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Rape Myth Acceptance and Willingness to Intervene: A Comparison of Greek-Affiliated and Non-Affiliated College Students by Gender

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Abstract

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

Fraternity and sorority members are overrepresented as perpetrators and victims of sexual assault, respectively. The current study examined rape myth acceptance, bystander attitudes, and bystander efficacy across four groups: sorority women, fraternity men, non-affiliated women, and non-affiliated men. Data were collected from 912 college undergraduates. Greek affiliated students were more accepting of rape myths than non-affiliated students. There were no differences in bystander attitudes based on Greek affiliation; however, Greek affiliated students did report significantly lower bystander efficacy than non-affiliated students. Sorority women and fraternity men reported no differences in their acceptance of rape myths or bystander efficacy; however, sorority women did report higher bystander attitudes than fraternity men. Based on the findings, it is recommended that prevention practitioners work to change norms within fraternities and sororities to promote a social identity that is associated with gender equality and a willingness, perhaps even an obligation, to intervene in risky situations.

Keywords

rape myth acceptance; willingness to intervene; bystander attitudes; gender; sorority women; fraternity men

INTRODUCTION

National studies indicate that approximately 20 – 25% of women will be sexually assaulted during their college years (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Krebs et al., 2009). Amidst growing concerns, President Obama established the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault to develop guidelines for sexual assault prevention and intervention programming at colleges and universities. In its *First Report* (2014), the Task Force identified bystander intervention education as one of the ‘most promising’ strategies in the prevention of sexual assault on college campuses (p. 9).

Rather than focusing on potential victims or perpetrators, bystander intervention education targets individuals (bystanders) who are present before, during, or after a sexual assault (Banyard, 2011; Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Using data from the National Crime Victim Survey, Planty (2002) found that in 66% of situations that ended in sexual assault, witnesses were present who could have intervened. Bystander intervention programs use a community responsibility approach to prevent sexual assault by teaching bystanders a variety of strategies they can use to safely intervene if they are present in risky situations (Banyard, 2011; Banyard et al., 2004).

A growing body of literature indicates that bystander intervention is an effective model in the prevention of sexual assault (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Coker et al., 2011; Moynihan & Banyard, 2008). However, as more college campuses seek to adopt bystander intervention programs, it is increasingly important to research potential barriers to their effectiveness across different demographic groups and institutional

contexts. Given that fraternity and sorority members are overrepresented as perpetrators and victims of sexual assault, respectively (Franklin, 2010; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000; Minow & Einolf, 2009; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996), it is critically important to examine potential barriers to their willingness to intervene.

SEXUAL ASSAULT AND ATTITUDES ABOUT RAPE IN GREEK ORGANIZATIONS

Research indicates that fraternity and sorority members are overrepresented as perpetrators and victims of sexual assault, respectively, on college campuses (Franklin, 2010; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000; Minow & Einolf, 2009; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Norris et al., 1996). Studies have found that fraternity members are significantly more likely than non-members to use sexual assault tactics (e.g., verbal coercion, physical force, and drug and alcohol facilitation) (Lackie & Anton, 1997; Tharp et al., 2013). The association between fraternity membership and sexual perpetration is well documented: a meta-analytic review by Murnen and Kohlman (2007) found a positive association between fraternity membership and self-reported sexual aggression in over 15 studies that surveyed nearly 5,000 individuals.

The increased likelihood of sexual assault perpetration by fraternity members disproportionately impacts sorority women (Franklin, 2010; Minow & Einolf, 2009; Norris, et al., 1996). Studies show that sorority women are between four and five times more likely to be sexually assaulted than non-affiliated women (Franklin, 2010; Minow & Einolf, 2009). One factor that has been examined as a possible explanation for the elevated risk of perpetration and victimization among Greek affiliated

students is their attitudes about rape, including the endorsement of rape myths (Carroll et al., 2016; Bannon, Brosi, & McMahon, 2010).

Rape myths are defined as erroneous stereotypes about sexual assault that blame victims and justify the actions of perpetrators (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Prevalent myths about rape include assumptions that victims are partly responsible for the assault due to their dress or alcohol consumption; that victims often lie about sexual assault because they regret having consensual sex; or that sexual assault is often the result of the perpetrator being intoxicated or having an out of control sex drive (Payne, Lonsway, Fitzgerald, 1999).

Research has consistently shown that fraternity and sorority members are more likely than non-members to report traditional gender role attitudes, which promote a male-dominant, female-submissive model of gender (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Corprew & Mitchell, 2014; Kalof & Cargill, 1991; Robinson, Gibson-Beverly, & Schwartz, 2004), and traditional gender role attitudes have been consistently linked to rape-supportive attitudes (Page, 2008). In a study of incoming freshmen, McMahon (2010) found that while women intending to pledge sororities were less accepting of rape myths than men intending to pledge fraternities, women intending to pledge a sorority were more accepting of rape myths than women not intending to pledge. McMahon (2010) also found that regardless of gender, students who were more accepting of rape myths were significantly less likely to intervene and be an active bystander. Since sorority women are disproportionately at risk for sexual victimization (Franklin, 2010; Minow & Einolf, 2009), it is critically important to examine how their attitudes about rape may be associated with their willingness to

intervene and help a fellow 'sister' who is in a risky situation that could lead to sexual assault.

BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

In an effort to prevent sexual assault, many universities have implemented bystander intervention education on their campuses (Banyard, 2011; Banyard et al., 2004). Bystander intervention programs use a community responsibility approach in the prevention of sexual assault (Banyard, 2011; Banyard et al., 2004). In this model, all students are seen as bystanders who have choices when they are in situations that could escalate to sexual assault. In risky situations, there are a variety of reasons why people may choose not to act (Bennett, Banyard, & Garnhart, 2013; Burn, 2009). Bystander intervention programs discuss the most common reasons why people choose not to intervene, including personal barriers (e.g., shyness), social barriers (e.g., fear of embarrassment), and faulty thinking (e.g., rape myth acceptance), and then provide students with a variety of strategies to overcome those barriers to intervene safely in risky situations (Banyard et al., 2004; Coker et al., 2011; McMahon, 2010). The ultimate goal is to change students' bystander attitudes and increase the likelihood they will become active bystanders in their communities.

Research has shown that peer norms are a powerful predictor of bystander attitudes, with people reporting that they are significantly less likely to intervene if they perceive it would be a violation of their peer norms (Burn, 2009; Fabiano et al., 2003; Latane & Darley, 1968). Research indicates that regardless of gender, individuals are less likely to intervene if they perceive that their peers would not be supportive (Rutkowski, Gruder, & Romer, 1983; Schwartz & Gottlieb, 1980); however, this

effect is particularly pronounced for men. Two studies of college men found that the most significant predictor of their willingness to intervene was their perception of whether or not their peers would be willing to act (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010; Fabiano et al., 2003). So, how do peer norms in Greek organizations impact fraternity men and sorority women's likelihood of intervening?

An extensive review of literature yielded only one article that focused on comparing the bystander attitudes of students in Greek organizations with non-affiliated students. In a study of incoming freshman, McMahon (2010) found that students intending to pledge fraternities and sororities reported significantly lower bystander attitudes than students not intending to pledge. Additionally, McMahon (2010) found that men intending to pledge fraternities reported significantly lower bystander attitudes than women intending to pledge sororities. In contrast, in a study conducted exclusively with students in Greek organizations, Bannon et al. (2013) found no significant difference between the bystander efficacy of fraternity men and sorority women. Therefore, one goal of the current study was to reconcile the conflicting findings between the studies by McMahon (2010) and Bannon et al. (2013) and examine if indeed there are significant differences in bystander attitudes and efficacy between fraternity men and sorority women.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Since fraternity and sorority members are more likely than non-affiliated students to serve as potential bystanders and prevent sexual assault (Franklin, 2010; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000; Minow & Einolf, 2009; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Norris, et al., 1996), it is essential to examine potential

barriers to their willingness to intervene in risky situations where sexual assault may occur. The current study compared rape myth acceptance and willingness to intervene, as measured by bystander attitudes and bystander efficacy, between Greek affiliated and non-affiliated students by gender and focused on the following research questions: (1) Do students in Greek organizations differ from non-affiliated students in their attitudes about rape and their willingness to intervene?; and (2) Do fraternity men differ from sorority women in their attitudes about rape and their willingness to intervene?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited to complete an online survey from a four-year public regional university in the Southeast. Prior to data collection, the university's Institutional Review Board approved all research protocols. The online survey was developed and administered through Qualtrics, which enabled all data to be collected anonymously.

At the end of the survey students were presented with the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of the following prizes: 1 \$50 gift card to the university bookstore; 2 \$25 gift cards to a coffee chain; and 5 \$10 gift cards for university dining.

PARTICIPANTS

Nine-hundred and twelve (912) college undergraduates participated in the survey. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the sample identified as female ($n=570$) and 27% identified as male ($n=214$). From the larger undergraduate sample, 125 students reported that they were members of a social fraternity or sorority. In the male sample, 43

men identified as fraternity members and 171 identified as non-affiliated. In the female sample, 82 women identified as sorority members and 488 identified as non-affiliated. Students in Greek organizations represented approximately 15% of the sample, which is representative of the number of students in Greek organizations at the university. The gender distribution of fraternity and sorority members who participated in the survey was also representative of the distribution on campus, as approximately twice as many women are Greek affiliated at the university than men.

MEASURES

Illinois rape myth acceptance scale-short form

The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance-Short Form (IRMA-SF) scale was the instrument used to assess rape myth acceptance (Payne et al., 1999). The IRMA-SF asks participants to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree (1=strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) with 19 statements. One sample item for the IRMA-SF is: “If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for what happened;” The mean for the IRMA-SF scale was a 2.09 ($SD = .88$) and the alpha coefficient was .95.

Bystander attitudes scale, revised

McMahon, Postmus, and Koenick (2011) developed the Bystander Attitudes Scale, Revised (BAS-R), which is a modified version of Banyard et al. (2007) Bystander Attitudes Scale. The 14-item scale assesses how likely participants are to perform a variety of bystander behaviors on a Likert scale from 1 – 6 (1 = not likely; 6 = extremely likely). One sample item is: “Confront a friend who is hooking up with someone who was passed out.” The mean for the BAS-R was 5.03 ($SD = 1.12$) and the alpha coefficient was .95.

Bystander efficacy scale

The Bystander Efficacy Scale (BES) was developed by Banyard et al. (2007). The BES assesses participants’ efficacy in relation to a variety of bystander behaviors. The scale contains 14 items that asks participants to indicate how confident they were on a scale of 0 – 100 (0 = can’t do; 100 = very certain) that they would engage in a variety of bystander behaviors. One sample item is: “Ask a friend if they need to be walked home from a party.” The mean for the BES was 79.28 ($SD = 18.58$) and the alpha coefficient was .92.

RESULTS

Preliminary tests for normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance-covariance were conducted. The Box’s M value was 54.80 with a p -value of .001, which is significant based on the guideline developed by Huberty and Petoskey (2000) of $p < .005$. Therefore, Pillai’s trace was reported, because it provides the most conservative F statistic and is considered by many statisticians to be the most powerful and robust multivariate test (Carey, 1998; Olson, 1976).

Next, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test for differences between groups across all dependent variables. The present study employed a 2 (Greek affiliation: yes, no) x 2 (gender: male, female) between-subjects factorial design. There were three dependent variables: rape myth acceptance, bystander attitudes, and bystander efficacy.

Gender was a significant predictor in the overall model [Pillai’s trace = .017, $F(3, 568) = 3.33, p = .02$]. Univariate statistics indicated that men ($M = 2.38; SD = .89$) were significantly more accepting of rape myths than women ($M = 2.01; SD = .87$). The effect size was small (Cohen’s $d = .42$) but statistically significant, $F(1, 570) = 6.25$,

$p=.01$. Men and women did not significantly differ in their bystander attitudes or bystander efficacy.

Greek affiliation was a significant predictor in the overall model [Pillai's trace = .013, $F(3, 568) = 2.49, p=.05$]. Univariate statistics indicated that students in Greek organizations ($M=2.31; SD=.95$) were significantly more accepting of rape myths than non-affiliated students ($M=2.06; SD=.87$). The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .27$) but statistically significant, $F(1, 570) = 4.66, p=.03$. Also, students in Greek organizations ($M=75.82; SD=20.09$) reported significantly lower bystander efficacy than non-affiliated students ($M=79.86; SD=17.70$). The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .21$) but statistically significant, $F(1, 570) = 3.87, p=.05$. Students in Greek organizations did not significantly differ from non-affiliated students in their bystander attitudes. See Table 1 for a comparison of the univariate

statistics for Greek affiliated and non-affiliated students on the three dependent variables.

There was a significant interaction between gender and Greek affiliation in the overall model [Pillai's trace = .017, $F(3, 568) = 3.20, p=.007$]. Univariate statistics indicated that sorority women ($M=4.83; SD=1.24$) reported significantly higher bystander attitudes than fraternity men ($M=4.71; SD=1.38$). The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .10$) but statistically significant, $F(1, 570) = 6.90, p=.009$. Sorority women did not significantly differ from fraternity men in their rape myth attitudes or bystander efficacy. See Table 2 for a comparison of the univariate statistics for sorority women and fraternity men on the three dependent variables. See Table 3 for the means and standard deviations on all dependent variables across all four groups: sorority women, fraternity men, non-affiliated women and non-affiliated men.

Table 1. Univariate Statistics Comparing Greeks vs. Non-Affiliated Students on Rape Myth Acceptance, Bystander Attitudes, and Bystander Efficacy.

Variable	Greeks		Non-affiliated		Cohen's d	p value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Rape Myth Acceptance	2.31	.95	2.06	.87	.27	*
Bystander Attitudes	4.79	1.29	5.06	1.07	--	--
Bystander Efficacy	75.82	20.09	79.86	17.70	.21	*

* $p<.05$

Table 2. Univariate Statistics Comparing Sorority Women vs. Fraternity Men on Rape Myth Acceptance, Bystander Attitudes, and Bystander Efficacy.

Variable	Sorority Women		Fraternity Men		Cohen's d	p value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Rape Myth Acceptance	2.12	.83	2.65	1.05	--	--
Bystander Attitudes	4.83	1.24	4.71	1.38	.10	**
Bystander Efficacy	75.23	20.01	76.92	20.49	--	--

** $p<.01$

Table 3. Comparison of the Means of Greek-Affiliated and Non-Affiliated Women and Men on Rape Myth Acceptance, Bystander Attitudes, and Bystander Efficacy.

Variable	Sorority Women	Non-Affiliated Women	Fraternity Men	Non-Affiliated Men
	$M (SD)$	$M (SD)$	$M (SD)$	$M (SD)$
Rape Myth Acceptance	2.12 (.83)	2.00 (.88)	2.65 (1.05)	2.26 (.81)
Bystander Attitudes	4.83 (1.24)	5.18 (.99)	4.71 (1.38)	4.69 (1.22)
Bystander Efficacy	75.23 (20.01)	79.85 (17.54)	76.92 (20.49)	79.88 (18.38)

Note. The Rape Myth Acceptance scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Bystander Attitudes Scale ranges from 1 (not likely) to 6 (extremely likely). The Bystander Efficacy Scale ranges from 0

DISCUSSION

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GREEK-AFFILIATED AND NON-AFFILIATED STUDENTS

Students in Greek organizations were significantly more accepting of rape myths than non-affiliated students, which is consistent with the findings of McMahon (2010) where she found that students intending to pledge sororities and fraternities were more accepting of rape myths than students not intending to pledge. For a possible explanation of the findings, it is important to consider peer norms within the subculture of Greek organizations. Fraternity and sorority members are more likely than non-affiliated students to report traditional gender attitudes (Kalof & Cargill, 1991; Risman, 1982). It is unclear if college students who hold traditional gender attitudes are more attracted to Greek organizations (self-selection) or if they are socialized to adopt these attitudes once they join them (assimilation) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, it is clear that traditional gender attitudes create a culture that make men more likely to engage in sexually aggressive behaviors (Swartout, 2013; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015) and make women more vulnerable to sexual assault (Franklin, 2010).

The current study found no differences in bystander attitudes based on Greek affiliation, which conflicts with the findings from McMahon's (2010) study where she found that students intending to pledge sororities and fraternities reported lower bystander attitudes than students not intending to pledge. However, in the current study, students in Greek organizations did report significantly lower bystander efficacy than non-affiliated students. For an explanation as to why fraternity and sorority members reported significantly lower

bystander efficacy than non-affiliated students, it may be relevant to consider how common barriers to intervention are uniquely experienced within the Greek community.

A sense of belonging is a primary motivator for joining social fraternities and sororities (Jackson & Winkler, 1964). In any situation requiring action, members observe one another to see if they will act, and they are aware that others are watching them (Latane & Darley, 1968). If they believe that intervening would violate larger group norms of protecting the 'brotherhood' (Kalof & Cargill, 1991), then they risk rejection from their peers. Therefore, even though they may want to help a potential victim, they may consider it too costly to intervene.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SORORITY AND FRATERNITY MEMBERS

A particularly interesting finding from the current study was that there was no difference in the acceptance of rape myths between sorority women and fraternity men in the current sample, which conflicts with the findings from Bannon et al. (2013) and McMahon (2010). One potential explanation for the lack of differences in attitudes toward rape between sorority women and fraternity men in the current study may be due to regional differences. The sample in the current study was recruited from a four-year public regional university located in the Southeast region of the United States. Southerners are more likely to report conservative values than individuals from other regions of the United States (Abrahamson & Carter, 1986; Carter & Borch, 2005). This includes an increased likelihood to endorse traditional gender role attitudes (Donnelly et al., 2015; Hurlbert, 1989), which have been consistently linked

to rape-supportive attitudes (Page, 2008). Therefore, the lack of differences between the acceptance of rape myths between sorority women and fraternity men in the current study may be due to increased conservatism found in the Southern region of the U.S.; however, more research is warranted.

One of the goals of the current study was to reconcile the conflicting findings between the studies by McMahon (2010) and Bannon et al. (2013) and examine if indeed there are significant differences in bystander attitudes and efficacy between fraternity men and sorority women. Previously, using the Bystanders Attitudes Scale – Revised, McMahon (2010) found that men intending to pledge fraternities reported significantly lower bystander attitudes than women intending to pledge sororities. In contrast, using the Bystander Efficacy Scale, Bannon et al. (2013) found no significant difference between the bystander efficacy of fraternity men and sorority women.

In order to determine if the inconsistencies in their findings were due to differences in measurement, the current study included one measure from each study: the Bystander Attitudes Scale, Revised and the Bystander Efficacy Scale. Consistent with the findings of McMahon (2010), the current study found that sorority women did report significantly higher bystander attitudes than fraternity men. Also, consistent with the findings of Bannon et al. (2013), the current study found no differences in the bystander efficacy between fraternity and sorority members. It is surprising that the findings were not more similar across the measures of bystander attitudes and bystander efficacy and points to the need for more research on measurement.

The finding from the current study that sorority women reported significantly

higher bystander attitudes than fraternity men is particularly interesting when put in the context of another finding from the study, that sorority women and fraternity men did not report differences in their acceptance of rape myths. This contradicts McMahon's (2010) findings that acceptance of rape myths was negatively associated with bystander attitudes. Again, one possible explanation for the findings could be regional differences. Norms and etiquette for Southern women dictate a projection of oneself as friendly and accommodating (Dillman, 1988; Lynxwiler & Wilson, 1988). Therefore, even if sorority women and fraternity men in our sample were no different in their acceptance of rape myths, the sorority women may have reported that they were more willing to intervene than fraternity men because it aligns with the social expectation for women to appear helpful and considerate (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Since findings from the current study contradict previous research on rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes in Greek organizations (Bannon et al., 2013; McMahon, 2010), further research is warranted about the possible impact of region on these constructs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As with all studies, there were limitations in the current investigation. Data were only collected at one point in time. Therefore, the association between the variables is correlational and causality cannot be established. It is recommended that future studies collect longitudinal data in order to determine the direction of effects. Another limitation was that participants in the present study were primarily female in both the overall sample (73%) and the sub-sample of students in Greek organizations (65%), which may have influenced the

findings. Finally, the data consisted of participants from one regional institution in the Southeast. Further replication is recommended across larger, gender-balanced, diverse samples from multiple regions across the U.S.

CONCLUSION

Prevention practitioners who work with fraternities and sororities may consider confronting the unique challenges presented by Greek organizations by utilizing their strengths. Fraternities and sororities require strict adherence to their community norms (Corprew & Mitchell, 2014; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000). If the community norms within fraternities and sororities could be changed to promote a social identity that is associated with gender equality and a willingness, perhaps even an obligation, to intervene and assist 'sisters' or 'brothers' in risky situations, there may be a significant reduction in sexual assault within the Greek community.

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