

Sexual Assault on Campus: A Multilevel, Integrative Approach to Party Rape

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This article explains why rates of sexual assault remain high on college campuses. Data are from a study of college life at a large midwestern university involving nine months of ethnographic observation of a women's floor in a "party dorm," in-depth interviews with 42 of the floor residents, and 16 group interviews with other students. We show that sexual assault is a predictable outcome of a synergistic intersection of processes operating at individual, organizational, and interactional levels. Some processes are explicitly gendered, while others appear to be gender neutral. We discuss student homogeneity, expectations that partiers drink heavily and trust their party-mates, and residential arrangements. We explain how these factors intersect with more obviously gendered processes such as gender differences in sexual agendas, fraternity control of parties, and expectations that women be nice and defer to men. We show that partying produces fun as well as sexual assault, generating student resistance to criticizing the party scene or men's behavior in it. We conclude with implications for policy. Keywords: sexual assault, party rape, college students, peer culture, gender inequality.

A 1997 National Institute of Justice study estimated that between one-fifth and one-quarter of women are the victims of completed or attempted rape while in college (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000).¹ College women "are at greater risk for rape and other forms of sexual assault than women in the general population or in a comparable age group" (Fisher et al. 2000:iii).² At least half and perhaps as many as three-quarters of the sexual assaults that occur on college campuses involve alcohol consumption on the part of the victim, the perpetrator, or both (Abbey et al. 1996; Sampson 2002). The tight link between alcohol and sexual assault suggests that many sexual assaults that occur on college campuses are "party rapes."³ A recent report by the U.S. Department of Justice defines party rape as a distinct form of rape,

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1. Other studies have found similar rates of college sexual assault (Abbey et al. 1996; Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004; Copenhaver and Grauerholz 1991; DeKeseredy and Kelly 1993; Fisher et al. 1998; Humphrey and White 2000; Koss 1988; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987; Mills and Granoff 1992; Muehlenhard and Linton 1987; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000; Ward et al. 1991).

2. While assaults within gender and by women occur, the vast majority involve men assaulting women.

3. Other forms of acquaintance rape include date rape, rape in a non-party/non-date situation, and rape by a former or current intimate (Sampson 2002).

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one that “occurs at an off-campus house or on- or off-campus fraternity and involves . . . plying a woman with alcohol or targeting an intoxicated woman” (Sampson 2002:6).⁴ While party rape is classified as a form of acquaintance rape, it is not uncommon for the woman to have had no prior interaction with the assailant, that is, for the assailant to be an in-network stranger (Abbey et al. 1996).

Colleges and universities have been aware of the problem of sexual assault for at least 20 years, directing resources toward prevention and providing services to students who have been sexually assaulted. Programming has included education of various kinds, support for *Take Back the Night* events, distribution of rape whistles, development and staffing of hotlines, training of police and administrators, and other efforts. Rates of sexual assault, however, have not declined over the last five decades (Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004:95; Bachar and Koss 2001; Marine 2004; Sampson 2002:1).

Why do colleges and universities remain dangerous places for women in spite of active efforts to prevent sexual assault? While some argue that “we know what the problems are and we know how to change them” (Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004:115), it is our contention that we do not have a complete explanation of the problem. To address this issue we use data from a study of college life at a large midwestern university and draw on theoretical developments in the sociology of gender (Connell 1987, 1995; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 1998, 2004). Continued high rates of sexual assault can be viewed as a case of the reproduction of gender inequality—a phenomenon of central concern in gender theory.

We demonstrate that sexual assault is a predictable outcome of a synergistic intersection of both gendered and seemingly gender neutral processes operating at individual, organizational, and interactional levels. The concentration of homogenous students with expectations of partying fosters the development of sexualized peer cultures organized around status. Residential arrangements intensify students’ desires to party in male-controlled fraternities. Cultural expectations that partygoers drink heavily and trust party-mates become problematic when combined with expectations that women be nice and defer to men. Fulfilling the role of the *partier* produces vulnerability on the part of women, which some men exploit to extract non-consensual sex. The party scene also produces fun, generating student investment in it. Rather than criticizing the party scene or men’s behavior, students blame victims. By revealing mechanisms that lead to the persistence of sexual assault and outlining implications for policy, we hope to encourage colleges and universities to develop fresh approaches to sexual assault prevention.

Approaches to College Sexual Assault

Explanations of high rates of sexual assault on college campuses fall into three broad categories. The first tradition, a psychological approach that we label the “individual determinants” approach, views college sexual assault as primarily a consequence of perpetrator or victim characteristics such as gender role attitudes, personality, family background, or sexual history (Flezzani and Benshoff 2003; Forbes and Adams-Curtis 2001; Rapaport and Burkhart 1984). While “situational variables” are considered, the focus is on individual characteristics (Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004; Malamuth, Heavey, and Linz 1993). For example, Antonia Abbey and associates (2001) find that hostility toward women, acceptance of verbal pressure as a way to obtain sex, and having many consensual sexual partners distinguish men who sexually assault from men who do not. Research suggests that victims appear quite similar to other college women (Kalof 2000), except that white women, prior victims, first-year college

4. On party rape as a distinct type of sexual assault, see also Ward and associates (1991). Ehrhart and Sandler (1987) use the term to refer to group rape. We use the term to refer to one-on-one assaults. We encountered no reports of group sexual assault.

students, and more sexually active women are more vulnerable to sexual assault (Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004; Humphrey and White 2000).

The second perspective, the “rape culture” approach, grew out of second wave feminism (Brownmiller 1975; Buchward, Fletcher, and Roth 1993; Lottes 1997; Russell 1975; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997). In this perspective, sexual assault is seen as a consequence of widespread belief in “rape myths,” or ideas about the nature of men, women, sexuality, and consent that create an environment conducive to rape. For example, men’s disrespectful treatment of women is normalized by the idea that men are naturally sexually aggressive. Similarly, the belief that women “ask for it” shifts responsibility from predators to victims (Herman 1989; O’Sullivan 1993). This perspective initiated an important shift away from individual beliefs toward the broader context. However, rape supportive beliefs alone cannot explain the prevalence of sexual assault, which requires not only an inclination on the part of assailants but also physical proximity to victims (Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004:103).

A third approach moves beyond rape culture by identifying particular contexts—fraternities and bars—as sexually dangerous (Humphrey and Kahn 2000; Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990, 1996; Stomblor 1994). Ayres Boswell and Joan Spade (1996) suggest that sexual assault is supported not only by “a generic culture surrounding and promoting rape,” but also by characteristics of the “specific settings” in which men and women interact (p. 133). Mindy Stomblor and Patricia Yancey Martin (1994) illustrate that gender inequality is institutionalized on campus by “formal structure” that supports and intensifies an already “high-pressure heterosexual peer group” (p. 180). This perspective grounds sexual assault in organizations that provide opportunities and resources.

We extend this third approach by linking it to recent theoretical scholarship in the sociology of gender. Martin (2004), Barbara Risman (1998; 2004), Judith Lorber (1994) and others argue that gender is not only embedded in individual selves, but also in cultural rules, social interaction, and organizational arrangements. This integrative perspective identifies mechanisms at each level that contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality (Risman 2004). Socialization processes influence gendered selves, while cultural expectations reproduce gender inequality in interaction. At the institutional level, organizational practices, rules, resource distributions, and ideologies reproduce gender inequality. Applying this integrative perspective enabled us to identify gendered processes at individual, interactional, and organizational levels that contribute to college sexual assault.

Risman (1998) also argues that gender inequality is reproduced when the various levels are “all consistent and interdependent” (p. 35). Processes at each level depend upon processes at other levels. Below we demonstrate how interactional processes generating sexual danger depend upon organizational resources and particular kinds of selves. We show that sexual assault results from the intersection of processes at all levels.

We also find that not all of the processes contributing to sexual assault are explicitly gendered. For example, characteristics of individuals such as age, class, and concern with status play a role. Organizational practices such as residence hall assignments and alcohol regulation, both intended to be gender neutral, also contribute to sexual danger. Our findings suggest that apparently gender neutral social processes may contribute to gender inequality in other situations.

Method

Data are from group and individual interviews, ethnographic observation, and publicly available information collected at a large midwestern research university. Located in a small city, the school has strong academic and sports programs, a large Greek system, and is sought after by students seeking a quintessential college experience. Like other schools, this school has had legal problems as a result of deaths associated with drinking. In the last few years,

students have attended a sexual assault workshop during first-year orientation. Health and sexuality educators conduct frequent workshops, student volunteers conduct rape awareness programs, and *Take Back the Night* marches occur annually.

The bulk of the data presented in this paper were collected as part of ethnographic observation during the 2004–05 academic year in a residence hall identified by students and residence hall staff as a “party dorm.” While little partying actually occurs in the hall, many students view this residence hall as one of several places to live in order to participate in the party scene on campus. This made it a good place to study the social worlds of students at high risk of sexual assault—women attending fraternity parties in their first year of college. The authors and a research team were assigned to a room on a floor occupied by 55 women students (51 first-year, 2 second-year, 1 senior, and 1 resident assistant [RA]). We observed on evenings and weekends throughout the entire academic school year. We collected in-depth background information via a detailed nine-page survey that 23 women completed and conducted interviews with 42 of the women (ranging from 1 ¼ to 2 ½ hours). All but seven of the women on the floor completed either a survey or an interview.

With at least one-third of first-year students on campus residing in “party dorms” and one-quarter of all undergraduates belonging to fraternities or sororities, this social world is the most visible on campus. As the most visible scene on campus, it also attracts students living in other residence halls and those not in the Greek system. Dense pre-college ties among the many in-state students, class and race homogeneity, and a small city location also contribute to the dominance of this scene. Of course, not all students on this floor or at this university participate in the party scene. To participate, one must typically be heterosexual, at least middle class, white, American-born, unmarried, childless, traditional college age, politically and socially mainstream, and interested in drinking. Over three-quarters of the women on the floor we observed fit this description.

There were no non-white students among the first and second year students on the floor we studied. This is a result of the homogeneity of this campus and racial segregation in social and residential life. African Americans (who make up 3 to 5% of undergraduates) generally live in living-learning communities in other residence halls and typically do not participate in the white Greek party scene. We argue that the party scene’s homogeneity contributes to sexual risk for white women. We lack the space and the data to compare white and African American party scenes on this campus, but in the discussion we offer ideas about what such a comparison might reveal.

We also conducted 16 group interviews (involving 24 men and 63 women) in spring 2004. These individuals had varying relationships to the white Greek party scene on campus. Groups included residents of an alternative residence hall, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, feminists, re-entry students, academically-focused students, fundamentalist Christians, and sorority women. Eight group interviews were exclusively women, five were mixed in gender composition, and three were exclusively men. The group interviews covered a variety of topics, including discussions of social life, the transition to college, sexual assault, relationships, and the relationship between academic and social life. Participants completed a shorter version of the survey administered to the women on the residence hall floor. From these students we developed an understanding of the dominance of this party scene.

We also incorporated publicly available information about the university from informal interviews with student affairs professionals and from teaching (by all authors) courses on gender, sexuality, and introductory sociology. Classroom data were collected through discussion, student writings, e-mail correspondence, and a survey that included questions about experiences of sexual assault.

Unless stated otherwise, all descriptions and interview quotations are from ethnographic observation or interviews. Passages in quotation marks are direct quotations from interviews or field notes. Study participants served as informants about venues where we could not observe (such as fraternity parties).

Explaining Party Rape

We show how gendered selves, organizational arrangements, and interactional expectations contribute to sexual assault. We also detail the contributions of processes at each level that are not explicitly gendered. We focus on each level in turn, while attending to the ways in which processes at all levels depend upon and reinforce others. We show that fun is produced along with sexual assault, leading students to resist criticism of the party scene.

Selves and Peer Culture in the Transition from High School to College

Student characteristics shape not only individual participation in dangerous party scenes and sexual risk within them but the development of these party scenes.⁵ We identify individual characteristics (other than gender) that generate interest in college partying and discuss the ways in which gendered sexual agendas generate a peer culture characterized by high-stakes competition over erotic status.

Non-Gendered Characteristics Motivate Participation in Party Scenes. Without individuals available for partying, the party scene would not exist. All the women on our floor were single and childless, as are the vast majority of undergraduates at this university; many, being upper-middle class, had few responsibilities other than their schoolwork. Abundant leisure time, however, is not enough to fuel the party scene. Media, siblings, peers, and parents all serve as sources of anticipatory socialization (Merton 1957). Both partiers and non-partiers agreed that one was “supposed” to party in college. This orientation was reflected in the popularity of a poster titled “What I Really Learned in School” that pictured mixed drinks with names associated with academic disciplines. As one focus group participant explained:

You see these images of college that you’re supposed to go out and have fun and drink, drink lots, party and meet guys. [You are] supposed to hook up with guys, and both men and women try to live up to that. I think a lot of it is girls want to be accepted into their groups and guys want to be accepted into their groups.

Partying is seen as a way to feel a part of college life. Many of the women we observed participated in middle and high school peer cultures organized around status, belonging, and popularity (Eder 1985; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Milner 2004). Assuming that college would be similar, they told us that they wanted to fit in, be popular, and have friends. Even on move-in day, they were supposed to already have friends. When we asked one of the outsiders, Ruth, about her first impression of her roommate, she replied that she found her:

Extremely intimidating. Bethany already knew hundreds of people here. Her cell phone was going off from day one, like all the time. And I was too shy to ask anyone to go to dinner with me or lunch with me or anything. I ate while I did homework.

Bethany complained to the RA on move-in day that she did not want to be roommates with Ruth because she was weird. A group of women on the floor—including Bethany, but not Ruth—began partying together and formed a tight friendship group. Ruth noted: “There is a group on the side of the hall that goes to dinner together, parties together, my roommate included. I have never hung out with them once . . . And, yeah, it kind of sucks.” Bethany moved out of the room at the end of the semester, leaving Ruth isolated.

Peer Culture as Gendered and Sexualized. Partying was also the primary way to meet men on campus.⁶ The floor was locked to non-residents, and even men living in the same residence

5. Researchers often restrict their interest to characteristics that explain variation in the risk of perpetrating sexual assault or being victimized while taking for granted the existence of sexually risky social scenes.

6. This is consistent with Boswell and Spade’s (1996) finding that women participate in dangerous party scenes because of a lack of “other means to initiate contact with men on campus” (p. 145).

hall had to be escorted on the floor. The women found it difficult to get to know men in their classes, which were mostly mass lectures. They explained to us that people “don’t talk” in class. Some complained they lacked casual friendly contact with men, particularly compared to the mixed-gender friendship groups they reported experiencing in high school.

Meeting men at parties was important to most of the women on our floor. The women found men’s sexual interest at parties to be a source of self-esteem and status.⁷ They enjoyed dancing and kissing at parties, explaining to us that it proved men “liked” them. This attention was not automatic, but required the skillful deployment of physical and cultural assets (Stomblor and Padavic 1997; Swidler 2001). Most of the party-oriented women on the floor arrived with appropriate gender presentations and the money and know-how to preserve and refine them. While some more closely resembled the “ideal” college party girl (white, even features, thin but busty, tan, long straight hair, skillfully made-up, and well-dressed in the latest youth styles), most worked hard to attain this presentation. They regularly straightened their hair, tanned, exercised, dieted, and purchased new clothes.

Women found that achieving high erotic status in the party scene required looking “hot” but not “slutty,” a difficult and ongoing challenge (West and Zimmerman 1987). Mastering these distinctions allowed them to establish themselves as “classy” in contrast to other women (Handler 1995; Stomblor 1994). Although women judged other women’s appearance, men were the most important audience. A “hot” outfit could earn attention from desirable men in the party scene. A failed outfit, as some of our women learned, could earn scorn from men. One woman reported showing up to a party dressed in a knee length skirt and blouse only to find that she needed to show more skin. A male guest sarcastically told her “nice outfit,” accompanied by a thumbs-up gesture.

The psychological benefits of admiration from men in the party scene were such that women in relationships sometimes felt deprived. One woman with a serious boyfriend noted that she dressed more conservatively at parties because of him, but this meant she was not “going to get any of the attention.” She lamented that no one was “going to waste their time with me” and that, “this is taking away from my confidence.” Like most women who came to college with boyfriends, she soon broke up with him.

Men also sought proof of their erotic appeal. As a woman complained, “Every man I have met here has wanted to have sex with me!” Another interviewee reported that: this guy that I was talking to for like ten/fifteen minutes says, “Could you, um, come to the bathroom with me and jerk me off?” And I’m like, “What!” I’m like, “Okay, like, I’ve known you for like, fifteen minutes, but no.” The women found that men were more interested than they were in having sex. These clashes in sexual expectations are not surprising: men derived status from securing sex (from high-status women), while women derived status from getting attention (from high-status men). These agendas are both complementary and adversarial: men give attention to women en route to getting sex, and women are unlikely to become interested in sex without getting attention first.

University and Greek Rules, Resources, and Procedures

Simply by congregating similar individuals, universities make possible heterosexual peer cultures. The university, the Greek system, and other related organizations structure student life through rules, distribution of resources, and procedures (Risman 2004).

Sexual danger is an unintended consequence of many university practices intended to be gender neutral. The clustering of homogeneous students intensifies the dynamics of student peer

7. See also Stomblor and Martin (1994). Holland and Eisenhart (1990) discuss a “culture of romance” in which women derive status from boyfriends. Among the first-year women we observed, status revolved more around getting male attention than male commitment. Focus group interviews with junior and senior sorority women suggest that acquiring high-status fraternity men as boyfriends occurs after women are integrated into Greek life.

cultures and heightens motivations to party. Characteristics of residence halls and how they are regulated push student partying into bars, off-campus residences, and fraternities. While factors that increase the risk of party rape are present in varying degrees in all party venues (Boswell and Spade 1996), we focus on fraternity parties because they were the typical party venue for the women we observed and have been identified as particularly unsafe (see also Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990). Fraternities offer the most reliable and private source of alcohol for first-year students excluded from bars and house parties because of age and social networks.

University Practices as Push Factors. The university has latitude in how it enforces state drinking laws. Enforcement is particularly rigorous in residence halls. We observed RAs and police officers (including gun-carrying peer police) patrolling the halls for alcohol violations. Women on our floor were “documented” within the first week of school for infractions they felt were minor. Sanctions are severe—a \$300 fine, an 8-hour alcohol class, and probation for a year. As a consequence, students engaged in only minimal, clandestine alcohol consumption in their rooms. In comparison, alcohol flows freely at fraternities.

The lack of comfortable public space for informal socializing in the residence hall also serves as a push factor. A large central bathroom divided our floor. A sterile lounge was rarely used for socializing. There was no cafeteria, only a convenience store and a snack bar in a cavernous room furnished with big-screen televisions. Residence life sponsored alternatives to the party scene such as “movie night” and special dinners, but these typically occurred early in the evening. Students defined the few activities sponsored during party hours (e.g., a midnight trip to Wal-Mart) as uncool.

Intensifying Peer Dynamics. The residence halls near athletic facilities and Greek houses are known by students to house affluent, party-oriented students. White, upper-middle class, first-year students who plan to rush request these residence halls, while others avoid them. One of our residents explained that “everyone knows what [the residence hall] is like and people are dying to get in here. People just think it’s a total party or something.” Students of color tend to live elsewhere on campus. As a consequence, our floor was homogenous in terms of age, race, sexual orientation, class, and appearance. Two women identified as lesbian; one moved within the first few weeks. The few women from less privileged backgrounds were socially invisible.

The homogeneity of the floor intensified social anxiety, heightening the importance of partying for making friends. Early in the year, the anxiety was palpable on weekend nights as women assessed their social options by asking where people were going, when, and with whom. One exhausted floor resident told us she felt that she “needed to” go out to protect her position in a friendship group. At the beginning of the semester, “going out” on weekends was virtually compulsory. By 11 p.m. the floor was nearly deserted.

Male Control of Fraternity Parties. The campus Greek system cannot operate without university consent. The university lists Greek organizations as student clubs, devotes professional staff to Greek-oriented programming, and disbands fraternities that violate university policy. Nonetheless, the university lacks full authority over fraternities; Greek houses are privately owned and chapters answer to national organizations and the Interfraternity Council (IFC) (i.e., a body governing the more than 20 predominantly white fraternities).

Fraternities control every aspect of parties at their houses: themes, music, transportation, admission, access to alcohol, and movement of guests. Party themes usually require women to wear scant, sexy clothing and place women in subordinate positions to men. During our observation period, women attended parties such as “Pimps and Hos,” “Victoria’s Secret,” and “Playboy Mansion”—the last of which required fraternity members to escort two scantily-clad dates. Other recent themes included: “CEO/Secretary Ho,” “School Teacher/Sexy Student,” and “Golf Pro/Tennis Ho.”

Some fraternities require pledges to transport first-year students, primarily women, from the residence halls to the fraternity houses. From about 9 to 11 p.m. on weekend nights early in the year, the drive in front of the residence hall resembled a rowdy taxi-stand, as dressed-to-impress women waited to be carpooled to parties in expensive late-model vehicles. By allowing party-oriented first-year women to cluster in particular residence halls, the university made them easy to find. One fraternity member told us this practice was referred to as “dorm-storming.”

Transportation home was an uncertainty. Women sometimes called cabs, caught the “drunk bus,” or trudged home in stilettos. Two women indignantly described a situation where fraternity men “wouldn’t give us a ride home.” The women said, “Well, let us call a cab.” The men discouraged them from calling the cab and eventually found a designated driver. The women described the men as “just dicks” and as “rude.”

Fraternities police the door of their parties, allowing in desirable guests (first-year women) and turning away others (unaffiliated men). Women told us of abandoning parties when male friends were not admitted. They explained that fraternity men also controlled the quality and quantity of alcohol. Brothers served themselves first, then personal guests, and then other women. Non-affiliated and unfamiliar men were served last, and generally had access to only the least desirable beverages. The promise of more or better alcohol was often used to lure women into private spaces of the fraternities.

Fraternities are constrained, though, by the necessity of attracting women to their parties. Fraternities with reputations for sexual disrespect have more success recruiting women to parties early in the year. One visit was enough for some of the women. A roommate duo told of a house they “liked at first” until they discovered that the men there were “really not nice.”

The Production of Fun and Sexual Assault in Interaction

Peer culture and organizational arrangements set up risky partying conditions, but do not explain *how* student interactions at parties generate sexual assault. At the interactional level we see the mechanisms through which sexual assault is produced. As interactions necessarily involve individuals with particular characteristics and occur in specific organizational settings, all three levels meet when interactions take place. Here, gendered and gender neutral expectations and routines are intricately woven together to create party rape. Party rape is the result of fun situations that shift—either gradually or quite suddenly—into coercive situations. Demonstrating how the production of fun is connected with sexual assault requires describing the interactional routines and expectations that enable men to employ coercive sexual strategies with little risk of consequence.

College partying involves predictable activities in a predictable order (e.g., getting ready, pre-gaming,⁸ getting to the party, getting drunk, flirtation or sexual interaction, getting home, and sharing stories). It is characterized by “shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation”—what Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003) call “group style” (p. 737). A fun partier throws him or herself into the event, drinks, displays an upbeat mood, and evokes revelry in others. Partiers are expected to like and trust party-mates. Norms of civil interaction curtail displays of unhappiness or tension among partygoers. Michael Schwalbe and associates (2000) observed that groups engage in scripted events of this sort “to bring about an intended emotional result” (p. 438). Drinking assists people in transitioning from everyday life to a state of euphoria.

Cultural expectations of partying are gendered. Women are supposed to wear revealing outfits, while men typically are not. As guests, women cede control of turf, transportation, and liquor. Women are also expected to be grateful for men’s hospitality, and as others have noted, to generally be “nice” in ways that men are not (Gilligan 1982; Martin 2003; Phillips 2000;

8. Pre-gaming involved the clandestine consumption of alcohol—often hard liquor—before arriving at the party.

Stomblor and Martin 1994; Tolman 2002). The pressure to be deferential and gracious may be intensified by men's older age and fraternity membership.⁹ The quandary for women, however, is that fulfilling the gendered role of *partier* makes them vulnerable to sexual assault.

Women's vulnerability produces sexual assault only if men exploit it. Too many men are willing to do so. Many college men attend parties looking for casual sex. A student in one of our classes explained that "guys are willing to do damn near anything to get a piece of ass." A male student wrote the following description of parties at his (non-fraternity) house:

Girls are continually fed drinks of alcohol. It's mainly to party but my roomies are also aware of the inhibition-lowering effects. I've seen an old roomie block doors when girls want to leave his room; and other times I've driven women home who can't remember much of an evening yet sex did occur. Rarely if ever has a night of drinking for my roommate ended without sex. I know it isn't necessarily and assuredly sexual assault, but with the amount of liquor in the house I question the amount of consent a lot.

Another student—after deactivating—wrote about a fraternity brother "telling us all at the chapter meeting about how he took this girl home and she was obviously too drunk to function and he took her inside and had sex with her." Getting women drunk, blocking doors, and controlling transportation are common ways men try to prevent women from leaving sexual situations. Rape culture beliefs, such as the belief that men are "naturally" sexually aggressive, normalize these coercive strategies. Assigning women the role of sexual "gatekeeper" relieves men from responsibility for obtaining authentic consent, and enables them to view sex obtained by undermining women's ability to resist it as "consensual" (e.g., by getting women so drunk that they pass out).¹⁰

In a focus group with her sorority sisters, a junior sorority woman provided an example of a partying situation that devolved into a likely sexual assault.

Anna: It kind of happened to me freshman year. I'm not positive about what happened, that's the worst part about it. I drank too much at a frat one night, I blacked out and I woke up the next morning with nothing on in their cold dorms, so I don't really know what happened and the guy wasn't in the bed anymore, I don't even think I could tell you who the hell he was, no I couldn't.

Sarah: Did you go to the hospital?

Anna: No, I didn't know what happened. I was scared and wanted to get the hell out of there. I didn't know who it was, so how am I supposed to go to the hospital and say someone might've raped me? It could have been any one of the hundred guys that lived in the house.

Sarah: It happens to so many people, it would shock you. Three of my best friends in the whole world, people that you like would think it would never happen to, it happened to. It's just so hard because you don't know how to deal with it because you don't want to turn in a frat because all hundred of those brothers . . .

Anna: I was also thinking like, you know, I just got to school, I don't want to start off on a bad note with anyone, and now it happened so long ago, it's just one of those things that I kind of have to live with.

This woman's confusion demonstrates the usefulness of alcohol as a weapon: her intoxication undermined her ability to resist sex, her clarity about what happened, and her feelings of entitlement to report it (Adams-Curtis and Forbes 2004; Martin and Hummer 1989).

9. Stomblor and Martin (1994:156) found that fraternity men demanded "niceness" from women with whom they partied. They selected "little sisters" on the basis of physical beauty and "charm, friendliness, and outgoingness."

10. In ongoing research on college men and sexuality, Sweeney (2004) and Rosow and Ray (2006) have found wide variation in beliefs about acceptable ways to obtain sex even among men who belong to the same fraternities. Rosow and Ray found that fraternity men in the most elite houses view sex with intoxicated women as low status and claim to avoid it.

We collected other narratives in which sexual assault or probable sexual assault occurred when the woman was asleep, comatose, drugged, or otherwise incapacitated.

Amanda, a woman on our floor, provides insight into how men take advantage of women's niceness, gender deference, and unequal control of party resources. Amanda reported meeting a "cute" older guy, Mike, also a student, at a local student bar. She explained that, "At the bar we were kind of making out a little bit and I told him just cause I'm sitting here making out doesn't mean that I want to go home with you, you know?" After Amanda found herself stranded by friends with no cell phone or cab fare, Mike promised that a sober friend of his would drive her home. Once they got in the car Mike's friend refused to take her home and instead dropped her at Mike's place. Amanda's concerns were heightened by the driver's disrespect. "He was like, so are you into ménage à trois?" Amanda reported staying awake all night. She woke Mike early in the morning to take her home. Despite her ordeal, she argued that Mike was "a really nice guy" and exchanged telephone numbers with him.

These men took advantage of Amanda's unwillingness to make a scene. Amanda was one of the most assertive women on our floor. Indeed, her refusal to participate fully in the culture of feminine niceness led her to suffer in the social hierarchy of the floor and on campus. It is unlikely that other women we observed could have been more assertive in this situation. That she was nice to her captor in the morning suggests how much she wanted him to like her and what she was willing to tolerate in order to keep his interest.¹¹

This case also shows that it is not only fraternity parties that are dangerous; men can control party resources and work together to constrain women's behavior while partying in bars and at house parties. What distinguishes fraternity parties is that male dominance of partying there is organized, resourced, and implicitly endorsed by the university. Other party venues are also organized in ways that advantage men.

We heard many stories of negative experiences in the party scene, including at least one account of a sexual assault in every focus group that included heterosexual women. Most women who partied complained about men's efforts to control their movements or pressure them to drink. Two of the women on our floor were sexually assaulted at a fraternity party in the first week of school—one was raped. Later in the semester, another woman on the floor was raped by a friend. A fourth woman on the floor suspects she was drugged; she became disoriented at a fraternity party and was very ill for the next week.

Party rape is accomplished without the use of guns, knives, or fists. It is carried out through the combination of low level forms of coercion—a lot of liquor and persuasion, manipulation of situations so that women cannot leave, and sometimes force (e.g., by blocking a door, or using body weight to make it difficult for a woman to get up). These forms of coercion are made more effective by organizational arrangements that provide men with control over how partying happens and by expectations that women let loose and trust their party-mates. This systematic and effective method of extracting non-consensual sex is largely invisible, which makes it difficult for victims to convince anyone—even themselves—that a crime occurred. Men engage in this behavior with little risk of consequences.

Student Responses and the Resiliency of the Party Scene

The frequency of women's negative experiences in the party scene poses a problem for those students most invested in it. Finding fault with the party scene potentially threatens meaningful identities and lifestyles. The vast majority of heterosexual encounters at parties are fun and consensual. Partying provides a chance to meet new people, experience and display belonging, and to enhance social position. Women on our floor told us that they loved to

11. Holland and Eisenhart (1990) and Stompler (1994) found that male attention is of such high value to some women that they are willing to suffer indignities to receive it.

flirt and be admired, and they displayed pictures on walls, doors, and websites commemorating their fun nights out.

The most common way that students—both women and men—account for the harm that befalls women in the party scene is by blaming victims. By attributing bad experiences to women's "mistakes," students avoid criticizing the party scene or men's behavior within it. Such victim-blaming also allows women to feel that they can control what happens to them. The logic of victim-blaming suggests that sophisticated, smart, careful women are safe from sexual assault. Only "immature," "naïve," or "stupid" women get in trouble. When discussing the sexual assault of a friend, a floor resident explained that:

She somehow got like sexually assaulted . . . by one of our friends' old roommates. All I know is that kid was like bad news to start off with. So, I feel sorry for her but it wasn't much of a surprise for us. He's a shady character.

Another floor resident relayed a sympathetic account of a woman raped at knife point by a stranger in the bushes, but later dismissed party rape as nothing to worry about "'cause I'm not stupid when I'm drunk." Even a feminist focus group participant explained that her friend who was raped "made every single mistake and almost all of them had to do with alcohol. . . . She got ridiculed when she came out and said she was raped." These women contrast "true victims" who are deserving of support with "stupid" women who forfeit sympathy (Phillips 2000). Not only is this response devoid of empathy for other women, but it also leads women to blame themselves when they are victimized (Phillips 2000).

Sexual assault prevention strategies can perpetuate victim-blaming. Instructing women to watch their drinks, stay with friends, and limit alcohol consumption implies that it is women's responsibility to avoid "mistakes" and their fault if they fail. Emphasis on the precautions women should take—particularly if not accompanied by education about how men should change their behavior—may also suggest that it is natural for men to drug women and take advantage of them. Additionally, suggesting that women should watch what they drink, trust party-mates, or spend time alone with men asks them to forgo full engagement in the pleasures of the college party scene.

Victim-blaming also serves as a way for women to construct a sense of status within campus erotic hierarchies. As discussed earlier, women and men acquire erotic status based on how "hot" they are perceived to be. Another aspect of erotic status concerns the amount of sexual respect one receives from men (see Holland and Eisenhart 1990:101). Women can tell themselves that they are safe from sexual assault not only because they are savvy, but because men will recognize that they, unlike other women, are worthy of sexual respect. For example, a focus group of senior women explained that at a small fraternity gathering their friend Amy came out of the bathroom. She was crying and said that a guy "had her by her neck, holding her up, feeling her up from her crotch up to her neck and saying that I should rape you, you are a fucking whore." The woman's friends were appalled, saying, "no one deserves that." On other hand, they explained that: "Amy flaunts herself. She is a whore so, I mean . . ." They implied that if one is a whore, one gets treated like one.¹²

Men accord women varying levels of sexual respect, with lower status women seen as "fair game" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Phillips 2000). On campus the youngest and most anonymous women are most vulnerable. High-status women (i.e., girlfriends of fraternity members) may be less likely victims of party rape.¹³ Sorority women explained that fraternities discourage members from approaching the girlfriends (and ex-girlfriends) of other men

12. Schwalbe and associates (2000) suggest that there are several psychological mechanisms that explain this behavior. *Trading power for patronage* occurs when a subordinate group accepts their status in exchange for compensatory benefits from the dominant group. *Defensive othering* is a process by which some members of a subordinated group seek to maintain status by deflecting stigma to others. Maneuvering to protect or improve individual position within hierarchical classification systems is common; however, these responses support the subordination that makes them necessary.

in the house. Partiers on our floor learned that it was safer to party with men they knew as boyfriends, friends, or brothers of friends. One roommate pair partied exclusively at a fraternity where one of the women knew many men from high school. She explained that “we usually don’t party with people we don’t know that well.” Over the course of the year, women on the floor winnowed their party venues to those fraternity houses where they “knew the guys” and could expect to be treated respectfully.

Opting Out. While many students find the party scene fun, others are more ambivalent. Some attend a few fraternity parties to feel like they have participated in this college tradition. Others opt out of it altogether. On our floor, 44 out of the 51 first-year students (almost 90%) participated in the party scene. Those on the floor who opted out worried about sexual safety and the consequences of engaging in illegal behavior. For example, an interviewee who did not drink was appalled by the fraternity party transport system. She explained that:

All those girls would stand out there and just like, no joke, get into these big black Suburbans driven by frat guys, wearing like seriously no clothes, piled on top of each other. This could be some kidnapper taking you all away to the woods and chopping you up and leaving you there. How dumb can you be?

In her view, drinking around fraternity men was “scary” rather than “fun.”

Her position was unpopular. She, like others who did not party, was an outsider on the floor. Partiers came home loudly in the middle of the night, threw up in the bathrooms, and rollerbladed around the floor. Socially, the others simply did not exist. A few of our “misfits” successfully created social lives outside the floor. The most assertive of the “misfits” figured out the dynamics of the floor in the first weeks and transferred to other residence halls.

However, most students on our floor lacked the identities or network connections necessary for entry into alternative worlds. Life on a large university campus can be overwhelming for first-year students. Those who most needed an alternative to the social world of the party dorm were often ill-equipped to actively seek it out. They either integrated themselves into partying or found themselves alone in their rooms, microwaving frozen dinners and watching television. A Christian focus group participant described life in this residence hall: “When everyone is going out on a Thursday and you are in the room by yourself and there are only two or three other people on the floor, that’s not fun, it’s not the college life that you want.”

Discussion and Implications

We have demonstrated that processes at individual, organizational, and interactional levels contribute to high rates of sexual assault.¹⁴ Some individual level characteristics that shape the likelihood of a sexually dangerous party scene developing are not explicitly gendered. Party rape occurs at high rates in places that cluster young, single, party-oriented people concerned about social status. Traditional beliefs about sexuality also make it more likely that one will participate in the party scene and increase danger within the scene. This university contributes to sexual danger by allowing these individuals to cluster.

13. While “knowing” one’s male party-mates may offer some protection, this protection is not comprehensive. Sorority women, who typically have the closest ties with fraternity men, experience more sexual assault than other college women (Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004). Not only do sorority women typically spend more time in high-risk social situations than other women, but arriving at a high-status position on campus may require one to begin their college social career as one of the anonymous young women who are frequently victimized.

14. Our recommendations echo and extend those of Boswell and Spade (1996:145) and Stomblor and Martin (1994:180).

However, congregating people is not enough, as parties cannot be produced without resources (e.g., alcohol and a viable venue) that are difficult for underage students to obtain. University policies that are explicitly gender-neutral—such as the policing of alcohol use in residence halls—have gendered consequences. This policy encourages first-year students to turn to fraternities to party. Only fraternities, not sororities, are allowed to have parties, and men structure parties in ways that control the appearance, movement, and behavior of female guests. Men also control the distribution of alcohol and use its scarcity to engineer social interactions. The enforcement of alcohol policy by both university and Greek organizations transforms alcohol from a mere beverage into an unequally distributed social resource.

Individual characteristics and institutional practices provide the actors and contexts in which interactional processes occur. We have to turn to the interactional level, however, to understand *how* sexual assault is generated. Gender neutral expectations to “have fun,” lose control, and trust one’s party-mates become problematic when combined with gendered interactional expectations. Women are expected to be “nice” and to defer to men in interaction. This expectation is intensified by men’s position as hosts and women’s as grateful guests. The heterosexual script, which directs men to pursue sex and women to play the role of gatekeeper, further disadvantages women, particularly when virtually *all* men’s methods of extracting sex are defined as legitimate.

The mechanisms identified should help explain intra-campus, cross-campus, and over time variation in the prevalence of sexual assault. Campuses with similar students and social organization are predicted to have similar rates of sexual assault. We would expect to see lower rates of sexual assault on campuses characterized by more aesthetically appealing public space, lower alcohol use, and the absence of a gender-adversarial party scene. Campuses with more racial diversity and more racial integration would also be expected to have lower rates of sexual assault because of the dilution of upper-middle class white peer groups. Researchers are beginning to conduct comparative research on the impact of university organization on aggregate rates of sexual assault. For example, Meichun Mohler-Kuo and associates (2004) found that women who attended schools with medium or high levels of heavy episodic drinking were more at risk of being raped while intoxicated than women attending other schools, even while controlling for individual-level characteristics. More comparative research is needed.

This perspective may also help explain why white college women are at higher risk of sexual assault than other racial groups. Existing research suggests that African American college social scenes are more gender egalitarian (Stomblor and Padavic 1997). African American fraternities typically do not have houses, depriving men of a party resource. The missions, goals, and recruitment practices of African American fraternities and sororities discourage joining for exclusively social reasons (Berkowitz and Padavic 1999), and rates of alcohol consumption are lower among African American students (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 2000; Weschsler and Kuo 2003). The role of party rape in the lives of white college women is substantiated by recent research that found that “white women were more likely [than non-white women] to have experienced rape while intoxicated and less likely to experience other rape” (Mohler-Kuo et al. 2004:41). White women’s overall higher rates of rape are accounted for by their high rates of rape while intoxicated. Studies of racial differences in the culture and organization of college partying and its consequences for sexual assault are needed.

Our analysis also provides a framework for analyzing the sources of sexual risk in non-university partying situations. Situations where men have a home turf advantage, know each other better than the women present know each other, see the women as anonymous, and control desired resources (such as alcohol or drugs) are likely to be particularly dangerous. Social pressures to “have fun,” prove one’s social competency, or adhere to traditional gender expectations are also predicted to increase rates of sexual assault within a social scene.

This research has implications for policy. The interdependence of levels means that it is difficult to enact change at one level when the other levels remain unchanged. Programs to combat sexual assault currently focus primarily or even exclusively on education (Bachar and Koss 2001; Leaning 2003). But as Ann Swidler (2001) argued, culture develops in response to institutional arrangements. Without change in institutional arrangements, efforts to change cultural beliefs are undermined by the cultural commonsense generated by encounters with institutions. Efforts to educate about sexual assault will not succeed if the university continues to support organizational arrangements that facilitate and even legitimate men's coercive sexual strategies. Thus, our research implies that efforts to combat sexual assault on campus should target all levels, constituencies, and processes simultaneously. Efforts to educate both men and women should indeed be intensified, but they should be reinforced by changes in the social organization of student life.

Researchers focused on problem drinking on campus have found that reduction efforts focused on the social environment are successful (Berkowitz 2003:21). Student body diversity has been found to decrease binge drinking on campus (Weschler and Kuo 2003); it might also reduce rates of sexual assault. Existing student heterogeneity can be exploited by eliminating self-selection into age-segregated, white, upper-middle class, heterosexual enclaves and by working to make residence halls more appealing to upper-division students. Building more aesthetically appealing housing might allow students to interact outside of alcohol-fueled party scenes. Less expensive plans might involve creating more living-learning communities, coffee shops, and other student-run community spaces.

While heavy alcohol use is associated with sexual assault, not all efforts to regulate student alcohol use contribute to sexual safety. Punitive approaches sometimes heighten the symbolic significance of drinking, lead students to drink more hard liquor, and push alcohol consumption to more private and thus more dangerous spaces. Regulation inconsistently applied—e.g., heavy policing of residence halls and light policing of fraternities—increases the power of those who can secure alcohol and host parties. More consistent regulation could decrease the value of alcohol as a commodity by equalizing access to it.

Sexual assault education should shift in emphasis from educating women on preventative measures to educating both men and women about the coercive behavior of men and the sources of victim-blaming. Mohler-Kuo and associates (2004) suggest, and we endorse, a focus on the role of alcohol in sexual assault. Education should begin before students arrive on campus and continue throughout college. It may also be most effective if high-status peers are involved in disseminating knowledge and experience to younger college students.

Change requires resources and cooperation among many people. Efforts to combat sexual assault are constrained by other organizational imperatives. Student investment in the party scene makes it difficult to enlist the support of even those most harmed by the state of affairs. Student and alumni loyalty to partying (and the Greek system) mean that challenges to the party scene could potentially cost universities tuition dollars and alumni donations. Universities must contend with Greek organizations and bars, as well as the challenges of internal coordination. Fighting sexual assault on all levels is critical, though, because it is unacceptable for higher education institutions to be sites where women are predictably sexually victimized.

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