2003 CAROLYN SHERIF AWARD ADDRESS: 
WHAT COLLEGE WOMEN DO AND DO NOT EXPERIENCE AS RAPE

Arnold S. Kahn
James Madison University

College women who did \( (n = 33) \) and did not \( (n = 56) \) label their sexual assault experience as rape provided written descriptions of their sexual assaults. From these descriptions we identified eight different sexual assault situations. Women who labeled their experience as rape were most likely to have been assaulted forcefully by an acquaintance, awakened to an acquaintance performing sexual acts on them, or experienced the assault as a child. Women were least likely to call their experience rape if they submitted to a whining, begging boyfriend, gave in to a man because of being emotionally needy, were assaulted by a boyfriend, were severely impaired by alcohol or drugs and unable to resist, or were forced to engage in oral or digital sex. Observers who read these descriptions generally agreed with the victims regarding whether or not the experience constituted rape, although they could not agree on whether or not forced oral or digital intercourse or forced intercourse by a boyfriend constituted rape.

Since 1989, together with my colleagues and students, I have conducted research on rape and sexual assault. One particular stream of this research has focused on what determines whether or not a woman labels her sexual assault experience as rape. In this paper I briefly summarize what we know about labeling one’s experience as rape and then focus on a very recent study that provides some new data regarding this process.

Researchers who study rape typically use a form of the Sexual Experience Survey (SES) (Koss & Gidycz, 1985) in which women respond \text{yes} or \text{no} to a series of questions concerning sexual behaviors. If a woman answers yes to one or more critical questions about her sexual experiences she has likely experienced rape. Research shows that a large percentage of women who answer yes to one or more of the critical SES questions, suggesting they had been raped, respond no when asked the direct question, “Have you ever been raped by a man?” That is, these women had an experience that appears to have been one of rape, but they did not label their experience as one of rape. Koss (1985) referred to these women as “hidden rape victims,” women who experienced acts that seemed to fit the legal definition of rape, but who did not conceive of themselves as victims or survivors of rape. In our past research we have referred to these women as “unacknowledged rape victims” (Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994; Kahn & Mathie, 2000). This terminology, however, has problems. It assumes that these women did in fact experience rape, something we do not know for sure, and it favors the scientist’s definition of rape over the definition of the research participant herself. Thus, I will refer to these women as “women who do not call their experience rape,” rather than “hidden victims” or “unacknowledged victims.”

Past research has shown that a large percentage of women, ranging from 48% (Kahn et al., 1994) to 73% (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988), who respond yes to one or more of the SES items, suggesting they had an experience that might legally be rape, respond no to the question, “Have you ever been raped by a man?” In most studies the percentage is over 50% of the sample of possible rape victims.

Why Women Do Not Label Their Sexual Assault as Rape

What leads a woman to call or not call her experience rape? A number of researchers have searched for differences in women’s personalities or attitudes, or in women’s experiences, that would differentiate those who called their experience rape from those who did not. This research has uncovered a number of predictors that appear to distinguish between these two groups. Compared with women who called their experience rape, women who did not
label their experience as rape were more likely to have been assaulted by someone they knew well, often a romantic partner (Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003; Koss, 1985). These women were also more likely to have a rape script of a very violent stranger rape rather than one of an acquaintance rape (Bondurant, 2001; Kahn et al., 1994). They also experienced less assailant force than women who called their experience rape (Bondurant, 2001; Emmers-Sommer & Allen, 1999; Kahn et al., 1994; Kahn et al., 2003; Layman, Gidyicz, & Lynn, 1996; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999).

Finally, although women who did not label their experience as rape had negative emotional reactions during and after the incident, these negative emotional reactions were not as strong as those of women who called their experience rape (Kahn et al., 1994; Kahn & Mathie, 2000; Kahn et al., 2003). Inconsistent results have been found for alcohol use and victim self-blame (Bondurant, 2001; Frazier & Seales, 1997; Kahn & Mathie, 2000; Kahn et al., 2003; Layman et al., 1996; Pitts & Schwartz, 1993; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). Interestingly, no personality, attitude, or demographic difference has differentiated women who do and do not label their assault experience as rape (Bondurant, 2001; Kahn et al., 1994; Koss, 1985; Levine–MacCombie & Koss, 1986).

In short, women who do not call their experience rape tend to see rape as a violent act committed by a stranger, but were themselves assaulted by someone they knew well, often a romantic partner, who did not use a great deal of force. These women experienced strong, negative emotional reactions to their assault, but their reactions were not as strong as women who called their experience rape.

**What Actually Happened?**

Past research trying to differentiate women who did and did not label their sexual assault experiences as rape has not directly examined what actually happened when the assault occurred. That is, did women who called their assault rape encounter a different set of events than those who did not call their assault rape? In a recent study (Kahn et al., 2003) my students and I did just that: we asked women to tell us what happened to them before, during, and after their assault experience. The details of the method and quantitative findings have been published elsewhere (Kahn et al., 2003). Here I will first summarize the quantitative findings from this study and then focus on some of the qualitative findings (Study One). Then I will include some new data that have not yet been published (Study Two). Because in this research we were interested in what women would and would not label as rape, we created a version of the SES that included a variety of assault behaviors (see Kahn et al., 2003, for a complete description), some of which would not meet a strict legal definition of rape in some locations.

**STUDY ONE**

**Method**

We distributed questionnaires to 504 female college students, 90% of whom were Caucasian and 51% of whom were first-year students. We told participants, in groups of 4–25, that we were studying how people perceive stressful events. The women first completed a questionnaire in which they indicated yes, uncertain or maybe, or no to 16 questions regarding criminal or aggressive acts or attitudes, including the crucial question, “Have you ever been raped by a man?” Next they completed a version of the SES. If a participant answered yes to at least one of seven critical questions, they were considered a possible rape victim. We then asked these women to turn to the next page where they found the following instructions:

Please take a few moments to describe in detail the circumstances of this experience. If there was more than one experience, respond about the one you remember best. How did this experience come about? What occurred during the experience? What did he do? What did you do? Remember that this survey is anonymous, and there is no way to match your survey or this description with you. Therefore, be as candid as you feel comfortable. Please write your response on the two sheets of blank paper provided and then continue on the next printed page.1

We considered a woman to have labeled her experience as rape if she answered yes to the question about having been raped and yes to one or more of the critical SES questions. We considered a woman not to have labeled her experience as rape if she answered no to the question about having been raped and yes to one or more of the critical SES questions. We considered a woman uncertain as to whether she had been raped if she answered yes to one of the critical SES questions and maybe/uncertain to the question about having been raped.

Of the 504 participants, 13 chose not to complete the survey. Of the 491 remaining women, 33 (6.5%) called an experience they had rape, 56 (11.4%) did not label an experience they had as rape, 8 (1.6%) were uncertain whether an experience they had was rape or not, and 394 (80.2%) indicated they had not been the victim of a sexual assault. Since only eight women chose the maybe/uncertain alternative, I will not report results from these participants.

Four individuals previously unassociated with this research each read all the assault descriptions and independently classified them into types of sexual assault situations. The four then met together, agreed upon the assault situations, and provided criteria for differentiating each situation from the others. We then gave the assault descriptions, the assault situations, and criteria for assigning assaults to situations to three other people not previously involved in this research. Each of these people independently categorized each description into one of the assault situations. Based on disagreements by these categorizers, we again reviewed and modified the situations and their criteria, producing a final set of eight sexual assault situations, with an additional ninth “other” category. We gave the women’s descriptions and the revised situations and their criteria to three different people who had not previously been involved in this research, and
asked them to place each assault description into one of the nine situations. The average interrater reliability was 83.5%.

Results

The quantitative results, reported in Kahn et al. (2003) revealed that women who labeled their situation as rape were (a) more likely to have been assaulted by a nonromantic partner, (b) more likely to have experienced extremely high negative affect after the experience, (c) less likely to be assaulted by an assailant who was intoxicated, and (d) more likely to have experienced forceful male aggression in other sexual encounters with men. Here I wish to further explore the qualitative findings from the participants’ descriptions of their assault experiences. The following constitute the eight different assault situations.

Submit to boyfriend involved, after repeated no’s, giving in to a boyfriend’s continued begging, whining, or arguing for sex. The woman did not want to have sex, but wanted to please him, keep peace, or feared he might become violent.

My boyfriend of a year and I were home alone together. In prior weeks he had been very agitated at my lack of interest in intimacy and my lack of patience with his temper. His recent outbursts had caused me to distrust him. His manner towards me was angry, but he didn’t actually threaten me at this time. In an attempt to appease his anger and prevent another outburst of anger, I consented to his repeated advances and requests for sex. It was so degrading.

Childhood included sexual acts performed by older cousins, a babysitter, or a close family member when the woman was in middle school or younger.

Forced sex acts occurred when a man, regardless of her relationship with him, used force to obtain or perform oral or digital sex.

I was drunk. He forced me into the bathroom with him. He was drunk, too. He pushed me down so that I was on my knees and undid his pants, basically forcing his penis in my mouth and moving my head. I said stop a lot of times.

Emotionally needy involved situations in which the woman was emotionally unstable and needy, often following the breakup of a relationship. She did not want to have intercourse and told the man so, but eventually gave in to the man because he seemed to care for her.

I genuinely didn’t want to have sex, told him so. However, I was going through a rough time, just broken up with a serious boyfriend and felt insecure, hurt, lonely, etc., etc. This guy made me feel better about myself, told me I had no reason to be lonely, he wanted me, he wanted to help with the pain, etc. I ended up having sex with him because I believed he cared about me even though I didn’t think it was right because I wanted the pain of the former breakup to quit.

Dominating boyfriend involved an older, larger boyfriend who used threats or force to obtain sexual intercourse. The woman tried to resist but could not.

At my senior beach week I had been dating my boyfriend for about a month... We got into bed, unclothed, and started “messing around.” After a few minutes I wanted to stop, but obviously he didn’t. He held my arms down and I was on my stomach and he tried to perform anal intercourse, but I squirmed and screamed at him until he stopped... P.S. It hurt like hell and I left him the next day.

Forceful acquaintance involved an acquaintance who would not yield to a woman’s pleas to stop and used force, threats, or coercion to obtain sexual intercourse. The following occurred during her senior year in high school when the woman turned down a schoolmate’s request for a date:

He got angry and told me that I was a tease and he slapped me across the face. So I pulled open the door to my car and tried to get away, but he grabbed my arm and forced me into the back seat. All I remember after that was crying and trying to push him off me. When he had finished he left me in the back seat of my car bleeding and barely conscious.

Asleep or tricked involved either a woman awakening to find a man performing sexual acts on her, or the man had promised no penile penetration yet did so anyway, but the woman was not immediately aware of it, unfamiliar with the “feel” of penetration.

He promised me that he would sleep on the couch and I could have his bed. I woke up later that night with him on top of me. I told him to stop but he wouldn’t. He continued and managed to take my clothes off. After raping me he rolled over and went to sleep.

Severe impairment occurred when the woman was severely impaired by alcohol or drugs and had neither the presence of mind nor the ability to resist the man, who had intercourse with her.

We were drunk. I didn’t have control over myself and I didn’t have the cognitive ability to say NO. I can’t remember everything, but I know we had sex and if I were sober it would not have happened. I just could not control myself at all.

Table 1 displays the number of women who called their experience rape and those who did not for each assault situation. Three situations, asleep or tricked, forceful acquaintance, and childhood accounted for over three-fourths (76.67%) of the descriptions provided by women who called their situation rape. Only four women who did not call their experience rape wrote descriptions that fell into one of these categories. Five situations, severe impairment,
submit, forced sex acts, dominating boyfriend, and emotionally needy accounted for 85.1% of the descriptions provided by women who did not call their experience rape. Only seven women who called their experience rape wrote descriptions that fit into one of these five categories.

Discussion
The main finding from these qualitative results suggest that those women who labeled their experience as rape, for the most part, encountered very different assault situations from those who did not call their experience rape. Women were more likely to label their situation as rape when the assailant was someone other than their boyfriend, who either used force to obtain intercourse or started to perform sexual acts while they were asleep, waking them up. Women also labeled as rape sexual acts which had occurred in childhood. Women were more likely to label their experience as something other than rape when the experience occurred with a boyfriend, whether submitting to his repeated pleas or giving in to his threats and force, when the woman was too impaired by alcohol or drugs to effectively resist the man, when the sexual act was something other than penile/vaginal intercourse, and when the woman gave in to intercourse because she was emotionally needy.

I should note that 15 of the 45 descriptions written by women who did not label their situation as rape fell into two categories: submit and emotionally needy. Both of these situations would probably not meet the criteria in most states to be admitted as rape and appear to more closely resemble what has been called unwanted sex (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994; Walker, 1997), that is, having intercourse to please a partner when a person did not desire it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Labeled Rape</th>
<th>Not Labeled Rape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submit</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced Sex Acts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally Needy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating Boyfriend</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful Acquaintance</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asleep or Tricked</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Impairment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1
Frequencies of Each Assault Situation as a Function of Whether the Woman Labeled Her Experience as Rape or Not Rape

If my roommate came home and told me the exact same story had happened to her, I’d tell her, “You call the hotline, you call the police! You’re a victim! That guy raped you and you should report it!” Wow! But I don’t know. For her it would be rape. For me it was just so complicated (p. 154).

We were interested in whether naïve observers, like some of Phillips’ participants, would be more likely than the women who wrote about their experience to label the situation as one of rape. Phillips found that her participants denied their victimization, in part, to preserve their view of themselves as mature adults who can handle situations, and in part because their experiences were complicated and did not match the “true victim” discourse that rape occurs when a stranger brutally attacks a woman who does everything possible to escape.

Method
I gave the written descriptions of the sexual assaults to four additional female undergraduate students previously unfamiliar with this research. I instructed each rater, working individually, to “Please label each situation as either ‘rape,’ ‘not rape,’ or ‘not enough information provided.’ Avoid using the ‘not enough information provided’ category; if you lean however slightly to either ‘rape’ or ‘not rape’ use one of them instead.” I provided no definition of rape to the categorizers.

I then looked at the categorizations of these four naïve raters. If three or four of them categorized the description as rape, I labeled the situation one of rape. Likewise, if three or four of the raters categorized the situation as not rape, I labeled the situation as not rape. Those descriptions for which there was no agreement or for which the raters agreed that there was not sufficient information, I categorized as unclear.

Results
The raters classified 28 descriptions as rape, 32 descriptions as not rape, and were unclear or could not agree about 19 descriptions. When I compared whether or not a woman called her own experience rape with how observers labeled the same situation, I found a very strong relationship, $\chi^2(2) = 36.87, p < .001$, which is shown in Table 2. Those situations that participants labeled as rape were also highly likely to be labeled as rape by naïve raters. Likewise, situations that participants labeled as something other than rape were also highly likely to be called not rape by naïve raters. If we remove the 24% of the situations where the observers who classified the descriptions were uncertain or could not agree and look at percentages, the situation becomes even clearer. Nearly all, 95.6%, of the descriptions for which the victim

STUDY TWO
In her interviews with women who had experienced rape, Phillips (2000) discussed situations in which a woman did not view her experience as rape, but when asked how she would describe the identical experience if it had happened to a friend, she gave a very different interpretation.
labeled her situation as rape, the observers also called it rape. Likewise in 83.4% of the descriptions in which the victim did not call her experience rape, the observers agreed that the situation was not rape.

These results support the hypothesis that observers would be more likely to label a situation as rape than would participants. Only once did a victim label her experience as rape (3.4%) when the raters agreed rape did not occur; however, six of the descriptions that the victims themselves labeled as not rape were clearly labeled rape by the observers (12%). That is, the raters were more likely to label a description as rape than were the victims themselves.

For our final analysis I examined the eight different assault situations in terms of whether or not the observers labeled the written description as rape or not. As can be seen in Table 3, the findings mirror, for the most part, the victims’ own categorization as to whether the situation was one of rape. From the observers’ point of view, three situations clearly constitute rape: forced intercourse during childhood, forceful intercourse by an acquaintance, and waking up to someone performing sexual acts on them, the same three situations that the women in our original study overwhelmingly called rape when it happened to them. Observers clearly viewed three other situations as not rape: submitting to pressure from a boyfriend after making it clear the woman did not want sex, an emotionally needy woman giving in to the man, and intercourse because of severe impairment and the inability to resist. These situations involved experiences that the women in our original study also tended to not label as rape. Finally, there were two situations in which it was unclear, from the observers’ perspective, whether rape had occurred: forced oral or digital sex and a boyfriend using threats or actual force to obtain intercourse. Women who wrote the descriptions always labeled them as not being rape.

### Discussion

For years we have been trying to understand what determines whether a woman will label her assault situation as rape or as something other than rape. From our latest research I think it is safe to say that a major contributor to a woman’s decision to label a situation as rape is the nature of the situation itself. Both the victims and those who read the victims’ descriptions of their experience agreed that some situations constituted rape and other situations did not.

Women, both victims and those who read victim descriptions, were most likely to label a situation as rape if sexual intercourse occurred in childhood, was forced by an acquaintance, or occurred while the woman was asleep. Three factors seem to be involved here. First, the woman had sexual intercourse when she either had no control—she was a child, asleep, or forced. Second, the assailant was someone other than her boyfriend. Third, from our quantitative data (Kahn et al., 2003) the woman experienced a very high level of trauma as a result.

Three situations, submitting to the begging, whining, or arguing by a boyfriend; having intercourse because she was emotionally needy; and being too impaired to resist intercourse with an acquaintance, all lead the majority of both victims and those who read victim accounts to believe rape had not occurred.

Although submitting to a whiny boyfriend or being emotionally needy in most cases probably does not constitute rape under most state laws, the inability to stop a man because of impairment by alcohol or drugs is considered rape in most jurisdictions. The written descriptions provided by these women can help us understand why they, and those who read their descriptions, did not label their experience as rape. The intoxicated women did not seem to believe they were personally at risk and they attributed their undesired intercourse not to the man’s pressure or force but to their own lack of ability to think clearly or resist—the alcohol rather than the assailant took away their options to act otherwise. These women seem to have presumed that a man will have sex with a woman unless the woman forcefully resists, and her inability to resist seemed to mean, to her and to observers as well, that what happened was not rape. Below are some additional extracts of descriptions provided by women who said they were too intoxicated to resist but did not call their experiences rape:

---

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victims' Label of Situation</th>
<th>Raters' Label of Situation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>Not Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Rape</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rape Situation</th>
<th>Observer Label of Situation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>Not Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced Sex Acts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally Needy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating Boyfriend</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful Acquaintance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asleep or Tricked</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Impairment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data for women who were uncertain whether or not they had experienced rape are included in these data.
I was having a bad day and I wanted to get trashed... So I went to my friend’s apartment... So I got really drunk and he basically totally took advantage of my weakness. Before I could get the strength to protest, he had quickly um, penetrated me. I know that if I hadn’t been so drunk I would have had the strength and I definitely would NOT have wanted to do that with him, and I would have strongly told him no and he knew that too, which is why he waited till I was hammered to do it. So I guess it doesn’t really count as rape, since I was the one who wanted to get drunk.

A man who I trusted very much made me and some friends a few drinks. We played drinking games and we were all pretty drunk. After everyone was asleep, this man and I were up talking and practically begged me to let him give me oral sex. I was drunk, told him I didn’t want to, but he kept at it and finally I was just like, fine. The oral sex turned into intercourse. I hadn’t wanted to do anything with him at all. I was too drunk to really consider the consequences though.

In reading these descriptions, as well as the descriptions by women who submitted to their boyfriends and those who were emotionally needy, it appears these women felt they could not call what happened to them rape because they didn’t resist, even if they couldn’t resist because of impairment. It also appears that these women did not experience the trauma found in the descriptions by women who labeled their experience as rape (see Kahn et al., 2003). As Gavey (1999) has suggested, although rape is frequently traumatic, “not all women are traumatized by rape” (p. 70). It may be that the women who were too intoxicated to resist labeled their experience as something other than rape because they were not as traumatized as women who tried to resist and they were adapting the best they could to an unpleasant experience, attempting to “get over it,” gain control for similar situations in the future, and escape the label of “victim” (see Phillips, 2000).

Finally, in two situations the victims did not label their experience as rape, but observers could not agree whether or not rape had taken place: forced sexual acts that did not involve penile/vaginal intercourse—digital or oral intercourse—and forced sexual intercourse committed by a boyfriend. Both of these situations would likely be considered rape under most state laws. With regard to digital and oral sex, research by Sanders and Reinisch (1999) suggested that only about one-third of college women consider oral sex as “having sex” and only about 10% consider manual stimulation of genitals as “having sex.” To the extent women believe that the act of rape must involve penile/vaginal intercourse, one can understand how the victims of forced oral or digital sex might call their experience something other than rape. Yet it is curious that those who read the descriptions were less clear on the matter. In two descriptions the raters agreed that rape had occurred, for one description they were sure rape had not occurred, and on four descriptions they did not agree among themselves or not enough information was provided to decide whether or not rape had occurred. Clearly this is an area in need of further research and education.

Being forced to have sexual intercourse by one’s boyfriend also seems to be an ambiguous situation for those who read the descriptions but not for those who wrote them. In all four cases the victims themselves did not call their experience rape, but those who read the descriptions were unable to agree with one another on any of the four scenarios. The rape by a boyfriend appears an unanticipated situation, one for which women have no script. In our earlier research on rape scripts (Kahn et al., 1994), none of our 174 participants, when asked to write their script for a typical rape, wrote a script involving a boyfriend. Women love and trust their boyfriends and rape by a boyfriend appears incomprehensible and difficult to categorize as rape.

**CONCLUSION**

My major goal in conducting this research was to determine what types of assaultive sexual experiences college women consider to be rape and what types of assaultive sexual experiences they consider to be something other than rape. To do this we included several SES items that were likely sexual assault but not rape. We found three situations that were almost always labeled as rape and five situations that were nearly always not labeled as rape. I think this research should be viewed as a first step in this regard. We were able to obtain only a limited number of retrospective descriptions of sexual assaults from predominantly White, middle-class college students. Older, less privileged women from different ethnic backgrounds may label their experiences differently. Furthermore, we developed a crude and imperfect classification system on the basis of written descriptions of sexual assaults, some of which were quite brief. In addition, an occasional written description could have fit into more than one assault situation (e.g., a woman forced by her boyfriend to perform oral sex on him while she was severely impaired by alcohol). Conducting in-depth interviews with samples of women about their assault experiences and the conditions under which they occurred appears to be necessary to further our understanding of what leads a woman to call their sexual assault rape.

I will end this article with the same words I used previously (Kahn et al., 2003). Is it important for a woman to label her experience as rape if it occurs? At the individual level it would appear that each woman is attempting, as best she can, to cope with what had happened to her. Under some conditions, such as awakening to a man performing sexual acts on her or being forced into intercourse by an acquaintance, most women appear to cope best by calling their situation one of rape. Under other conditions, such as being unable to resist because of severe intoxication or because a boyfriend forced them to have sex, most women appear to cope best...
by labeling what happened to them as something other than rape. Furthermore, their peers, for the most part, agree with this classification system. Should efforts be made to teach women to label their experience as rape if they have had an experience that would legally qualify as rape? Women as a group, and likely women in the future, would certainly be better off if all women who experienced legal rape labeled it as such. Such widespread acknowledgment of rape would highlight the tremendous problem of rape in our society, hold perpetrators responsible for their behavior, and likely lead to greater enforcement of rape statutes, greater prosecution of rapists, and ultimately reducing the frequency of rape. But at what cost to individual women who can better cope with what happened to them by not calling their experience rape? Are these women better off by having someone else define their experience for them? This is not a dilemma easily resolved. Perhaps the best perspective has been provided by Gavey (1999), who said of women who do not label their experience as rape: 

Feminist accounts of rape need to be able to take account of such women’s experiences without, in effect, dismissing them as the result of false consciousness. Carefully listening to and theorizing such ambivalent and confusing experiences may illuminate the complex relationship between heterosexuality and rape. Moreover, it may produce feminist analyses of rape that are sympathetic to all women who are raped, no matter how they experience it (pp. 69–70).

REFERENCES


