

5-2018

You and I and Anyone: Misperceptions of Sexual Intent and Implications for Prevention Strategies

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YOU AND I AND ANYONE:
MISPERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL INTENT
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION STRATEGIES

LEAH SIMONSON

20 MAY 2018

A Master's Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in the department of
Community Development and Planning

And accepted on the recommendation of

Dr. Marianne Sarkis, Chief Instructor

Abstract

You and I and Anyone:

Misperceptions of Sexual Intent and Implications for Prevention Strategies

Leah Simonson

This paper is about the what, why, and where of misperceptions of sexual intent and the connection between these misperceptions and sexual assault, with a focus on college campuses. Studying, analyzing, and understanding male misperceptions of sexual intent could inform implications for prevention strategies to foster safer campus communities. This was done through an analysis of qualitative survey data, made available to me by Dr. Rhiana Wegner of University of Massachusetts Boston, in which 288 male participants answered three questions about their experiences with misperceiving the sexual intent and interest of a woman. The data suggest that prevention strategies must explicitly: address attitudes and beliefs that normalize sexual assault, emphasize verbal communication, address misperceptions of sexual intent, be more comprehensive and holistic, and engage men to be part of the solution. Addressing these gaps in prevention strategies is a major step in preventing sexual assault and the misperceptions of sexual intent that often facilitate it.

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Date: 20 May 2018

Baccalaureate Degree:

Psychology and Women's and Gender Studies Double Major, Studio Art Minor

Source: Clark University

Date: 21 May 2017

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Rhiana Wegner of University Massachusetts Boston for providing the data that this paper is based on and for her guidance and mentorship. I would not have been able to write this paper without her help.

I also wish to thank my two readers Dr. Marianne Sarkis and Dr. Kathryn Madden for their support throughout this process.

I am so grateful for the personal and academic support that Dr. Marianne Sarkis has given me – she encouraged me to include my personal story in this paper and I cannot thank her enough for that.

Thank you to all the people in the past few years who have sparked my interest and dedication to learning about and preventing sexual assault, including but not limited to Dr. Denise Hines of the Clark University Psychology department, Title IX Coordinator Lynn Levey, Melanie Rocco (my undergraduate Capstone partner and friend – I could not have taken on the Capstone project without her), and the many incredible students and staff at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Thank you to my incredibly supportive friends and family. Their everlasting encouragement means so much to me.

Thank you to all the people, near and far, I have discussed this paper and this subject matter with. It is in these conversations that I am reminded of how many people are affected by sexual assault, and why this kind of work is so needed.

Lastly, Thank you to all the people who are working to eliminate sexual assault in all its forms, to making this world a safer place for us all. Your work inspires me.

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Foreword

Content Warning: This section includes detailed personal narrative about sexual assault.

You and I and Anyone	(Couldn't you see my red eyes bulging?)
Just another person another person confiding Casual How normal these days to be touched against our will	Those snakes, they cross Miles Lands Continents (They know no bounds)
(You and I means anyone)	Just another person She knows it, and so does he over there Through their jeans, their thighs burn too
I can't sit so close to you with our legs semi-touching, sweat beading down my face	(We just don't always know who)
(Touching will never be casual to me again)	Just another person This shit happens all the time, hidden behind seats, sheets, crossed lines
I can't sit so close to you because my inviting shirt and face might provoke you	(It's happening right now)
(My thighs burned like a thousand flames)	Just another person Confiding Casual How normal these days to be touched against our will
I can't sit so close to you with your hands lingering on my back, snake fingers crawling into my surface	

Two and half years ago, I was touched without my consent, trapped and confused. 12 hours on a plane, 12 hours of inner turmoil. Those 12 hours have turned into days and months of anxiety, fear, stress, and confusion. What happened in those 12 hours exceeds any flight, trip, or length of time. For a long time, it exceeded my ability to sit comfortably not only on a plane, but in any public space.

I got to my seat, where I would be sitting between two orthodox Jews, a man to my left and a woman to my right. It was an overnight flight, so the lights were off and most people were sleeping. I was in the last row of the plane, hidden and private. To pass the time and ease my anxiety, I was writing and drawing in my notebook. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my thigh, under the blanket. This was not accidental, but was intentional and heated; with every cell in his hand, I could feel lust and intent. I felt his gaze, with curiosity and desire. I felt my face heating up with blood. Soon after, he touched me again. Eventually I started shaking, turning my back to him and hoping I could brush off what happened. When I started nodding off to sleep, I felt a hand on my back, rubbing with each individual finger slowly and passionately. I heard his breathing.

I felt myself become smaller and smaller, shriveling up into a speck of a silenced woman.

My mind was racing. Did I show too much skin? How could anyone do this? How could *he* do this? I thought I was having a nightmare; I could not bear to believe that this was happening, when I suddenly felt his hand reach up into the small curls of my hair at the nape of my neck. At that point I could not control my shaking, sweating, and sorrow. I turned around and tried to explain to him why what he was doing was wrong, but I do not speak Hebrew. My voice was cracking, and I had tears in my eyes, which I hoped communicated louder than the explanation I was trying to give. He tried to talk to me, to ask me if I was Jewish, and other

things about myself. I tried to let go, and to not be mad. I tried to tell myself that he didn't know what he was doing, that he just wanted to get to know me.

I kept validating his actions because then he would be nice to me, and talk to me, and then I could walk away from all this...right? How could he validate his actions, and how could I validate them, too?

I wondered, will anyone believe me? Who can I tell, how can I tell them, and who will understand? I felt trapped and isolated. Another 8 hours to go, how do I go on? For hours I silently sobbed, scribbling in my notebook and looking for some impossible escape. After a few hours, I vaguely remember him saying, "You can sleep. It won't happen again." I am not sure if this happened or not; it may have been a delusion, or something I convinced myself so that I could fall asleep.

By the end of the longest 12 hours of my life, he quickly grabbed his luggage and got in line to get off the plane. He looked at me, with sadness I did not want to feel for or pity. I could not bear to believe that it was as deep as the sorrow that I felt. And just like that, he was gone.

When I got off the plane, I was looking for his face - looking for him. I could not. I was surrounded by men that looked just like him, so frightened that it could have been any of them. I have been sexually violated and touched without my consent since this experience. Has this happened to anyone else? Who else has felt too ashamed or afraid to speak up?

Touching will never be casual to me again. It will never be easy. This has to do with every aspect of my physical existence and my every day life. I often cannot go on public transportation, or sit next to someone, without being reminded of what happened. I am quick to flinch and sweat when a hand or leg brushes against mine. I hate that my first thought when I walk onto a plane is who will be next to me, and will they touch me?

For many months I did not know how to define what happened to me. I did not consider my story valid alongside the stories of others. I walked away without physical evidence of assault, so did this really happen? This binary of how we are taught to think about sexual assault made me feel invisible. I still feel insecure, alone, deeply confused and hurt by this experience, even though I know that so many people are violated in public spaces every day. Why do we not talk about this? Why is this so normalized? What happened to me changed the way I view myself in private, and especially in public.

When I look back, I see *gaps*. Where was the communication? What made him think he could touch me, and what made me think he could get away with it? We are not taught to speak about sex or intimacy. We do not learn how to ask for consent; rather, we learn from television, movies, and music that we must look for signals or cues that someone is interested, and that using words is shameful and even embarrassing. In this *gap* is where people sexually misperceive others, and end up sexually assaulting them, whether they intended to or not. The man who touched me did not know how to talk to me about sex, nor did he understand my rejection of it. I did not know where to turn or how to talk about what happened.

These feelings and this experience are so common and contribute to why so many people feel that they cannot and should not report what happened. *You and I and anyone*. This may be you, or someone you know, or someone you are related to. There is no doubt that someone in your life, whether they know it or not, or whether you know it or not, are part of this community. It is not just the criminal behind bars who is committing acts of rape and sexual aggression, nor is it just the person with physical signs of abuse that has been the victim of sexual assault. Acknowledging that sexual assault is affecting you and I and anyone (as perpetrator, as survivor, and as passive bystander) is a major step to combating misperceptions of sexual intent in our

every day interactions. Until this gap is filled and our society starts addressing the need for healthy, verbal communication about consent, misperceptions of sexual intent will persevere and, as a result, more sexual assault survivors will continue to feel objectified and silenced.

Introduction

I am writing this paper because sexual assault prevention matters – not just to me, or to the Clark University community. Sexual assault prevention matters for the safety, protection, and liberation of bodies around the country and world. The literature tells us that the lack of verbal communication between people is a vital component in sexual assault perpetration. More effective prevention of sexual assault means addressing this gap in communication and promoting explicit, verbal communication.

This paper is contextualized within community development on college campuses, focusing on community safety, community education, and the right to bodily integrity – which relates to the cultural norms that permeate into our communities and normalize detrimental attitudes and behaviors. “Understanding the causal process linking rape-supportive attitudes to sexually aggressive behavior is crucial to developing effective prevention programs” (Bouffard, 2010, p. 878). We now know this more than ever with the upsurge of the #MeToo Movement. As Tarana Burke, the founder of the movement stated, “We need a complete cultural transformation if we are to eradicate sexual assault in our lifetimes. It means we must build our families differently, engage our communities and confront some of our long-held assumptions about ourselves...Let’s get to work” (metoomvmt.org). Addressing the community at large to prevent sexual assault also means addressing both the attitudes and beliefs that normalize this behavior *and* understanding the gap in education and prevention that we so direly need.

I approach this topic with a focus on male misperceptions of sexual intent and their connection to sexual assault, particularly on college campuses. To prevent these misperceptions from occurring, we must understand what they are and where they come from. I conducted an analysis of a survey completed by 288 male participants who responded to questions about instances in which they had misperceived a woman's level of sexual intent, or interest. Three themes emerged through my review of the literature and my data analysis: a lack of direct verbal communication between men and women; traditional gender role beliefs, sexual entitlement and ultimately, an inability to take "no" for an answer; and the indication that men who misperceived women general showed no understanding that what they did was wrong or misguided. These themes are discussed in terms of prevention strategies and how to most effectively move forward in our efforts to combat sexual assault and the cultural norms that justify and validate it.

Who is Being Sexually Assaulted?

It is crucial to understand the expanse of sexual assault before beginning to understand the ways we can prevent it. The National Crime Victimization Survey from 2010-2014 found that on average, there are 321,500 victims – ages 12 and older – of sexual assault each year in this country alone (Dep. of Justice, 2015; RAINN, 2016). One out of every six women and one of every 71 men has been the victim of sexual assault in their lifetime. Those affected are predominantly between the ages of 12-34 (Dep. of Justice, 1997; RAINN, 2016). These numbers do not represent the full truth; 66% of sexual violence cases go unreported (Dep. of Justice, 2015; RAINN, 2016), illustrating the stigma and barriers that survivors face when considering whether or not to come forward. These numbers only scrape the surface of who is being affected by sexual assault, not to mention subpopulations that experience assault at higher rates (LGBTQ

individuals, prisoners, people in the military, and Native Americans) (Dep. of Justice, 2004; Dep. of Justice, 2013; Dep. of Defense, 2015; Cantor, Fisher, Chibnall, & Townsend, 2015).

College students are particularly vulnerable; college women ages 18-24 are three times more likely to be sexual assaulted compared to the general female population (Aronowitz, Lambert, & Davidoff, 2012). “American women ages 16-24 are considered to be at the greatest risk of sexual assault” (Lombardi & Jones, 2009). Clearly, this population of women is particularly vulnerable. Why this may be is discussed in the section below.

College Students ¹

According to Arnett (2000), college is a transitional period from adolescence into “emerging adulthood.” For many, this is a time of change and possibility in love, work, and worldview. This is especially true for students in college, who have “left the dependency of childhood and adolescence” and who have not yet “entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood,” leaving space to explore themselves, their peers, and the environment around them (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). Part of the theoretical background of emerging adulthood is based off of Erik Erikson’s “prolonged adolescence,” which is a time when a young adult goes through “free role experimentation” and “may find a niche in some section of his [or her] society” (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). This experimentation can lead to role confusion, as “accepting responsibility for one’s self and making independent decisions” can be overwhelming and difficult (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). This role confusion can lead to risky and dangerous behaviors involving drugs, alcohol, and violence. Because of the exploratory nature of emerging adulthood, this risk is heightened.

¹Much of this section of the paper comes from a report I and another student, Melanie Rocco, completed at Clark University under the supervision of Dr. Denise Hines and Title IX Coordinator Lynn Levey entitled: A Student-led Proposal for Ongoing, Undergraduate Sexual Violence Prevention Programming.

During this exploratory time, students rely heavily on one another for behavioral norms and social cues. Social learning theory, founded by Dr. Albert Bandura, states that individuals learn behaviors through observation and instruction (Bandura, 1971). This could result in copying someone's action, but also copying someone's inaction, as well (Bandura, 1971). Action and inaction relate back to the bystander effect, which "refers to the phenomenon that an individual's likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in a critical situation" (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmuler, Krueger, Vogrincic, & Frey, 2011, p. 517). With this in mind, much of the research concludes that communities that normalize a culture of intervention will more likely see action of intervention, and vice versa (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Schwartz and DeKeseredy found higher rates of sexual assault across a campus community that reflected higher levels of "male peer support" for sexual assault (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004, p. 63). Male peer support theory states that, "Men who abuse women do so because they have other men's encouragement and support. These groups perpetuate and legitimize sexual exploitation of women, especially when they are intoxicated" (Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait, & Alvi, 2001). They intentionally surround themselves with people who will encourage and reinforce their negative, objectifying attitudes. With this, comes the encouragement and reinforcement of misperceptions of women's sexual interest and intent, increasing the chances of perpetration and the validation of their behavior (Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, & Parkill, 2007, p. 1470). Therefore, social learning theory supports the notion that people around us often fuel behaviors, whether they are positive or negative. As Bandura wrote (1999), "When everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible" (p. 198).

For many reasons, survivors of sexual assault do not often come forward to file reports. Reasons include: there was not enough legal evidence, fear of the justice system, did not know

how to, feel the crime was not serious enough, did not want others to know, and unsure about the perpetrator's intent, among others (U.S. Dep. of Justice, 2013). As a result, college campuses have few criminal records and come off as safe, non-threatening environments (Aronowitz, Lambert & Davidoff, 2012). Yet, the literature and research show us that we have reason to be concerned. We have reason to talk, educate, and prevent.

Sexual Assault – Gender Based Violence

This paper focuses on male perpetrators and female victims of misperceptions of sexual intent and sexual assault. This is not to say that females do not also misperceive the sexual intent of men, that females do not commit acts of sexual assault, or that this does not occur in same-sex encounters. Rather, it is because we see time and again that men are more likely to commit acts of sexual assault on women (Farris, Treat, Viken & McFall, 2008, p. 2). Ninety-one percent of the victims of rape and sexual assault are female, and 9% are male (National Crime Victimization Survey, 2010-2014). The overwhelming majority of perpetrators are men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Additionally, between 25-57% of men report that they have perpetrated sexually aggressive behavior against a woman since they were 14 years old (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011). Men have consistently been more likely to report misperception and to over-perceive ambiguous behaviors compared to women, who report greater experiences of having their intent misperceived (Wegner, Abbey, Pierce, Pegram & Woerner, 2015) (Farris et al., 2008).

Our society has a narrow view of what constitutes sexual assault; many instances (e.g. verbally coerced sex and sometimes incapacitated rape) do not fit legal definitions and are not included in these percentages (Wegner et al., 2015). The U.S. Department of Justice defines sexual assault as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent

of the recipient. Falling under the definition of sexual assault are sexual activities as forced sexual intercourse, forcible sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape” (justice.gov). Women are experiencing varying levels of male sexual aggression that may not fit into the legal or social definition. Sexual assault is normalized; thousands of people have nonconsensual experiences that do not necessarily fit the socially accepted and legal definition for sexual assault, and these are the stories that are falling through the cracks. “Sexual assault is reluctantly accepted by many as inevitable or an unfortunate but unavoidable part of the existing social order” (O’Neil & Morgan, 2010; Joseph, Gray, & Mayer, 2013, p. 494). Perhaps this is why “sixty-seven percent of college women indicated that they have had at least one experience in which an attempt to be friendly was misperceived as a sexual come-on, and 38% indicated that they have had such an experience within the past month” (Abbey, 1987; Farris et al., 2008, p. 3). These numbers are striking, and show us that this is no coincidence. Gender based violence is a health problem, a “violation of women’s human rights, their bodily integrity, and their sexual and reproductive rights” (Krantz, 2017). For these reasons, I frame my work in terms of female victims and male perpetrators of sexual assault.

Impacts of Sexual Assault

Sexual assault has lifelong impacts. Not reporting one’s experience while simultaneously questioning and second-guessing oneself contributes to a wide range of negative individual and interpersonal outcomes. Research shows that survivors experience high rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (with symptoms such as emotional detachment, sleep disturbances, and flashbacks), depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and extreme distress (Aronowitz et al., 2012). Compared to the general public, survivors are more likely to use drugs, have unhealthy eating and sleeping habits, and have problems in school, at work, and with family and friends.

“The aftermath of sexual assault frequently leads to withdrawal from college” (Lombardi & Jones, 2009). They are more likely to get pregnant or have a sexually transmitted infection, as well (RAINN, 2016).

Sexual assault affects all spheres of an individual’s life –“autonomy, productivity, and capacity to care for oneself and one’s family and subsequently also overall health status and quality of life” (Krantz, 2017). Clearly, sexual assault affects not only an individual but also their interactions with others in the community; sexual assault is a community health and safety concern and must be seen as such. “Due to the prevalence of sexual assault and data indicating that sexual assault can have a long-term impact on survivor’s psychological functioning and development, the prevention of sexual assault needs to be a priority on college campuses” (Aronowitz et al., 2012, p. 174). Sexual assault impacts the health and livelihoods of those both directly and indirectly affected by it; this illustrates a major need for innovative prevention and education strategies.

National Policies

Until the 1990s, sexual assault was a private matter dealt with behind closed doors. In 1986, Jeanne Clery was raped and murdered in her campus dorm, which raised concern to unreported crimes on college campuses (RAINN, 2016). It was not until the Clery Act was enacted that sexual assault started to be more widely viewed as an issue that affects an entire community, and as a public safety concern. The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security and Campus Crime Statistics Act of 1990 requires universities and colleges that receive any federal funding to make their campus crime policies and statistics known and available in a timely manner (Not Alone, 2014, p. 16). In 2013, this became the Campus SaVE Act (Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act); this law has additional requirements, including rights and support for

survivors and campus-wide prevention and education programming (Bouffard & Bouffard, 2011). Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, no person should be discriminated against based on sex (U.S. Dep. of Education, 2015). This law became more related to sexual assault with the passing of the Clery Act and Campus SaVE Act. Title IX handles sexual assault cases on college campuses and is meant to proceed lawfully and supportively.

Gaps in Sexual Assault Prevention

The United States has made enormous strides in addressing sexual assault on college campuses, but there is work that still needs to be done (Not Alone, 2014). The data are limited, and there is no guarantee that present violence prevention programs have been effective at actually reducing problematic, violent attitudes and behaviors on college campuses (DeGue, Holt, Massetti, Matjasko, Tharp, & Balle, 2012). The current work and research targeted towards prevention and intervention specifically with men is even more limited, with the majority of programs focusing on changing community norms through bystander skills and empathy-related exercises. The current strategies are leaving out fundamental aspects, which are discussed in the “Findings and Discussion” section starting on page 29, that could more effectively reach and affect male participants.

Currently, many universities offer support services for survivors of sexual assault, but few provide extensive training related to sexual assault prevention (McMahon, Postmus, & Koenick, 2011). The focus of these school strategies often reinforce gendered social norms, restricting women’s behavior to what is thought to be appropriate for “nice girls” (Aronowitz et al., 2012, p. 180). This also places the responsibility for the consequences of sexual harassment and assault on women. An example of this includes the emphasis many programs place on always walking with someone, or having a “buddy plan.” According to Aronowitz and

colleagues (2012), “To the extent that services promote individual and victim-centered strategies, universities support patriarchal social norms that restrict women’s independent use of public space. These interventions inadvertently support the myths that most rapes are stranger rapes and that women’s behaviors increases their risk.” This approach does not address the type of rape that is most common on college campuses, which is acquaintance rape at 90% (Sampson, 2002; Aronowitz et al., 2012). Programs are developing, but are they developing in the ways students and survivors need them to?

Sexual assault does not come from one singular cause nor does it have one singular solution. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), sexual assault comes from “multiple, interacting levels of influence,” also known as the social-ecological model. These levels include the individual, relationship, community, and societal (DeGue et al., 2012). Each level is crucial to the prevention of sexual assault, yet policies and prevention strategies are clearly not addressing these levels adequately or at all.

The issue cannot be addressed solely to victim and perpetrator, as if this was an isolated occurrence, but to everyone in the community. The focus must be on “changing community norms” (Banyard et al., 2004, p. 69) so that there is zero tolerance for harassment or violent behavior. This message must be clear and consistent; there is a community “expectation that such behavior is not acceptable” (Banyard et al., 2004, p. 64) and everyone in the community is responsible for maintaining this expectation. An environment that places responsibility on all community members must also foster empowerment; this involves caring, empathy, awareness, and confrontation, which promotes helping rather than hinders it (Banyard, 2011). The “dominant stories that support, hide, or deny sexual harassment” are unacceptable because they lead to widespread fear and un-safety within a community. Rather, individuals must gain a sense

of empowerment through feeling as though their voice and their actions matter. In fact, they are crucial in the development of this proactive community. This allows for the normalization of active bystander behaviors and creates a positive social learning environment in which people speak up and act up when necessary. Until students, professionals, and policy makers understand the scope and impact of sexual assault, and unless the issue is viewed in terms of a public health and community safety concern, effective change cannot be made.

Policies and programs are not addressing the deep elements of sexual assault that are allowing perpetration and the silencing of survivors to continue. The macro level has clearly made strides to draw awareness to the issue, but what about the instances of sexual assault in which the answers are not always clearly defined in the ways we understand them? What if alcohol was involved, or flirtation, eye contact, or revealing clothing? What if words are not spoken and the interaction is not physically violent, but one person is uncomfortable or unsure, and feels violated? These micro level interactions are just as important to address. Therefore, if universities want to productively address sexual assault on a community level, they also have to admit to and openly address the complications that arise in these instances. The micro interaction and *understanding* of this interaction affects the broader social norms and accepted behaviors in the macro.

Misperceptions of Sexual Intent: What, Why, and Where Do They Come From?

Misperceptions of sexual intent often involve making assumptions about someone's sexual interest based on various nonverbal signals that were never clearly communicated about or defined. The misperception may come from ambiguous nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, a smile, standing close, giving a compliment, flirting, and the type of clothing or makeup

worn (Jacques Tiura, et al., 2007; Abbey & Melby, 1986). Lindgren and colleagues conducted a study with 29 undergraduate students about sexual communication; one male participant stated,

“[A woman] pretty much knows what she’s anticipating based on the way she dresses or at least they have a clue. Because if she’s wearing jeans and a regular sweatshirt, then you are like, ‘Ah man, I’m not going to get anything!’ And then you see like a girl who wears a hoochie top and you’re like, All right!’ (Lindgren, Schacht, Pantalone, Blayney, & George, 2009, p. 496). Yet, women did not state that their type of clothing was a method of communicating their sexual interest” (Lindgren et al., 2009).

This behavior is not uncommon; Jacques-Tiura and colleagues (2007) found that of their 356 male participants, 54% reported having misperceived a “woman’s sexual intent *at least once*”; of those, the median was three. Many of these men had repeatedly misperceived a woman’s level of sexual interest. This may come from a variety of influences, included but not limited to the discussion below.

Lack of Education and Reinforcement of Verbal Communication

Our society does not educate us or reinforce the use of direct, verbal communication to express our sexual and intimate wants and needs, let alone basic information on sex and sexuality (Aronowitz et al., 2012); to do so may “lead to embarrassment, rejection, and/or shame, which can make one reluctant to reveal one’s intention too overtly” (Lindgren et al., 2009, p. 492). We are not taught the language we need to talk about consent and sex, nor are we encouraged to do so; consequently, people, particularly men, misperceive women’s behaviors and act on this misperception. Research shows that more women report that their level of sexual interest was over-perceived and that men “interpret women’s behavior differently from how it was intended” (Jacques-Tiura, et al., 2007). Abbey and McAuslan (2004) conducted a study analyzing 197 male

college students' perpetration of sexual assault and the differences between non-assaulters, one-time offenders, and repeat assaulters. Many of these men describe "various forms of sexual assault in benign terms such as 'just another night,' 'something that got a little out of control due to feelings of immense pleasure,' and 'not a big deal'" (p. 11). These acts can affect the survivors for a lifetime, leaving them with post-traumatic stress and trauma, isolation, and depression, among others. Yet, the perpetrators view them as normal "mishaps" that can be easily forgotten.

Sexual Scripts

The traditional sexual script reinforces male aggressive, dominant behaviors while teaching women that they are to be concerned about the man's needs (Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002; Abbey et al., 2011, p. 2); this can manifest itself in the use of indirect rather than direct communication as a way to protect a man's feelings (Murnen et al., 2002). This finding works in tangent with that of Foubert and colleagues (2006), who found that men preferred indirect sexual communication over direct because they were concerned about being rejected. Sexual scripts prevent individuals from using direct, verbal communication and feeling comfortable with honesty and rejection.

Researchers have noted that men require "less evidence of sexual interest before willing to label the behavior" (Koukounas & Letch, 2001; Farris, Treat, Viken & McFall, 2008, p. 7). There are many reasons for why this may be; there is a sexual schema in our society that traditionally requires men to initiate sexual encounters and dating relationships. Therefore, men are "watching out for signs" which may lead to certain expectations that bias perceptions (Aronowitz et al., 2012). "Sex role socialization" causes men to value and seek out sexual encounters more often than women (Gross, 1978; Abbey & Melby, 1986). While men are socialized to go after women and to not take no for an answer, women are socialized to please

men and to satisfy their immediate needs (Lindgren et al., 2009). This combination makes misperceptions of sexual intent take place, which can lead to nonconsensual intimacy and sex.

Traditional Gender Roles

We live in a society that places high value on the gender binary, which enforces traditional gender roles that dictate the ways we are expected to act, the ways we do act, and ultimately the ways we interact with others. When a woman smiles at a man, this small but significant moment can be interpreted *very* differently between the two parties. “Perhaps the verbal and non-verbal behaviors that women consider friendliness are categorized quite differently by men” (Farris et al., 2008, p. 2). While the man might see a sexually-interested woman, the woman sees a man who is looking at her, and her immediate response – as women are socialized to please others – is to smile. Lindsey (1997) argued that, “Patriarchal cultures reinforce traditional masculine gender roles that emphasize force and dominance in relationships with women” (Bouffard, 2010, p. 870). The patriarchy, which reinforces traditional gender roles, normalizes male aggression and “dominance,” and ultimately, normalizes misperceptions of sexual intent and sexual assault. Traditional gender roles also lead to expectations of women’s obedience, dependency, and sexual access (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1993; Bouffard, 2010, p. 871). Because of this, “American society socializes men (and promotes stereotypes of men) to be interested in casual sex, whereas it socializes women (and promotes stereotypes of women) to be interested in commitment” (Haselton & Buss, 2000, p. 89). It is the male “right” to sex, for “men have strong, and often uncontrollable, sexual needs that must be fulfilled and that women must serve that purpose” (Hill & Fischer, 2001; Bouffard, 2010, p. 871). Clearly, the multifaceted levels of influence all come back to gender roles and expectations, which strongly impact the ways people then choose to act and view the world, and other people, around them.

Gender roles are influenced by various norms and attitudes, which make misperceiving a woman's interest and intent more likely. These attitudes and beliefs include sex-role stereotypes (as discussed above), hostile masculinity, impersonal sex, and rape-supportive or rape-myth attitudes (Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Farris et al., 2008; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007) (Malamuth and colleagues 1991; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007, p. 1469). Rape-myth attitudes are widely held that "serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 12; Aronowitz et al., 2012). This connection between norms and attitudes and misperceptions relates to the confluence model; this argues that certain norms and attitudes make it more likely for someone to act sexually aggressive and commit sexual assault (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007) (Willan & Pollard, 2003). In broader terms, our attitudes and beliefs about other people, the world, and ourselves can influence the ways we act and treat others.

Sexual Double Standards

Sexual scripts and traditional gender roles impact the development and reinforcement of sexual double standards that increase male misperceptions of female sexual intent and sexual assault rates, as well. "Women are stigmatized for engaging in any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage, whereas for men such behavior was expected and rewarded" (Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 13). While women are negatively judged for engaging in sexual interactions and particularly for initiating these interactions, men are encouraged and rewarded for this same behavior (Green & Sandos, 1983; Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 23). A study done by Aronowitz and colleagues (2012) found that 63% of the 237 college participants agreed that, "If a woman makes out with a guy, it is okay for him to push for sex" (p. 179). This is associated with less sexual knowledge and higher rape-myth acceptance. It is as though she owes him something; this is known as the sexual social exchange theory (Basow & Minieri, 2011). She led him on, so she

owes him sex. Sexual double standards clearly play a part in expectations, misperceptions of sexual intent, and sexual assault.

The Link Between Misperceptions of Sexual Intent and Sexual Assault

Misperceptions of sexual intent “may be part of a constellation of individual and situational variables that increase the probability of more socially problematic behavior such as sexual coercion” (Farris et al., 2008, p. 2). In fact, the link has been made between misperceptions and the perpetration of sexual assault and harassment (Abbey et al., 2011, p. 4).

Abbey and colleagues (1998) found that male college students who had misperceived a woman’s sexual intent in the past were more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression. Sexual assault is understood in a vacuum, yet it is sexual misperceptions, often of men towards women, which lead to nonconsensual encounters and the perpetuation of rape culture. We must understand where these beliefs come from by promoting an environment in which men and women can comfortably discuss cultural norms and standards they live by, so that we can more effectively combat them.

Justification

Because of the normalization of pursuing others sexually on the basis of nonverbal cues, and consequently the normalization of sexual assault, men in particular are able to justify their misperceptions and actions. As a result, they often do not perceive their behavior as problematic (Bouffard, 2010, p. 871). Social norms (i.e. male sexual dominance and female sexual submission) “add to the trivialization and/or justification of male sexual coercion toward women (Krape, Scheinberger-Olwig & Kolpin, 2000; Aronowitz, 2012, p. 179). Women-are-sex-objects implicit theory states that women are in a constant state of sexual desire. Regardless of how they act, what they really want is sex, even if they are not actively pursuing sex or even say no. This

minimizes the harm of the misperception and ultimately justifies the misperception and potential act of sexual assault (Hermann, Babchishin, Nunes, Leth-Steensen, & Cortoni, 2012, p. 883).

Particularly because most cases of sexual assault are not violent stranger rape, this amplifies the trivialization and justification of many cases. As a result, many cases (particularly on college campuses) go unreported and, if reported – without punishment, which “leads to women’s feelings of powerlessness and a perceived lack of confidentiality in reporting” (Paul & Gray, 2011) (Aronowitz, 2012, p. 179). The cycle continues, perpetuating silence and consequently, objectification.

The justification and validation of sexually misperceiving women also leads to *victim blaming*, and vice versa: victim blaming leads to justifying and validating misperceptions of sexual intent and sexual assault. The responsibility of the perpetrator is “mitigated by the credibility and complicity of victims,” i.e. what was she wearing? Was she drunk? Was she flirting with you? (Hermann et al., 2012, p. 882). “Punitive conduct” of the woman is justification for the action of the perpetrator – victims get blamed for bringing the suffering onto themselves (Bandura, 1999, p. 203). Clearly, “Ideologies of male domination, dehumanization, ascription of blame, and distortion of injurious consequences...play a heavy role in sexual abuse of women” (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1999, p. 206). Victim blaming is dehumanizing and belittling, which perpetuates the normalization of these objectifying, toxic, and entitled behaviors. People still suffer, regardless of how perpetrators justify their actions (Bandura, 1999, p. 193). Maybe they can walk away, but the person misperceived – that person has to sit with that for a lifetime, questioning what they could have done differently, or what they could have said, or how things could have been different. The survivor, too, justifies the actions of the

perpetrator and feels silenced. What may seem like a small misunderstanding is a fundamental lack of communication that allows and encourages sexual assault.

What Does Saying “Sorry” Mean?

Acknowledging the misperception of sexual intent may come in the form of “I’m sorry.” Although this may initially seem like an honest and thoughtful response, unless the apology is associated with consequences, it is cheap talk (Mungan, 2012, p. 178). The legal system rewards those who “present as if they are remorseful, even if they do not feel the least sorry about their actions” (Mungan, 2012, p. 179). Although many cases do not get processed through the legal system as they are either not reported or the perpetrator is not found guilty, this illustrates that interpersonally and legally, saying “sorry” is a quick, empty response that supposedly proves one’s remorse. It is a passive way of dealing with the behavior, especially since once someone says “sorry” they can then hypothetically walk away from the situation without guilt or shame.

Therefore, saying sorry relieves the perpetrator from “psychological burdens and responsibility”; Dr. Mungan, a law and economics scholar and theorist, notes that saying “sorry” is an easy way out (Mungan, 2012, p. 178). It is easier to justify one’s behavior when the perpetrator does not immediately and physically see the harm they have brought onto the victim (Tilker, 1970; Bandura, 1999, p. 199). Therefore, it is less likely that the perpetrator will feel accountable; one benefits from an insincere apology, as it de-stigmatizes the situation and allows the person to feel less sense of responsibility. “Apologies, like compliments, are primarily aimed at maintaining, enhancing, anointing, or supporting the addressee’s ‘face’” (Goffman, 1967; Holmes, 1989, p. 196). Actually facing their actions also means understanding the faults of one behaviors, feeling guilt or blame to some extent, and questioning rigid gender norms and rape-myth acceptance that normalized the misperception and subsequent behaviors.

Misperceptions of Sexual Intent: Conclusion

Misperceptions of sexual intent are based on nonverbal assumptions that may likely lead to sexual assault. It is these contributing factors that we are so afraid to talk about, yet need to be addressed the most. Our society's understanding of sexual assault is rigid; because misperceptions of sexual intent are not widely understood or taught about as something connected to sexual assault, this allows perpetrators to excuse their behavior.

The small moments many of us label insignificant, are significantly affecting the ways people interact and sexually pursue others. We must have a greater understanding of these interactions on both macro and micro scales if we are to adequately address and prevent sexual assault.

Study Goal

The current study is meant to understand misperceptions of sexual intent and how men respond to them, in the hopes of filling a gap in sexual assault prevention programming. We must gain a more holistic understanding of the contributing factors of sexual assault (i.e. misperceptions of sexual intent) and hear the men who are experiencing this, so that we can better educate and prevent misperceptions of sexual intent from becoming sexual assault.

Participants and Methodology

I conducted an analysis of qualitative data collected by Dr. Rhiana Wegner, an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. In the summer of 2017 I worked in Dr. Wegner's lab as a Sexual Assault Programming Coordinator; through this experience, I gained knowledge of misperceptions of sexual intent through access to data that Dr. Wegner had collected for her dissertation at Wayne State University in 2014. Three-hundred and forty men were recruited from a large metropolitan area in the Midwest for a two session study

on initial interactions between men and women. Study advertisements indicated that the study was looking for single, heterosexual men, between the ages of 21 and 28, who identified themselves as social drinkers and were interested in meeting a woman. Advertisements told interested men to email the research lab and were then emailed a link and a unique identifying code that allowed them to access the Qualtrics survey. The university's Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures. All participants were compensated with one research credit for an eligible psychology course or were entered into a lottery for one of three \$50 Amazon gift cards.²

I focused exclusively on the first part of Dr. Wegner's study, which was a survey about instances when men misperceive the sexual intent of women. Two hundred and eighty-eight men completed the survey between the ages of 18 to 37, which an average age of 23.50 (and a standard deviation of 2.79). Nearly half of the participants indicated their ethnicity as Caucasian (45.0%), 16.5% African American, 15.9% Arab or Middle Eastern, 10.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 4.7% Biracial, 4.4% Hispanic, 0.3% Native American or American Indian and 2.6% indicated Other. 11.1% indicated their highest level of education was high school graduate or GED, 78.1% indicated they had at least some college-level education, 4.5% indicated they had a Masters, Professional, or Doctoral Degree, and 6.2% indicated other or provided no responses.

The three questions included in the survey are: "What did the woman do or say to convey to you that you had misinterpreted her level of sexual interest?", "What did you do or say when you realized that you had misinterpreted her level of sexual interest?", and, "How did it end?" The responses were coded based on a coding scheme created by Dr. Antonia Abbey (1987),

² This methodology section is part of further work that Dr. Rhiana Wegner is completing.

which was then revised to fit the current data by Dr. Rhiana Wegner and a University of Massachusetts Psychology student.

With the assistance of Dr. Marianne Sarkis, an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Development, Community, and Environment at Clark University and my first reader and adviser for this paper, we analyzed the qualitative responses by grouping them into broader categories and finding themes that emerged from the data.

Analysis

Men frequently (25%) reported saying “sorry” or that they apologized to the women in response to learning of their misperception of her sexual intent. Of these men, only 34% placed the blame on themselves for what happened, indicating that the majority either did not take responsibility for their actions or placed blame on the women for the misperception. A smaller percentage responded by either expressing confusion, disappointment, or explaining why he misunderstood. It was not always clear whether men took any responsibility in these situations, but this response suggests a sense of entitlement and a lack of remorse. In the section below I discuss common themes that emerged from men’s qualitative responses.

Major Themes

Through the data analysis, three major themes emerged. The major, overarching theme is the lack of direct verbal communication between men and women. Men often rely on nonverbal cues for making decisions about sexual intent; this theme is discussed primarily in the section below, “Lack of Verbal Communication.” The second theme is traditional gender role beliefs, sexual entitlement and ultimately, an inability to take “no” for an answer. This is discussed in the section, “Sexual Scripts and Traditional Gender Roles” on page 26. The third and final theme is that men who misperceived women generally showed no indication that they understood what

they did was wrong and misguided. This theme is discussed in the section, “What Does Saying ‘Sorry’ Mean?” on page 28.

Lack of Verbal Communication

Men often use nonverbal cues to perceive a woman is interested, such as body language, flirting, or a compliment made. Examples of this from qualitative responses made by male participants include, “Gave me eye signals,” “Sexual jokes, loose clothing,” “The way she was dressed,” “Winked,” “I can’t remember specifically, but it was probably connected to a high amount of eye contact,” and “Very flirtatious.” Thus, men seemed to justify their misperception by citing common nonverbal, ambiguous behaviors of the women. Similar behaviors have been previously linked to a greater likelihood of misperception in men and may be embellished upon post hoc in order to support the man’s assumption of sexual interest. One participant stated, “She was being very flirty and it seemed like she was making some kind of advance. I tried to move into kiss her, in which case she swiftly backed off.” That situation could have been more comfortable and consensual if direct communication had been used.

From what the male participants reported, which should be interpreted cautiously, women, too, were often not using direct communication to convey the misperception to men. Rather, they were using “excuses” to help him save face, or ignoring or distancing themselves from the situation without providing explicit information about the misperception. Examples of this include, “She just backed away,” “Turned away from the kiss,” “She had a boyfriend,” “She said she was married,” “I’m not that kind of girl,” and she said, “I am lazy.” Women are socialized to be the gatekeepers, not the initiators of sexual interactions; thus, it is not surprising that not a single male participant stated that he perceived interest because the woman said that

she was interested. Clearly, there are major gaps in communication between men and women that lead to what may be an “awkward” or “embarrassing” encounter for the man.

Sexual Scripts and Traditional Gender Roles

Some men did seem as though they were trying to learn from their experience and engaging in more direct verbal communication with the woman in order to understand how they misperceived the woman’s sexual intent. However, it was difficult to determine whether this behavior was based in a true interest to correct one’s perceptions and behavior, or based on an inability to accept rejection and a sense of sexual entitlement. One respondent stated, “I tried to make a move on her, but once she rejected me I apologized and left soon after. Later the next day I contacted her to ask why.” Their conversation continued and allowed room for the man to understand that what he did was wrong and how he can change his behaviors for the future. Their encounter ended with, “We’re still friends. No hard feelings.” Open, honest conversation can enhance awareness and reduce the risk of nonconsensual sexual activity. However, these men were the exception. Many respondents expressed their confusion, disappointment, or explained why they misunderstood. Others did nothing, felt embarrassed or uncomfortable, walked away, and acted like the misperception had not happened.

One respondent “laughed the matter out and told her she was beautiful.” Instead of confronting his faults and trying to understand why she was not interested, he treated the situation as a joke and tried to alleviate the magnitude of what happened by complimenting her physical appearance. This may seem like harmless behavior, but not confronting one’s faults and walking away from them means one is likely to commit those same faults in the future (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007). Sexual scripts socialize men to read situations in a certain way, and walk away from them when the situation is not going as planned (Lenton & Bryan, 2005).

One man was told that the woman did not want to have sex that night. His response to that was, "I just walked away." The interaction ended "by us not talking anymore after that happened." As the literature states, the traditional male gender role makes it difficult for men to understand why women would not be interested in sex. These nonverbal "cues" are supposed indicators that she is leading him on, and therefore owes him sex. The thought that she might not want to go there with him is too difficult to bear, and he walks away. This scenario is not uncommon: One respondent wrote, "She just said she wasn't interested in having sex that night, despite the level of physical intimacy that was apparent...I became very embarrassed and simply said that it was ok and rolled over, went to bed...We just sort of fell apart. Stopped seeing her. She stopped calling me." The majority of male responses are passive, with no deeper, continued conversation about the rejection or interaction.

A small portion of participants kept trying to engage in the sexual behavior. Among these men, the majority ignored the woman's request or wishes. This often meant putting guilt and blame on the woman for leading him on, or putting pressure on the woman to continue the sexual interaction. A few examples include: "Apologized. But still tried to pursue her sexually," "I tried to bribe her or tell her why she should go with the flow," "I apologized and said 'I know you dress that way for a reason, and I feel silly ignoring that,'" "I said I was happy she did not want to take things further because I did not want to think of her as a slut," and "I stopped and probably said something like 'Okay. We don't have to. But you've got me all excited now.'" While we do not know the exact outcome of these situations (i.e., consensual versus nonconsensual sex), these men are clearly being sexually coercive by not listening to women, putting pressure on them, and by shaming them for the way they dress and act. Sexual scripts

reinforce this behavior, encouraging men to look for signs that the woman is interested, even if the signs are not present or accurate (Lenton & Bryan, 2005).

Men's assumption that women are "playing hard to get" and that "no means maybe" was seen time and again. One woman "told me that she didn't want to have sex." That man responded by telling her to "stop playing games." What games is she playing? She *directly* told him she was not interested. And, even if she did flirt, make eye contact, or make physical contact with him, these are not games or an indication that he should persistently pursue sexual activity after her refusal. She should be allowed and *encouraged* to vocalize what she wants or does not want at every step of that interaction; consent at one time does not mean consent throughout. The commonly accepted notion that men initiate and take, and women are submissive and give, is misinformed, misguided, and is what normalizes sexual assault. It is these small but strong statements that reinforce these binaries and put women in uncomfortable, invasive, and sometimes unsafe situations.

What Does Saying "Sorry" Mean?

As it came up in the literature and in a response above, many participants (25%) responded to being informed of the misperception with "I'm sorry," which may indicate they in part accept blame for what occurred. However, this is also a quick and easy way of dealing with the situation, which may absolve them of later guilt (i.e. "but I said I was sorry"). The presence of an apology however does not necessarily provide an indication that they understand what they did was wrong and misguided, nor does it indicate that they will change their behavior in the future. Providing an apology appeared to be just as likely to result in the man and woman remaining friends or going their separate ways, but very few times did it result in an explicit conversation about the misperception or the status of their relationship. Based on my qualitative

analysis, it is clear that the male respondents do not confront their misperceptions of sexual intent; they are often not communicating before, during, or after the interaction.

Findings and Discussion

The complexity of sexual assault, and the social conditioning factors leading up to it, requires a multidisciplinary approach towards studying, understanding and preventing it. First, we need to address attitudes and beliefs that normalize sexual assault, then provide programming which emphasizes the importance of, and gives men the skills to engage in productive verbal communication with potential sexual partners.

Addressing Attitudes and Beliefs that Normalize Sexual Assault

As research shows, our attitudes and beliefs affect the ways we behave and treat others (Bouffard, 2010, p. 878). First and foremost, programs must tackle the “normal,” or the commonly accepted thoughts and attitudes of many of us, particularly men, even if we are unaware that we have these thoughts and attitudes. “Beliefs that encourage forced sex, such as men’s sex drive is uncontrollable, a woman who has led a man on deserves what she gets, once a man has had sex with a woman he is entitled to have sex with her again, and women who have sex with many men don’t have the right to say no to any man are still surprisingly common” (Murnen et al., 2002; Abbey et al., 2011, p. 14). Making men aware of these rape-supportive beliefs must be addressed in *all* prevention programs.

Emphasis on Verbal Communication in Prevention Programs

As the research illustrates, prevention programs encouraging honest, verbal communication, especially on consent, is lacking. Programs need to develop effective methods to “teach college men and women to communicate verbally and directly about sexual preferences, desires, and consent and – identify strategies that will increase their tolerance for and comfort with doing so”

(Lindgren et al., 2009, p. 500). Until this is done, verbal communication about sex and intimacy will continue to be stigmatized and frowned upon. A possible way of going about this is teaching young men and women that direct communication can enhance sexual encounters and increase pleasure and desire (Lindgren et al., 2009); direct communication can be fun! Even more than that, it minimizes “risk and harm to oneself and one’s partner” (Farris et al., 2008). Framing consent and explicit communication in this way could change the way young people go about pursuing one another.

Addressing Misperceptions of Sexual Intent

This conversation goes hand in hand with a conversation about misperceptions of sexual intent. “It is critical to provide programming that also highlights (a) that there are gender-based differences in perceptions in sexual intentions and (b) the ways in which these differences can be exacerbated by alcohol” (Lindgren et al., 2009, p. 500). By doing so, young people can critically look at their interactions and understand how verbal communication could make these interactions more positive for everyone involved.

Comprehensive Prevention Strategies

“The ‘Monster Myth’ of rape [and other forms of sexual assault] includes the belief that rapists are only people we can identify as abnormal or weird – not someone you’d consider ‘normal’” (Johnson, 2016). Theory, literature, and programming must break away from this binary; people are not either “good” or “capable of violence”; it is much more complicated than that, and must be addressed as such. As Abbey et al. (2011) state, there is a need to develop more comprehensive theories and methods to explaining and adequately addressing sexual aggression (p. 11). The social-ecological model, a prominent public health behavior intervention and prevention framework discussed in the beginning of this paper, states that sexual assault

perpetration or risk is a product of multiple, interacting levels of influence: the individual, relationship, community, and societal influences (DeGue et al., 2012). Prevention programming must make clear how many forms of influence there are in the ways we act; this provides a comprehensive, holistic, and multifaceted strategy to addressing sexual assault.

Engaging Men: How Men Can Be Part of the Solution

Prevention programming can only reach its fullest potential if the programming intentionally works to address and engage men in this conversation and effort. Although the majority of men are not violent, all of us play a role in our current societal standards, which allow and normalize others to perpetrate (Berkowitz, 2004). Michael Flood's research is centered on violence against women, men's health, and gender justice; he asserts: "While some men are part of the problem, all men are part of the solution" (2011, p. 24). Why should men be part of the solution? Why should they take responsibility for preventing violence against women? As Alan Berkowitz, a specialist in all-male prevention programs, states, men must commit to this effort "because of the untold harm it causes to women in men's lives and the ways in which it directly hurts men. Violence against women hurts men when it results in women being afraid of or suspicious of men due to fear of potential victimization..." (2004, p. 1). Sexual assault is not just a "woman's problem"; in the end, everyone is hurt by it (Flood, 2011). "Rigid norms related to gender and power differentials between groups of men mean that many men also feel pressure to prove their manhood by using violence against other men" (Peacock & Barker, 2014, p. 582).

We must engage men in an honest, critical dialogue, approaching them as "partners in solving the problem rather than as perpetrators" (Berkowitz, 2004, p. 2). Working in ways that encourage learning rather than blame is a major element of successfully engaging men to prevent sexual assault. Once this environment is created and facilitated (often made possible in all-male

program spaces), men can more deeply and meaningfully address and change problematic attitudes and behaviors (Flood, 2011).

Flood (2011) writes about the six levels of intervention: strengthening individual knowledge and skills, promoting community education, educating providers and other professionals, engaging/strengthening/mobilizing communities, changing organizational practices, and influencing policies and legislation. Men must engage in prevention efforts at all levels; if we are to “transform gender inequalities” and make lasting, societal and systematic change, we have to address the issue as such (Flood, 2011, p. 23).

Limitations

This paper addresses a major gap in current sexual assault research and prevention through focusing on misperceptions of sexual intent. However, there are many limitations and implications for future research I was unable to conduct or address.

The data at hand are based on self-reports, which do not always present accurate information. The data is solely in the form of the male understanding of what happened, as well, and not the female. This is a major limitation of the data because we as researchers are only hearing one side of the story. Future research must ask these same questions of women to gain more understanding of how all people experience misperceptions of sexual intent.

The majority of research that already exists is about this age group, particularly about college students. Although this is a vulnerable population that deserves our attention, research and prevention should begin much earlier to adequately address this normalized societal issue.

Most research is U.S. based and heteronormative, as well. This perpetuates the cycle of silencing LGBTQ+ individuals. The research in this paper was conducted and analyzed with the lens of men as the people misperceiving the sexual intent of women, and fits the gender binary;

this excludes transgender individuals and women who misperceive sexual intent. We need to expand the research to include a wider range of participants to understand misperceptions of sexual intent and sexual assault as it affects everyone.

Conclusion

Misperceptions of sexual intent are often normalized and widespread; that is what makes them so dangerous. By acknowledging and addressing attitudes that support misperceptions of sexual intent and sexual assault, providing encouragement and strategies for the use of verbal communication, and by implementing a more holistic explanation of sexual assault as to help men better understand where it comes from, we can more effectively engage men to effectively combat misperceptions of sexual intent and ultimately, sexual assault.

Too many people have been hurt because they do not have the words to say yes, or say no. Too many people feel they are to blame because of some signal or cue that may have “indicated” consent. Too many people walk away thinking this type of behavior is okay, and worse, encouraged. We are not taught how to talk about intimacy, so we do not. Rather, we often base our actions on nonverbal, unclear indicators of interest; this leads to the objectification and silencing of so many who are left feeling that they are to blame. Each and every one of us has the potential to hurt someone else, and also to help someone else. We all have a say in how our interactions unfold; normalizing open and honest verbal communication is crucial to mitigate the interpersonal, relational, and societal issues we see today in how we go about sexually pursuing others.

Neither the man who touched me on that plane three years ago nor anyone can take away my strength and my resilience. No one can take away the right I have and will always have to my body, my desires, my voice and my consent. And no, I am *not* to blame. No matter where you

are, what you are wearing, or how physically close you are to others, no one has the right to touch your body without your consent. You and I and Anyone – we *all* have the right to feel safe in our bodies and our communities. Prevention starts here: With you, me, and the institutions and communities we are a part of.

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