

**College Students' Attitudes Toward Acquaintance Rape:
The Effects of a Prevention Intervention
Using Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

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Statement of the Research Problem

Rape is a major problem on college campuses which is well-documented in the literature (Adams & Abarbanel, 1988; Bogal-Albritten & Albritten, 1985; Branton, 1989; Burkhart & Stanton, 1988; Caron & Brossoit, 1992; Koss & Dinero, 1989a). According to these authors, the predominant form of rape on college campuses is acquaintance rape. A review of the literature and theory suggests that acquaintance rape on college campuses occurs, at least in part, because many males and females hold attitudes that support acquaintance rape. The intervention proposed by the researcher was an effort to change these attitudes.

The purpose of this study was to measure the effectiveness of a social work intervention on college students' attitudes toward rape. The intervention is based on a feminist model of prevention and uses cognitive dissonance theory to predict attitude change. The following questions were addressed: (1) Are there differences in males' and females' attitudes about rape and acquaintance rape? (2) Will student attitudes be less accepting of rape after exposure to a social work intervention based on a feminist model of prevention, designed to create cognitive dissonance and attitude change? (3) If attitude change does occur, will the change be sustained for at least six weeks? (4) After a period of six weeks, are there changes in students' attitudes or behavior, as defined by the student, which the student attributes to this intervention?

Research Questions

Rape is defined as forced sexual intercourse that is perpetrated against the will of the victim (Adams & Abarbanel, 1988). In acquaintance rape, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows. This may be a date or boyfriend of the victim, a casual acquaintance or a relative. According to Adams and Abarbanel, the type of force used may be physical violence, coercion or threats to harm the victim. Estimates indicate that 50-80% of all rapes are perpetrated by someone the victim knows (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Muehlenhard, Friedman, & Thomas, 1985).

Acquaintance rape is the form of rape which was the focus of this study. Although the actual incidence of acquaintance rape is unknown, there is evidence that the incidence is much higher than the number of reported cases indicates (Koss et al., 1987). According to a survey by Meyer (1984), over 20% of college women are the victims of rape or attempted rape. Koss et al. (1987) found in a national survey of college students that 27.5% of the women surveyed had experienced a rape or an attempted rape since the age of fourteen. This study indicated that eight of 10 rapes involved someone the victim knew, and over half (57%) of the rapes involved a date.

Current intervention strategies on college campuses involve various kinds of educational programs aimed at giving students information about rape and acquaintance rape. Very little is known about the effectiveness of programs developed to inform students of the problems of rape and acquaintance rape and to teach them strategies for prevention (B. Burkhart, personal communication July 8, 1992; Harrison, Downes & Williams, 1991). Also, few studies use theory-based guidelines in the development of rape prevention interventions or in the evaluation of these interventions (Gilbert, Heesacker & Gannon 1991).

Acceptance of rape can be measured by adherence to rape myths, defined as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists (Burt, 1980). According to Burt, strong acceptance of rape myths by individuals indicates an attitude of being accepting of rape, and rejection of rape myths indicates an attitude of being rejecting of rape. The program presented in this study was an attempt to challenge any rape myths held by students and to influence students' attitudes about rape so that they might become more rejecting of rape. Changing attitudes toward rape has the potential to reduce the incidence of rape on college campuses, although the reported incidence of rape may increase as awareness increases. According to Fishbein (1967), influencing attitudes is a step toward changing behavior. Therefore, if attitudes can be changed to be more rejecting of rape, the incidence of rape may begin to decrease. According to Parrot and Bechhofer (1991), an effective intervention should create cognitive dissonance among those holding rape-supportive beliefs.

The use of feminist theory as a framework for examining the phenomenon of rape and acquaintance rape is evident in a review of the literature (e.g. Burkhart, 1991, Burt, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1985; Koss & Harvey, 1991; Yegidis, 1986). Feminist theory contends that acceptance of rape myths, sex-role stereotyping, sexual conservatism, and acceptance of sexual violence against women all create an atmosphere which fosters the acceptance of rape and other forms of sexual assault (Burt, 1980; Koss & Burkhart, 1989; Shotland & Goodstein, 1983). A theme throughout most of the literature on rape (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Klemmack & Klemmack, 1976) is that coercive sexual behavior is a natural consequence of male dominance in our culture and is linked to an acceptance of interpersonal violence toward women (Burkhart & Stanton, 1988). The values contained in a feminist analysis of rape provide a nonblaming conceptual framework and encourage development of those psychological dimensions related to prevention of victimization at a cultural and personal level (Koss & Burkhart, 1989). Use of a feminist framework has implications for prevention and for policy development (Freeman, 1990).

Cognitive dissonance theory has implications for prevention of acquaintance rape. Exposure to accurate information about acquaintance rape should create cognitive dissonance in those persons who are accepting of rape and rape myths. This theory would predict that the individual will attempt to take some action to reduce dissonance. If cognitive dissonance can be produced for those students who are accepting of rape and rape myths, and alternatives proposed to alleviate the dissonance, it should be possible for attitude change to occur.

The literature also indicated that personalizing information presented to individuals maximizes the opportunity for attitude or behavior change to occur (Gray, Lesser, Quinn, & Bounds, 1990; Parrot, 1991). Using data gathered at individual universities which is relevant to the population being studied is indicated.

Hypotheses:

(1) There will be a statistically significant difference in attitudes for males and females based on pretest, posttest, and follow-up posttest scores (General Attitudes Toward Rape Scale, Larsen and Long, 1988), with females being more rejecting of rape and rape myths than are males.

(2) Students exposed to the social work intervention will have statistically significantly higher mean scores on the GATR scale posttest than will those students in the control groups.

(3) At a six week follow-up posttest, both males and females in the experimental groups will show no statistically significant change in GATR scale scores compared to their initial posttest scores.

(4) There will be no statistically significant difference in posttest and follow-up posttest scores for the experimental or control condition.

Methodology

The design of this study was an experimental design used to measure the effects of a specific social work intervention on college students' attitudes toward rape. Research hypotheses were developed by the researcher related to the research questions. The Solomon four-group design was used in this study with a qualitative component added to augment findings as appropriate. A pretest and posttest were administered to measure attitudes. A follow-up posttest to measure attitudes was administered six weeks after the intervention to assess whether any measured change in attitude was sustained for a period of at least six weeks. Qualitative questions were asked after the administration of the follow-up posttest.

The dependent variable in this study was attitudes toward rape as measured by the General Attitudes Toward Rape (GATR) scale developed by Larsen and Long (1988). There

were two independent variables in this study. The first independent variable was the sex of the subject. The second independent variable was a social work intervention on acquaintance rape based on a feminist model of prevention using cognitive dissonance theory to change attitudes.

The GATR scale was coded for computer analysis. Answer sheets for the pretest, posttest and follow-up posttest were scanned to obtain raw data. These data included the student identification number, scores on the GATR, demographic data, class, test (pretest, posttest, or follow-up posttest), and group assignment.

Using SAS (SAS Institute, Inc., 1989), the attitude scores were used to do several analyses based on the Solomon four-group design. Scores were analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA) at an alpha level of .05. A four-way factorial design was used to test the first two hypotheses. ANOVA was used to test main effects and to test for interactions of main effects. Main effects included program (experimental or control group), pretest (yes or no), class (class 1 or class 2) and sex (male or female). By testing the interactions of the main effects, all comparisons based on the Solomon four-group design were accomplished. This design rules out significant interactions between testing and the intervention and provides data for comparisons that will reveal the amount of interaction that occurs in the classical experimental design (Babbie, 1992). A repeated measure design was also used to test hypotheses using Tukey/Kramer post hoc tests for follow-up comparisons.

The subjects in this study consisted of two large undergraduate psychology classes of approximately 250 students each. Participation in the experiment was voluntary. The data collection instrument used in this study was composed of five parts. The instrument included a letter stating the voluntary nature of participation in the experiment, a demographic data sheet, the General Attitudes Toward Rape Scale (Larsen & Long, 1988) and an answer sheet for computer scoring, and a questionnaire with qualitative questions about the intervention. Based on the Solomon four-group design, students were divided into control and experimental groups, then given a pretest as appropriate. Those in the experimental groups then received intervention. The program consisted of an introduction and a presentation of data collected from the Mississippi State University campus and national data on stranger and acquaintance rape. The videotape, *Campus Rape*, (Burns, Freeman & Hoblit, 1990) was shown followed by a discussion of common rape myths and facts.

A handout with these rape myths and facts was given to each student. Students were advised before the program that because of the sensitivity of the subject, information about counseling and other resources on campus and in the community for victims, friends of victims, perpetrators or others with concerns about the subject would be available after the program. The GATR scale (Larsen & Long, 1988) was administered as the posttest instrument. A posttest was given to experimental groups following the intervention and to control groups following the program on alcohol on campus. After the posttest, all students were asked to complete a demographic data sheet. Before leaving, each student in the experimental groups was given a handout about rape myths and facts. There was a follow-up posttest (GATR scale) administered to all groups in each class to measure attitudes toward rape six weeks after the intervention. At

this time, students in the experimental groups were also asked to answer three qualitative questions and to include miscellaneous comments on the program or the topic.

Results

The General Attitudes Toward Rape Scale (Larsen & Long, 1988) was used to measure attitude change among 521 students participating the in initial pretest and posttest. Of this sample, 58% were male and 42% were female. A total of 426 students (57% male and 42% female) participated in the follow-up posttest.

Results indicated that male are statistically significantly more accepting of rape and rape myths than are females. In the control groups and in the experimental groups there were statistically significant differences in scores for males and females at pretest, posttest and follow-up posttest. Males in the experimental groups receiving the intervention had statistically significant change in attitude scores from pretest to posttest, indicating that attitudes became more rejecting of rape and rape myths. This change was maintained at the follow-up posttest. Even though males continued to hold more rape-supportive beliefs when compared to females, there was significant attitude change for males who were exposed to the intervention.

The findings indicated that the social work intervention was effective in changing attitudes toward rape to be more rejecting of rape and rape myths for males and females in experimental groups. There was no statistically significant difference in pretest scores for control and experimental groups. These results indicate that prior to the intervention there was no statistically significant difference in attitudes toward rape held by students in control and experimental groups. After the intervention there was a statistically significant difference in mean attitude scores, indicating that the intervention was effective in changing attitudes.

There was a statistically significant difference in both posttest and follow-up posttest scores between control and experimental groups. These results indicate that students receiving the intervention, both at posttest and follow-up posttest, were more rejecting of rape and rape myths compared to students in the control groups.

The results also indicate that six weeks after the posttest, attitude change was maintained, and there continued to be a statistically significant difference between scores for control and experimental conditions. The difference in scores for control and experimental groups at the follow-up posttest was expected since there was a difference at posttest. These results indicate that attitude change which was attributed to the social work intervention was maintained for at least six weeks. This change was maintained for both males and females.

Qualitative data collected indicated that many students thought the program gave them information they previously did not have about acquaintance rape and rape myths. The responses indicated that many students, based on their own assessment, had experienced a

change in attitude, behavior, or that they intended to change future behavior. The qualitative data presented indicated that the intervention did make a difference in attitudes about rape.

The data gathered from this experimental study indicated that the social work intervention designed to change student attitudes toward rape was effective in changing attitudes and that the attitude change lasted for a period of at least six weeks. Results of this study indicated that males and females have significantly different attitudes about acquaintance rape, males being more accepting of rape and rape myths than females, regardless of intervention. Even though both males and females experienced statistically significant attitude change after the intervention, the difference between males and females still exists. Responses to qualitative questions supported the results obtained in this study and indicated a need for further research and programming in specific areas.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Primary prevention has long been a role of the social worker (Boehm, 1958). According to Steiner and Moore (1979), 25% of college and university counseling centers employ social workers on a full or part-time basis. Social workers can offer this program as an effective primary prevention effort on college campuses. This intervention can serve as a tool for social workers working with student groups, classes and individuals. The intervention is particularly useful because it is well-defined, brief, and easy to present to large groups of students. Based on the data gathered in the qualitative part of the study, the intervention has the potential to change students' behavior as well as students' attitudes.

Based on the differences in males' and females' attitudes about rape, there is a need for more programs targeting males. Developing programs which encourage males and females to share perceptions about dating, appropriate sexual interactions, and communication is indicated. The difference in attitude scores for males and females indicates a problem which needs to be addressed by social work practitioners and researchers in primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts.

It is important that, as faculty and administrators at colleges and universities, social workers be educated to have an accurate understanding of the issue of acquaintance rape. Social workers as educators and policy-makers have the opportunity to influence the institution's response to acquaintance rape. The data gathered in this study can be used to support recommendations for campus policy changes.

Social workers can advocate for policy change and be instrumental in presenting educational and training programs. Social workers can also gather data on their own campuses to present to students and campus administrators. It is clear from responses in this study that personalizing the data presented in prevention programming can make a difference in student attitudes as suggested by Gray (1990).

Many students coming into the university system have already been victimized (Burkhart and Sherry, in press). School social workers and health and mental health social workers need to develop specific strategies for adolescents for prevention and treatment of stranger and acquaintance rape. Research by social workers on prevention of adolescent victimization is indicated based on the findings of this study.

Implications for social work practice also include expanding social work prevention efforts on acquaintance rape into targeted populations through other community agencies, such as community rape crisis centers, hospitals and health centers, mental health centers, and schools. Also, other agencies may be utilized in campus prevention efforts by social workers.

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