Preventing Sexual Assault Through Engaging College Men

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Sexual assault occurs at alarming rates on college campuses, with men committing 99% of these crimes toward women and in some instances toward other men (Rennison, 2002). The number of women who report surviving a completed or attempted sexual assault while in college has hovered around 25% since Mary Koss completed the first well-documented study of college acquaintance assault in 1985 (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Warshaw, 1994).

Historically sexual assault prevention has been seen as a “women’s issue,” and programmatic initiatives have focused on teaching women how to “protect” themselves, and largely neglected to engage men as allies in ending sexual violence against women. Prevention consisted of teaching women how to avoid potential perpetrators and by using tactics to escape dangerous situations, measures that are generally ineffective in addressing acquaintance rape, the most common form of sexual assault (Schewe & O’Donohue, 1993).

Recently some campus prevention programs have engaged men as allies in addressing sexual violence, recognizing that most men do not perpetuate sexual violence, and given the right skills will intervene in potential sexual assault situations. Although few people intend to cause harm, not acknowledging and addressing the environments that allow sexual violence to occur contributes to the problem of sexual violence. When students do not understand the complex connection between sexual violence and sexism, a rape-prone culture is perpetuated in unintentional ways, including inappropriate behaviors, traditions, and rituals that maintain some men’s power over women (Davis & Liddell, 2002).

Sexual assault is “a learned behavior acquired through routine social and environmental interaction . . . and an extreme form of the traditionally socialized ways that men and women act in the context of sexual relations” (Davis & Liddell, 2002, p. 36). Researchers have found positive correlations between rape-supportive attitudes and behaviors including sexual aggression, history of sexual aggression, and likelihood of future sexual aggression (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Truman, Toaker, & Fischer, 1996). Additionally, belief in traditional gender roles positively correlates with greater acceptance of rape myths, making obvious the link between traditional gender roles and sexual assault (Davis & Liddell, 2002; Truman et al., 1996).

Sexual Assault Prevention Programs and College Men

One-time programs do not appear to change rape-supportive cultures, nor do they change individuals’ beliefs, values, and behaviors for an extended period of time (Lonsway, 1996; Berkowitz, 1994). Studies indicate that effective ways to reach students include using peer-to-peer education, conducting programs...
in single-sex groups, and completing multiple programs with the same group (Black, Weisz, Coats, & Patterson, 2000; Brecklin & Forde, 2001; Davis & Liddell, 2002; Lonsway, 2000; O’Donohue, Yeater, & Fanetti, 2003).

The effectiveness of sexual assault prevention programs targeting men is currently being assessed. Some campuses recently implemented such programs, and studies show the programs are well received (Choate, 2003; Hong, 2000); however most have not been in place long enough to evaluate behavioral change. Systematic evaluation of multi-pronged approaches to sexual assault prevention is rarely conducted on college campuses (Lonsway, 1996; Schewe & O’Donohue, 1993), making it difficult to judge the amount of time required to impact students’ attitudes and behaviors (Gidycz et al., 2001). The authors of the current study assert that by continuing to support campus programs designed to address sexual assault prevention through a multi-pronged approach, the number of people affected by sexual assault on campuses and in communities will decrease, leading to a safer and more welcoming climate for all. The study was guided by four research questions: (a) What did the men gain from participating in the Men’s Project? (b) What did the men learn from participating in the Men’s Project? (c) How did the men’s attitudes and behaviors associated with rape and towards women change as a result of participating in the Men’s Project? and (d) How did the men’s bystander intervention knowledge, skills, and behavior change as a result of participating in the Men’s Project? What strategies did they employ for interventions?

The Men’s Project

The Men’s Project, the focus of this study, uses an ecological/public health model for preventing sexual violence. In this model, public health educators address the prevention of sexual assault by identifying risk factors at the individual, intrapersonal, societal and cultural levels (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The program content was in large part influenced by the bystander work of Latane & Darley (1976), and reflected linear stages necessary for intervention: notice, interpret, responsibility, assistance, and implementation (Latane & Darley). The curriculum highlighted four main areas: (a) gender socialization; (b) privilege, intersections of identities, and the politics of oppression; (c) sexual assault myths and facts, rape-supportive environments and how to support a survivor; and (d) sexual assault prevention/bystander intervention strategies. The facilitator employed diverse techniques, including multimedia presentation and a combination of small and large group activities and processing. The pedagogy was intentionally feminist in that participants determined the direction and focus of the sessions and facilitators ensured that learning objectives were achieved.

Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by Connell’s (1987, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity and his work on multiple masculinities. The authors of this study understand hegemonic masculinity as a form of social practice that contributes to patriarchal beliefs where men’s violence is perpetuated and a rape-supportive environment is fostered (Truman et al., 1996). Individual bodies are sites of complexity and contestation and individual men can learn to resist the ideal norms of the hegemonic man (Whitehead, 2002). Teaching men the skills to prevent violence against women disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be a man and interrupts those assumptions in a rape-supportive culture. In this study, we examined how men’s attitudes and behaviors were impacted by participating in the Men’s Project.
METHOD

Procedures
Because men socialized in all-male groups, including fraternities, athletic teams and all-male residence hall floors have higher acceptance of rape myths and traditional gender role expectations (Boeringer, 1999; Hinck & Thomas, 1999; Schaeffer & Nelson, 1993), the Men's Project coordinator intentionally recruited male-identified individuals from these communities to participate in the program. Men were selected to participate in the Men's Project via applications and interviews. Participants were chosen based on their contribution to the group's diversity, their desire to learn about and gain skills in preventing violence against women, and their willingness to reflect on their own behaviors. The intervention consisted of a voluntary 10-week training where the participants meet for 2 hours each session.

Four focus groups were conducted at the end of the Men's Project (December 2005). Graduate students (two men and two women) in the Women's Studies Certificate program facilitated the focus groups that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Men participated in the focus groups voluntarily and as determined by availability. Four to seven Men's Project participants attended each focus group. The groups were audio taped and transcribed.

Participants
Of the 28 Men's Project participants, 19 participated in the focus groups. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23. They identified themselves as Asian American (n = 3, 16%), African-American (n = 1, 5%), Caucasian (n = 12, 63%), and Latino (n = 3, 16%). On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being heterosexual and 5 being homosexual, they identified predominately as heterosexual (n = 16, 84%). Two men identified as homosexual (11%) and 1 (5%) identified being between heterosexual and homosexual with a response of "2."

Research Design
We conducted qualitative focus groups to examine the impact of the Men's Project. The focus groups were conducted on campus with participants in the Men's Project. The participants did not receive any compensation for participation in the focus groups or the Men's Project. We used focus groups, rather than individual interviews, because we wanted to engage men in groups. As stated above, masculinity is a social phenomenon, and often a collective enactment (Connell, 1995). Because the situations in which men could intervene would certainly involve other men, we wanted to examine the men's responses in groups of men.

Analysis
The focus group data was analyzed by four coders, including the authors and one graduate student. The coders were two men and two women. Using constant comparative analysis procedures, the four researchers open coded individually and then met collectively to resolve their codes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A master code list was created and, from this, narratives containing participant responses were constructed for each question. These narratives were taken collectively and interrogated for how they informed the four research questions. The final analytic write-ups were theoretically guided by Connell's (1987, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Latane and Darley's (1976) work on bystander behavior. We specifically looked for what men noticed, interpreted, took responsibility for, assisted in, and implemented.

RESULTS
What Did the Men Gain?
The Men's Project participants reported a variety of gains including a new awareness of
gender, a deeper understanding of LGBT issues and homophobia, and information about sexual assault. Participants reported increased empathy for how women might feel in certain situations: “A lot of the sessions everybody was totally blown away by some new issues concerning women, and seeing it through their eyes instead of just seeing it through our eyes.”

Participants described a greater understanding of the privilege they possess as men, and for many, a greater understanding of other privileges related to other identities:

I gained a . . . reminder of the privilege that I had grown up with and that I had continually had in life, and that was something that was hard to deal with and hard to cope with at first because I hadn’t really come to grips with how prevalent it was. I feel like that was a big part of the Men’s Project to me . . . learning how to use that in a positive way as opposed to letting it kind of be a chain.

Participants gained a support network of men concerned about the same issues, instilling a sense of camaraderie:

There was this common thread of men getting together to work against sexism and gender violence and sexual assault on campus. . . . The Men’s Project was a place where I felt accepted, that there are other men who approach women just like [I do] and that we can all relate to that and provide each other a community of support.

Participants noted that individual growth made it easier to work with their friends around issues of diversity, oppression, and sexism: “The Men’s Project helped me challenge myself too. So I think that was helpful in me educating myself and further helping me educating others and to challenge them to step out of their comfort zones.”

Participants also became aware of others’ behaviors and found themselves wondering where those behaviors came from:

I’ve noticed how much when watching . . . other people, how much they play into their gender stereotypes. You see people and they’re doing something, and it’s like, is that really what they want to do? or [are] they doing that because they’ve been socialized to do that?

The men also talked about how their participation gave them some credibility in interventions, “The Men’s Project . . . I guess in a way gave me some credibility to challenge others on certain topics . . . to challenge people to step out of their comfort zones and to help educate people.”

Participants also discussed the use of homophobia as a tool to pressure men to conform to appropriate hegemonic gender performances, “I’d say the one thing I’ve noticed more than anything is the homophobia. . . . I think that it . . . pushed heterosexual males further into the box that society places them in.”

The participants interpreted language use differently in all-male groups. They identified the discourse as objectifying, a tool for asserting social hegemonic masculinity:

I’ve noticed how when men get into large groups it seems like male bonding time. . . . It seems like when it’s just men and they’re just having a regular conversation . . . they always have to feel like they have to prove something to the other men in the group.

The participants consistently reported noticing situations involving sexist behavior. Spoken language was the most often cited example of sexist behavior. “Now I hear sexist comments all the time, like [from] coworkers or at the gym.” Participants identified language as blatantly sexist, exclusive, and/or a means for perpetuating traditional gender roles. Blatantly sexist language included the terms
“girls,” “bitch,” and “tits.” “I’ve noticed a lot more men calling women ‘girls.’” Participants noticed their textbooks contained male-centered language, and cited language perpetuating traditional gender roles as sexist. Participants identified statements like “Be a man,” “Take it like a man,” and “This is a man’s job,” as contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles.

Men cited other forms of communication as signifiers of sexism, including body language and artifacts in the physical environment. One participant commented:

I’ve noticed how much the little things that people don’t notice actually have an effect on sexist behavior. Like in dorm rooms, how people will have pictures of harshly exposed women . . . because, yes, those women are attractive, but you can value their beauty in other ways besides just putting up pictures of them basically without their clothes on.

Participants identified several sexual assault myths, with each of the following five myths being coded eight or more times:

1. Women deserve to be sexually assaulted for how they were dressing, acting, behaving.
2. Most sexual assaults are stranger assaults.
3. Men have more power and are entitled and supposed to be dominant and in control in sexual interactions.
4. Once consent is given it cannot be taken away.
5. Men must be the initiator of sexual activity.

Participants learned the inaccuracy of these myths through a rape survivor panel, readings, videos, and through group discussions.

In addition to an awareness of rape myths, a large number of men recognized that consent could not be given when a person was incapacitated due to alcohol use, and that obtaining consent is an ongoing process. Additionally, men talked about being aware of the environment where physical intimacy takes place, and how this may impact consent:

Just another aspect of consent . . . would be, even if she does say yes, what kind of situation are we in? If she is at my house, is she in a place to get away? I would assume a little less threatening position . . . watch my posture. Also, if she is going through a bad time, it is probably not a good situation to ask for [sex].

What Did Men Learn?

Many of the participants highlighted learning from multiple perspectives, and developing a “new thought process,” or a “new way of seeing the world.” Participants described gaining a deeper understanding of their relationship to the community of which they are a part, and developing a greater respect for others and explained understanding that their behaviors impacted the people around them, positively or negatively: “It was shocking how many times I would have to stop and actually think about what I was actually saying and how it would affect the people that were around me.”

Participants explored the social interplay of heterosexual relationships, articulating some of the complexities of power:

I think that certain ways the woman dresses is also constructed by men though, because a lot of men will tell their partners, “You should dress like this or like this,” . . . and then men being the powerful figures they are, they go back and use that, saying . . . just because she dresses that way she wants sex or something.

Participants embraced their role in challenging gender socialization due to their gender privilege: “I think it is just a higher responsibility, now after the Men’s Project, [because] before we were all ignorant, now that
we are informed, we [have] got to step up." Participants noted internalizing responsibility to serve as change agents as the result of knowledge acquisition. This social responsibility was applied to many issues of oppression as participants developed as allies: "I have learned that it is the responsibility of the privileged to break the constraints of stereotypes."

Participants attempted to honestly reflect on their gender socialization. They saw their peer group performing in accordance to their gender socialization, and this helped them analyze their own attitude and thoughts. Although difficult, the participants acknowledged being aware of gender socialization as personally satisfying:

I have realized that almost every male is raised to be a sexist. It is ridiculous in how we are just socialized to . . . put down women, and be the enforcer, the aggressor in so many different ways. When you break that, when you get that broken down to you, that you need to change what you are doing, it is really, it's hard for most people, but really once you do it, it is completely satisfying.

Men also noted that pornography was another device normalizing sexism and misogyny:

An article for the Men's Project . . . was . . . about pornography, and how pornography, while a facet of the opinions of modern society, is definitely a reflection of the sexual norms of society. . . . Sex is defined as taking of pleasure from women by men. And therefore rape is not only illegal, but socially normal at the same time.

Some students found a voice through the Men's Project, and felt empowered to challenge the processes they were engaged in as participants. In the focus groups some men seemed to struggle with the questions asked, for they interpreted them as implying a heterosexist norm: "Interesting thing that the question poses . . . well I am going to talk about other kinds of relationships, like homosexual relationships. . . . What is the man's role in the relationship when there are two men?"

**Changing Rape-Supportive Attitudes**

Participants identified their own campus as a rape-supportive environment:

I think a rape-supportive environment . . . can be our very own college right now. A lot of times we think colleges are a place of equality, and a lot of the time they really don't punish these people that are taking this action against these women, even if they are faculty, or students . . . that just makes me more aware of how deep-rooted in society our rape-supportive environment can be.

Participants noted the pressure to dominate in relationships. Although the men readily identified this as the most prominent message they receive about being men, they simultaneously voiced their disagreement and displeasure with this message:

A lot of the negative stereotypes [exist] for guys, [like] you always have to be in a dominating role, the power figure, you say what goes, you make all the money and stuff like that, and I think through the Men's Project I've learned a lot of that is . . . crap. It needs to be equal.

Participants expressed that power related to decision making was expected of them in relationships. This power was demonstrated in another frequently coded expectation of men as providers in heterosexual relationships:

It is always expected that the man has to be the provider, pretty much for everything, and the woman pretty much just stays in the house and does the work and chores and cooks and takes care of the kids.

Despite feeling societal pressure to assert dominance and power, many participants
articulated desiring a nonhegemonic partnership with equality and respect, independent of traditional gender roles. “Not just respecting your partner but just respecting everybody. Respecting women and men alike, equally, and not thinking lower of anybody for any reason.” Men also resisted an essentializing differentiation of roles contingent upon gender. “[The] expectation of being a man is pretty much the same expectation of being a woman.”

Noticing sexist behavior within peer groups caused some men to reevaluate their social circles. Participants discussed the lens through which they view the world as changing. They discussed the newfound ability to consume certain media, such as sporting events, while criticizing the hegemonic gendered messages within that media.

Bystander Intervention and Strategies

Men explained changing their behavior as a result of the Men’s Project, specifically highlighting language, the ability and confidence to intervene in appropriate situations, and the importance of activism. Their actions were the result of an acquired feeling of responsibility: “[We] really stressed, you have to take a stance even though it is little, maybe saying ‘women’ instead of ‘girls’ . . . it’s our responsibility because men are doing these things.”

The men self-reported broadly defined interventions, ranging from passive to active:

- We learned many different skills, like bystander intervention skills. We learned . . . different ways that we can be involved on campus, and also how to work with other men to try to reduce events of sexism on campus, you know, if you see someone doing something, what might you say to them for them to do not do that again.

Participants highlighted challenging their peers’ behaviors and language. Many participants reported intervening and changing the momentum of a conversation away from sexism. “With friends . . . if they’re saying anything degrading, you don’t necessarily have to scold them but you could let them know where you are coming from and at least make sure that they show women respect.”

Men’s Project participants also cited frequent conversations with their peers regarding gender socialization:

A big thing that I feel like I am constantly talking about is gender roles in general, when somebody says, “Be a man,” or something like that, to confront that and call them out. I’ve found myself doing that a lot more since the Men’s Project.

A frequently identified barrier to participant interventions was women not supporting men. Men found that when they challenged their peers, men or women, the women in their peer group often were often resistant, confused, and sometimes abusive to the men attempting such interventions:

- I’ve even been told by women, like, I’ll come home from class, and there’ll be on my whiteboard, “Grow some balls, you fag,” and I know it’s from the women on my floor . . . they do it as a joke because a lot of them respect the things I do, but in a way they make fun of me.

Participants described homophobia as another barrier to implementing bystander intervention strategies. The participants found that when they attempted interventions, their peers discredited them in social groups through homophobic comments. “Being told that you’re gay [is a barrier to confronting peers]. . . . It’s like, you say something, and its like, ‘All right, fag,’ and they walk away and completely blow you off.”

Many of the participants shared that their
peers were hypersensitive to their language and interventions. When participants challenged their peers on language, their peers seem poised to point out to the men when they themselves were exclusive. Participants described this as draining, and they felt like their language and behavior was under a microscope:

And I think people can be really critical too, if you are trying to change your language, or be more inclusive . . . and people know that, and you slip up, people will call you out on that and make a big deal out of it.

Men indicated that participation in the Men’s Project dramatically changed their everyday language, though they struggled feeling comfortable with a more inclusive vocabulary: “If you try to go against what the norms of society are, it’s just not real accepted; again, its like trying to learn a new language.”

Most men reported intervening in sexist situations by challenging people’s language. They “confronted,” “challenged,” and “called out” men and women’s sexist, exclusive, and gender stereotypical language. Confronting sexist language usually meant identifying why the language was sexist, asking critical questions, encouraging people to empathize with groups marginalized by the comments, and offering alternatives:

There was a woman in my hall and she said something, like something was gay, and then I was like, “Don’t say ‘gay.’ That is completely irrelevant to what you are talking about.” And she actually thought about it and was like, “Yeah, I’m sorry.”

The men reported they found sexist language and behaviors easiest to challenge with friends and most difficult with strangers, especially large groups of strangers: “If they were strangers, I don’t know if I have the right to say anything.” They sometimes feared reprisals and physical violence from other men, “As men, you are thinking, ‘Dude, am I going to get hit in the face?’”

The frequency with which men intervened in sexist situations ranged from rare to consistent. Exemplifying both ends of the intervention continuum, one man said:

This [intervening] is actually one of the toughest things for me right now, even though I have all this knowledge, and I do feel empowered, it is still really difficult for me to stand up and say stuff. Sometimes it’s really not. Sometimes I will just say it without even thinking.

Consistently the men emphasized how important it was to “stand their ground,” “make their presence known,” and “do something.” The men stated clearly that they learned their intervention skills in the Men’s Project. “I had some of the tools to approach the situation because of the Men’s Project.” The interventions often took the form of reclaiming “coolness,” by telling their peers that their behavior and language were not acceptable.

I would go up to guys and just be like, “You know that’s not cool,” and usually they would just be like, “Well whatever” but they would at least stop. That’s one of the things that [the Men’s Project has] given me, that courage.

For some participants, the interventions became increasingly comfortable:

At first it was kind of tough . . . but it gets easier and easier sort of as the semester went on because it was like, the whole group was sort of growing in that way. It was like I had this support group so even if it was not taken well when I did call somebody out, there was still a group I could go back to and debrief to.

Finally, participants reported noticing sexism even within the Men’s Project, and holding coparticipants accountable for their sexism in and out of the group:
I've noticed [sexism] a lot more with a certain peer in particular... it upsets me that he is part of the Men's Project, and that he will say certain things while we are in our group, but he does not follow through with it when he is outside the group. And so I call him out on it, and he is like, “Ohh, that is not who I really am, I was just joking around.” I was like, “Well, joking matters, you are a part of the Men's Project, you need to really change how you are speaking.”

The Men's Project curriculum empowered participants to employ bystander intervention strategies. Participants noted many barriers to action but most men indicated employing interventions though a wide spectrum of passive and active behaviors that demonstrate particularized progression along Latane and Darley's (1976) stages of bystander behavior.

Implications and Recommendations

Although sexual assault continues to happen on college campuses at alarming rates, male-identified students trained to recognize and intervene in rape-supportive environments will assist in reducing the incidence of sexual violence against all types of people on our campuses. As men challenge their peers, the environment that allows sexual violence to thrive will change, thought the process may be slower than desired.

Results show that when men had a support group, they readily challenged their sexist environment and employed effective bystander intervention strategies. This research demonstrates that participants intervened by reclaiming “cool” as nonhegemonic behaviors, articulating a counterstory to socialized traditional violent masculinity. Results also show that the participants understood the intersections of oppression, and intervened in situations where racial and homophobic slurs were used. By understanding that all oppression stems from fear, participants helped to improve the environment as a whole, reaching beyond addressing only sexism.

In addition to changing the culture that allows sexual violence to thrive, this intervention also creates an opportunity to engage college men, a group for whom a deficiency of specific programmatic efforts currently exists. Many college men are ready and willing to take action to self-reflect on stifling socialization, and to challenge the campus climate that disempowers all students. As one participant in the study articulated, “The 25 guys that were in the group, I think when we want to make a difference as individuals, we definitely can because we have the tools and the resources.”

The third recommendation in Learning Reconsidered involves establishing routine ways to hear student voices (2004). Student affairs professionals should establish routine ways to engage men to speak about issues of gender. When we create nonthreatening single-gendered spaces, men open up and explore gender socialization in meaningful ways that help them to identify pervasive and persuasive messages, leading to a safer and more welcoming environment for all.

Additionally we discovered that women may struggle with how to support men in their lives who are actively engaged in constructing a non-hegemonic masculinity. For this reason, women should be a part of the creation and design of such programs, leading to greater accountability of both men and women to each other in the deconstruction of socialized gender roles. By including multiple people with varying perspectives in the development of such programs, strategies for addressing challenges will be more comprehensive and inclusive, leading to more significant change and longer lasting results.

As student affairs practitioners continue to look for ways to engage college students in
meaningful ways, and reduce the incidence of sexual violence on our campuses, the results of this study should inform their practice, specifically related to college men. Although the intervention described here is not a panacea for ending sexual violence, it plays an important role in the overall culture change required to halt sexual violence on our campuses.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations exist and limit applicability. Research was conducted at one large public research institution in the mountain-West, therefore limiting the generalizability of the findings. Participants in the study were exposed to other campus events and programmatic initiatives, such as campus programs, speakers, and articles in the student newspaper challenging the rape-supportive environment that exists, potentially impacting the assessment data. Finally, the lack of a control group presents a limitation when analyzing participant outcomes.

REFERENCES
