student labeled scenario 8, which involved consensual yet awkward and regrettable sex, as sexual assault.

Evaluation of activity

In general, students’ ratings of the activity were very favorable, with more than 90 percent finding it informative and useful for future classes (see table 2). More than two-thirds of the students said the activity gave them new information about sexual assault. Students also were unlikely to be upset by the activity. Of the few students (21 percent) who indicated being moderately upset, some noted that it was not the activity but rather other students’ opinions and the reality of sexual assault that made them upset.

Discussion

This activity addresses a very important issue on college campuses by exposing students to common sexual scenarios and having them evaluate the elements in those scenarios that may constitute sexual assault. The findings presented here are consistent with past research (with larger and more diverse samples) on sexual assault (Frawniuk 2005; Goodchilds et al. 1988; Sawyer 2004). 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Verbal nonconsent</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Withdraw consent</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Drug intoxication</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Physical intimidation</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Crying nonconsent</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Emotional intimidation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Alcohol intoxication</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Awkwardness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For scenario 5, \( N = 60 \) because one student did not answer. For scenario 8, \( N = 32 \) because it was added later in the data collection. For all other scenarios, \( N = 61 \).
et al. 1998). Although students generally are less likely to rate a scenario as sexual assault the more it diverges from its prototypical notions (as noted in table 1), their labels of the various scenarios are rarely unanimous. Students tended to discuss the differences among popular perceptions of sexual assault, the activity’s scenarios, and the legal definition of sexual assault. Most important, results showed that students’ understanding of the definition of sexual assault improved after evaluating and discussing the scenarios. Students said this was an informative activity that should be used in future classes.

This activity is most useful in smaller classes (fewer than fifty students), but large classes can be split into discussion groups. Further, this activity can be used and will benefit any course that incorporates discussion of intimate relationships, gender issues, the law, or violence. These include psychology (e.g., Social Psychology, Psychology of Women/Gender, Psychology and the Law), human sexuality, sociology, women’s studies, and criminal justice. Similarly, this activity would be relevant in an interdisciplinary first-year course (e.g., College Life 101) that many schools require of their entering students. Although I have primarily used this activity in a class that has higher female than male enrollment (about 10 percent male), giving both women and men information is essential for reducing sexual assault. Having males in the class is ideal, given that 99 percent of sexual assaults are committed by men (U.S. Department of Justice 2000). It is a limitation of this research that I could not make meaningful gender comparisons.

This activity may break some common myths about sexual assault. It introduces important questions about the inconsistencies between legal and popular definitions and strengthens students’ understanding of what does and does not constitute sexual assault. Although legal definitions may be thorough, their usefulness may be lessened by their poor transmission to those committing or who are victims of sexually violating behavior. By educating young people about sexual assault, we reduce the number of future perpetrators and victims and also improve the knowledge base of our future counselors, police officers, lawyers, legislators, judges, and jurors. Of course, it is an important step to criminalize sexual assault on a societal level, but the only way society will change is if those committing sexual assault understand and recognize their behavior as unacceptable.

NOTE
1. The author thanks Rebecca Brasfield, Michael Norton, and Joe Vandello for helpful comments on earlier versions of the scenarios and the manuscript.

REFERENCES


### Table 2. Students’ Evaluations of Sexual Assault Scenario Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postactivity statement</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I thought this activity was (not) a waste of time.</td>
<td>6.77</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I think this activity should be used in future semesters.</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I thought this activity was very informative about sexual assault.</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I thought this activity was useful for learning about sexual assault.</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The activity (did not) upset me.</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I learned things about sexual assault that I did not previously know.</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Items 1 and 5 are reverse scored.