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College Students’ Misperceptions of Rape and Sexual Assault of Female Undergraduate

College Students

Jane Reid

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Abstract

This study examined undergraduate college students’ perceptions on the subject of rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college students. The study was based on the results of Littelton et al. (2009). Seven female undergraduate college students participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Using semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of a “typical” strange perpetrator rape scenario, a “typical” drug and alcohol rape scenario, and a “typical” date rape scenario and rate these three scenarios from the most common scenario (1) to the least common (3). The results of the study did not support the findings of Littelton et al. (2009). The results of the study found that participants were unable to answer or reported confusion in describing the “typical” date rape scenario. The results of the study significant as they provide insight about the average types of perceptions that college students hold about sexual assault and rape of undergraduate female college students. The results of the study can be utilized in educating college students about inaccurate perceptions of sexual assault and rape.
Introduction

In a recent article, Sean Spence (2017) discussed how identity theft was a rising concern for college students as roughly “…4% of the victims of reported identity-theft crimes were 19 years of age…” (N.P). Identity-theft victimization rates had also been found to increase among individuals ages 20-29 by almost 15% as well (Spence 2017). Along with the reporting of these rates, Spence also included information about ways college students could prevent against this type of crime as a majority of undergraduate college students fell into the 20 to 29 age range (Spence 2017 N.P.). While prevention tips and guidelines were presented in Spence’s article and in other related news outlets on this issue, other crimes that consistently victimize undergraduate college students—and with much greater consequences--tend to not garner the attention of media and news outlets.

Two specific types of often violent crime consistently victimize a reported 20% of female college students: rape and sexual assault (“Statistics About Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.). While a 20% victimization rate is alarming as it roughly purports to the victimization of one out of every five female college students, news coverage about increased identity theft is what is present in the media spotlight (“Statistics About Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.). While college students have access to articles and tips to aid them and their friends in recognizing identity theft and the harm of it, coverage about recognition of the issue of the high sexual assault and rape rate of female undergraduate college students is limited at best. The issue of increased risk of identity theft is
seemingly more important to address than why the rate of sexual assault and rape on college campuses continues to remain steady at a 20% victimization rate (“Statistics about Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.).

The consistently high rate of sexual assault and rape victimization of female college students has spurred research efforts in the social science fields. While research has examined a variety of topics on sexual assault among female undergraduate students, minimal research has been conducted on the perception and awareness of college students about rape and sexual assault on campus. It can be argued that it is necessary to conduct studies on college students’ perceptions of rape in order to obtain a basis for their education on the subject and how the issue continues to occur even if students possess knowledge.

In order to address this need, the following study was formulated, conducted, and analyzed in order to answer the question: What misperceptions do female and male college students hold on rape and sexual assault?

**Literature Review**

**Rates of Rape and Sexual Assault For Women**

Sexual assault and rape are two types of crime that are likely to occur to women within the United States of America. According to compiled research by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015), an estimated 20% of females become victims of sexual assault or rape at some point during their lifespan. Researchers also predict that they expect that about 300,000 women will become victim to sexual assault each year (Tjaden and Thoennes 2006). While one fifth of women within the United States are likely to experience the crimes of sexual assault and rape within their lifetime, the crimes
of rape and sexual assault remain the crimes least likely to be disclosed to law enforcement officials (“Statistics About Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.). Research has found that over 60% of victims of sexual assault choose not to disclose information about their sexual assault to law enforcement officials (“Statistics About Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.). This trend in lack of reporting by victims could indicate that the occurrence of sexual assault and rape is even higher than researchers predict. While the research above examines the sexual assault and rape victimization rate of women within the entirety of the United States of America, other research has found that a smaller, more specified population of women are just as or are more likely to become victims of sexual assault and rape: undergraduate female college students.

**Population of Undergraduate Female College Students**

Undergraduate female college students in the United States of America are a specific population of women in society that suffer a similar or sometimes greater likelihood of sexual assault or rape victimization. Research reports that 20% of undergraduate female college students will suffer from sexual assault or rape during the course of their enrollment (“Statistics about Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.). While the likelihood of rape and sexual assault is, on paper, the same likelihood that all women face within the United States of America, the consideration of various factors and variables for undergraduate female college students cause them to be more at risk.

**Size of College Campus**

One factor that garners consideration is the overall size of the college campus under examination. Colleges across the United States of America differ in enrollment of students depending on whether the college is deemed small, medium, or large in size.
Small colleges differ from large colleges as small colleges are typically characterized as having a few thousand students enrolled versus a large college having over triple and quadruple the student enrollment rate of small colleges (Freidman 2009: N.P.).

According to a report by U.S. News & World Report done in 2015, the average amount of students on a college campus in the United States of America was found to “…Be approximately 6,176…” (Friedman 2009: N.P.). While the size of college campuses may differ depending on characterization of size, the population estimate of all women in the United States of America only tends to differ depending on increases in population seen in estimates annually. While the estimated 20% sexual assault and rape victimization rate of all females in the United States accounts for large amount of females to suffer from these types of crimes, the rate of sexual assault and rape for female undergraduate college students is alarming when the various different sizes of college campuses are considered. (“Statistics About Sexual Violence, 2015). Due to the fact that this victimization rate is found steady across varying college campuses, the rate could be considered “alarming” as female undergraduate college students still suffer from the same likelihood of rape and sexual assault as a part of general population of females in the United States of America but in a setting where there is a smaller female population. In examination of the setting of a college campus, the application of this rate of 20% would imply that undergraduate females college students would most likely know acquaintances, classmates, roommates, or even close friends that become the subject of sexual assault and rape during their enrollment in college (“Statistics About Sexual Violence, 2015).

**Report Rate of Undergraduate Female College Students**
While female undergraduate college students may know other females personally who have become the victim of sexual assault and rape, there also remains a high likelihood that they would not know if a fellow undergraduate college student became a victim. The lack of knowledge about the victimization of fellow peers in a cohort at a college campus is high as research reports that only 10% of rapes occurring on a college campus are disclosed to law enforcement or campus police (“Statistics About Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.). The high lack of reporting occurring on college campuses about sexual assault and rape victimization suggests that the likelihood of sexual assault and rape may be even higher than that of all women of the United States of America.

**Alcohol as a Causal Argument**

In an effort to address the cause behind the high sexual assault and rape victimization rate of female college students, groups like board members of colleges have put the blame on one substance: alcohol.

Alcohol consumption has been utilized as a causal explanation to explain the high rate of sexual assault and rape of female undergraduate college students as research has found that a large portion of college students report consuming alcohol (Knight et al. 2002). In a study by Wechsler et al. (2002), the researchers found that of the college student population surveyed in the study, “…40.3% [reported that they] drank [alcohol] (but not at heavy episodic levels), 24.6% engaged in occasional heavy episodic drinking, and 19.5% engaged in frequent heavy episodic drinking…” (263, as cited by Knight et al. 2002).

While alcohol consumption is not mutually exclusive to the specific demographic of college students, some characteristics about the way in which college students
consume alcohol vary in comparison to other populations within society. Research has found that portions of college students engage in “binge or heavy drinking,” which refers to the consumption of a large amount of alcohol in the duration of a short period of time (Knight et al. 2002). Some researchers have formulated operational definitions in order to study binge drinking in college students, with Wechsler et al. (1992) defining it for the purpose of their study as “…Five or more drinks for men and four or more drinks for women in one sitting…” (263, as cited by Knight et al. 2002). While what constitutes “binge drinking” may differ depending on characteristics of the drinker, research has found that a large portion of students engage in binge drinking practices when they do consume alcohol. As stated earlier, Wechsler et al. (1994) found that almost 20% of college students surveyed reported that they had engaged in binge or heavy drinking behaviors in a period of two weeks (p. 263, as cited by Knight et al. 2002). While binge drinking practices are also not mutually exclusive to college students, the high rate of binge drinking behaviors displayed by college students is part of the evidence utilized to support the alcohol causation explanation for the high sexual assault rate as alcohol consumption has found to have been a component in a large percentage of sexual assault and rape cases (Abbey et al. 1998).

While sexual assault and rape occur without alcohol consumption, research has found that alcohol consumption is often a part of sexual and rape cases in terms of alcohol consumption having had occurred by the victim, perpetrator, or both parties prior to a sexual assault or rape occurrence (Abbey et al. 1998). Previous research had found that out of the population of the United States of America as a whole, 55% of the female victims and almost 75% of male perpetrators drank alcohol prior to the occurrence of the
rape or sexual assault (Abbey et al. 1998:168). Other research found that in date situations that turned into rape or sexual assault scenarios, “…55% of the males [sampled] and 53% of the females [sampled] had consumed alcohol…” (Abbey et al. 1998:168). While alcohol use has often been reported having been used in sexual assault and rape cases, the rationale behind the alcohol causation explanation argument for sexual assault and rape is based on research about perceptions individuals have about alcohol consumption and the physiological effects caused by certain levels of alcohol consumption (Abbey et al. 1998).

In terms of alcohol consumption, alcohol consumption in individuals has been found to alter behaviors and beliefs in individuals. Previous research found individuals associate sex and alcohol consumption together (Abbey et al. 1998). Males have reported being more interested in sex and more physiologically aroused when they have been drinking alcohol (Abbey et al. 1998). Males have also had been found to become physiologically aroused when the discussion of rape situations had occurred (Abbey et al. 1998). Positive correlations have found between males who reported feeling more sexually aroused and more willing to engage in sexual intercourse and increased sexual and forceful actions (Abbey et al. 1998). While not all males report having had these feelings and beliefs in terms of alcohol consumption, the findings discussed above indicate that alcohol has been found to impact beliefs and behaviors of male subjects.

While beliefs and behaviors have been found to be altered by the factor of alcohol consumption in males, research has found that perceptions males hold about females also are altered in terms of whether or not they consume alcohol (Abbey et al. 1998). In support of the alcohol consumption and sex finding discussed in the previous paragraph,
research indicates that females who consume alcohol have an increased chance of being perceived by both males and females as more interested in engaging in sexual activities or intercourse (Abbey et al. 1998). Along with willingness, the research findings indicate that women who drank or consumed alcohol were also found by male and female participants to be easier to talk into sexual activities or intercourse (Abbey et al. 1998).

The previous research findings discussed above about alteration of behaviors, belief and perceptions by males and females due to alcohol consumption support a hypothesis that some researchers have proposed to explain why sexual assault and rape are highly correlated to alcohol consumption by the victim or the perpetrator. Some researchers have inferred that the combination of the physiological effects of alcohol consumption, such as alteration of thought processes in the brain, and misperceptions formulated and tied to alcohol consumption and rape, explain why rape and sexual assault occur when alcohol consumption has occurred by the victim or perpetrator (Abbey et al. 1998). The hypothesis dictates that the physiological effects of alcohol, such as interference of “…higher order cognitive functions like abstraction, conceptualization, and the interpretation of complex stimuli…” in the brain in the perpetrator, victim, or both cause them to be less aware of cues and behaviors that indicate interest in sexual activity or not (Abbey et al. 1998:168). Due to the fact that previous research indicated that males and females have been found to perceive women who drink alcohol as more interested in the engagement of sexual activities and behaviors, males may be more likely to misinterpret advances of females and engage in sexual assault or rape behaviors due to expectations they formulated about females and alcohol consumption (Abbey et al. 1998). Accounting for the physiological effects alcohol can have on individuals
dependent upon level of consumption, both the victim and the perpetrator may be unwilling to consent or may misinterpret sexual behavior as willing when no consent was provided by the victim of the assault (Abbey et al. 1998).

While physiological effects of alcohol could impair both the cognitive processes of the perpetrator or the victim, the rationale behind the alcohol causation argument is based on the hypothesis that previous misperceptions about alcohol and sexual behavior combine with physiological impairments of alcohol consumption to explain why sexual assault and rape occur due to alcohol (Abbey et al. 1998). This hypothesis could be argued to have been utilized so frequently in an attempt to explain the high rate of sexual assault and rape of female college students due to the fact that previous research findings have found that portions of college students engage in periods of drinking alcohol in high quantities (Knight et al. 2002). As the rate of some of these behaviors, like binge-drinking, are relatively high, the alcohol causation argument could help to explain the high rate of sexual assault and rape seen on college campuses.

While the alcohol causation argument, in terms of the hypothesis proposed by some scholars about how alcohol could effect sexual assault rates, the alcohol causal explanation contains severe limitations due to the fact that does the explanation does account for the rape and sexual assault occurrences of female college students by sober perpetrators.

*Fallacies of the Alcohol Causation Argument*

One of the fallacies in the alcohol-causation argument is that the population of females, outside of female college students, consume alcohol and are still proportionally at a lower risk for sexual assault and rape (“Statistics about Sexual Violence, 2015”).
Another fallacy about the alcohol-causation argument is that it does not explain or account for why rape and sexual assault occur when the perpetrator, victim, or both parties are sober and did not report alcohol consumption prior to the event. Along with sober parties, the alcohol causation argument is also flawed, as individuals who have been drinking are not necessarily cognitively impaired. While alcohol can affect some cognitive processes, the amount of alcohol that causes an individual to become cognitively impaired is varied and dependent on the individual (Abbey et al. 1998). If either the victim, perpetrator, or both parties have consumed alcohol but not to the level that impaired their cognitive function, then the alcohol causation argument would then be limited to just the factor of misperception and false beliefs by the parties involved.

While the alcohol causation argument is limited due to the fallacies like the fact that not all rapes and sexual assaults of college students involve alcohol consumption, a portion of the argument and hypothesis included in the alcohol causation argument would still be applicable in terms of explaining the cause of rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college students in cases of both alcohol consumption and non alcohol consumption: the formulation of false misperceptions and beliefs that influence behavior and expectations of behavior (Abbey et al. 1998). In terms of an argument, this argument has been referred to in this paper as the false misperception argument.

Formulation of False Misperceptions Argument

Another causal argument that is being offered up by researchers on the subject of the high rate of sexual assault and rape of undergraduate female college students on college campuses is simply that victims, along with perpetrators, peers, and classmates, are holding false perceptions or views about the nature, occurrence, and type of sexual
assault and rapes that occur to female undergraduate college students on college campuses (Littleton et al. 2009).

This causal explanation outlines that college students are endorsing or believing information that is false or untrue about aspects of rape and sexual assault. False information, also known as “rape myths,” are explanations or beliefs that are incorrect when compared to legal, sociological, and biological definitions of rape and sexual assault (McMahon 2010). This explanation entails that college students endorse these false definitions of rape and sexual assault as correct which allows these certain behaviors and actions to become socially acceptable behaviors to follow in the setting of a college campus (Littleton et al. 2009). The harm in the normalization of these socially acceptable behaviors is that perpetrators may begin to believe they did not commit a crime of sexual assault or rape because the normalization allowed for the performance of those certain actions. (Littleton et al. 2009). This causal explanation involving the formation of false perceptions about sexual assault and rape could also begin to explain why the victimization disclosure rate is lower on college campuses than in comparison to the disclosure rate of the entire population of rape victims in the United States of America.

The misperception argument also offers an explanation as to why undergraduate female college students hardly document the occurrence of sexual assault or rape. While the victim’s experience may legally fall under the classification of rape or sexual assault, the victim may not view it as a rape or a sexual assault due to normalization of false perception (Littleton et al. 2009). The victim may have heard of a similar experience or occurrence happening to other undergraduate female college students in their cohort or
that they know from connection or acquaintance. If these other victims also choose to not view the assault or rape as an occurrence of sexual violence due to personal belief and normalization of false perception, why would another peer, classmate, or acquaintance choose to report or disclose their assault to law enforcement like the campus police? While some female undergraduate college students may not recognize that their experience of sexual violence falls under the legal classification of rape or sexual assault, others may not disclose their assault because they feel that they would not be heard due to the normalization of these false misperceptions about rape and sexual assault on college campuses (Burnett et al. 2009).

While the proposed causal explanation that the normalization of false perceptions about rape and sexual assault is contributing to the high rate of victimization among undergraduate female college students could provide new insight and information to sociologists, few studies have been conducted that have tested this explanation. A study conducted by Littleton et al. (2009) examined this explanation through the completion of structured interviews with female college students on a college campus. While Littleton et al. (2009) studied perceptions of college students utilizing qualitative methods, other researchers have yet to formulate and conduct studies that utilize qualitative methods to examine the perceptions of both female and male college students. The examination of the perceptions of both female and male college students is important in studying as males are generally the perpetrators in the rapes and sexual assaults being reported on college campuses across the United States of America. Through study of both female and male college students, researchers could attempt to understand the difference between
what rape myths and information males and females perceive as true and if that could attempt to explain the victimization rates of undergraduate female college students.

The following study will attempt to extend the results of Littleton et al. (2009) by examining the perceptions that female and male college student’s hold about rape and sexual assault. In the study conducted by Littelton et al. (2009), the researchers found that participants described three specific types of rape scenarios most often when they were asked about their rape perceptions (p. 801). These three scenarios were a rape scenario involving a strange perpetrator, a rape scenario involving drugs and alcohol, and a date rape scenario (Littleton et al. 2009:801). Out of these three scenarios, the strange perpetrator rape scenario was described most frequently, the drug and alcohol scenario was described the second most by participants, and the date rape scenario was described the third most often by participants (Littleton et al. 2009:801).

Littleton et al. (2009) also found that participants reported common elements and components in the strange perpetrator rape scenario, the alcohol and drug scenario, and the date rape scenario. In examining the specific results of the strange perpetrator rape scenario, the majority of participants reported that the strange perpetrator rape scenario would involve violence and the use of a weapon by the perpetrator (Littleton et al. 2009:801). In terms of the alcohol rape scenario, the majority of participants reported that the perpetrator in the scenario would use a date rape drug like a rohypnol to incapacitate the victim (Littleton et al. 2009:801). In the date rape scenario, the majority of participants reported that the perpetrator would be charismatic in terms of character and that they would have planned the rape scenario (Littleton et al. 2009:801).
Based off the findings of Littleton et al. (2009), this current study will ask female and male college students to describe their perceptions of a “typical” strange perpetrator rape scenario, a “typical” drug and alcohol rape scenario, and a “typical” date rape scenario would present as and consist of for female college student. The study will also ask the participants to rank the likelihood of occurrence of each rape scenario occurring to a female college student victim.

Hypotheses for the current study are based on the results of Littleton et al. (2009). For the strange perpetrator rape scenario, the researcher hypothesized that the descriptions would include use of violence and weapon by the perpetrator. In terms of the drug and alcohol rape scenario, the researcher hypothesized that descriptions of the scenario would include the mention of rohypnol. For the drug and alcohol rape scenario, the researcher hypothesized that respondents would believe that the rape would be premeditated or planned by the perpetrator and that the perpetrator would be described as being charismatic.

In terms of the likelihood of the scenario, the researcher hypothesized that the strange perpetrator rape scenario would be rated as the scenario most likely to occur to a female undergraduate college student victim.

**Theoretical Perspective**

In order to guide the proposed research on the study of rape and sexual assault perception by female and male undergraduate college students on college campuses, the researcher will be utilizing specific sociological theories that could aid in support. For the proposed topic of formulation of misperceptions about sexual assault and rape, the
researcher will be utilizing the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism to guide the focus of the research.

*Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic interactionism is the most applicable and useful sociological theory to utilize in directing this research as the theory examines how individuals continually develop definitions for social phenomena over time. Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level sociological viewpoint, which examines how individuals develop understanding for society through social engagement with others (Carter and Fuller 2016). The focus is on the individual in this theory as the individual is the one who develops the meaning for an item, object, or phenomena through engagement with other individuals (Carter and Fuller 2016). The individual creates meanings for objects or phenomena in order to know how to properly act within the context of society without deviating from norm (Carter and Fuller 2016). Important to this theory is that the meanings created for objects or symbols alter over time due to interaction with a variety of individuals as well as being placed in different environments (Carter and Fuller 2016). Through creation of meanings, the individual therefore knows how to act or interact with objects or symbols. When many individuals create these definitions, many actions occur which help to formulate the functioning and structure of the society under examination.

While symbolic interactionism is known as micro-level theory in which the individual is the focus, the theory still relates to helping to explain or guide research on a group or institution like a college campus as the creation of meanings leads to actions which impact the functioning of society. Symbolic interactionism would be the most insightful theory to utilize in examining the formulation of false misperceptions by
college students on college campuses as it would help to explain why individuals do not perceive or understand the full definition of rape and why women may not view a certain type of rape scenario as the most common type of rape scenario to occur on college campuses (Littelton et al. 2009). Due to the fact that individuals create meanings through engaging or communicating with others in a social setting, the individuals may view the occurrence of an event like rape as permissible if others do as well.

An example of this would be an individual going to a party on a college campus and hearing an inebriated student neither confirm nor deny consent to engage in sexual activity. If the individual were to discuss with the students the next day about what they overheard and they were to define that event as “not rape,” then the individual could formulate a definition of rape that does not fit the legal definition. In this example, if the student formulated a definition about rape that it is okay to engage in sexual activity with a student who neither confirmed nor denied consent when they were intoxicated, their definition for rape and sexual assault would be misinformed and untruthful. In terms of the law, consent is always needed in order to engage in sexual activity with another individual and consent is invalid if the student is determined to be in a state of inebriation (Abbey 2002). Violation of both these would make the sexual activity technically rape (Abbey 2002). However, if the student who overheard the conversation and discussed the conversation with other students found that they did not define what happened as rape or sexual assault, they would most likely formulate a definition of rape that did not include obtaining consent and accounting for inebriation of the individuals engaging in sexual activity.
The formulation of these definitions helps individuals understand how to act in the future, which could possibly influence their actions in a similar situation or cause them not to intervene in this activity. The formulation of various definitions, as discussed, can lead to perpetuation of false information—relative to science and law—known as rape myths (McMahon 2010). The endorsement of rape myths could contribute to the finalization of false definitions of rape and sexual assault. When these definitions become fully formulated perceptions in individuals, individuals would then begin to hold false perceptions about details of sexual assault and rape, such as commonality and most frequent type to occur. With the lack of support by other individuals or even authorities on campus, victims may not desire to report their rape or sexual assault, leaving the perpetrator being free and able to commit actions again.

While the explanation that the perpetuation of false misperceptions based on rape myths aids in the causation of the high sexual assault and rape rates on college campuses, a systematic study can be guided by the theory of symbolic interactionism. Individuals create meanings for objects and symbols through engagement with others with those meanings guiding the actions of the individual (Carter and Fuller 2016). The theory does not state that meanings created align with formal laws and regulations of society (Carter and Fuller 2016). Definitions of social phenomena are impactful and important as they guide actions of the individual, whether accurate or inaccurate. While the individual is only one person, the perpetuation of inaccurate definitions could lead to formulation of false meanings by multiple people (Carter and Fuller 2016). While one person’s action would not necessarily alter the functioning of society, a large amount of people’s actions could influence society. Symbolic interactionism, therefore, could help guide the study
of how the endorsement of rape myths could contribute to the formulation of false perceptions by a multitude of individuals, which would in turn impact rates of sexual assault and rape seen on college campuses.

Methods

While research has been completed on areas like rape culture, the study of rape perception by both female and male college students has been limited. The proposed research will look at the effect that the endorsement of false rape definition has on the development of false rape perceptions in college students. In order to study the subject of rape perception on the campus of a small college in the Rocky Mountain west, the researcher conducted qualitative research. The specific details on how the researcher conducted the study are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Description of Qualitative Method

The qualitative method that was used in the study was semi-structured interviews. This method was utilized as it gave the researcher immediate feedback on individuals’ perceptions of rape. Qualitative data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews was appropriate for the study of rape perception as individuals gave more detailed information and description in an interview setting than they would through the use of a quantitative format. The researcher also observed the participants’ body language when they answered the questions.

The structured interviews took place on the campus of a small, liberal arts college. Prior to interview conduction, the requirements of various gatekeepers were met. The researcher gained approval for research from submission of the research proposal to their
thesis advisor and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After IRB and advisor approval, the researcher initiated the participant selection process.

**Participant Selection Process**

The researcher recruited interviewees through their fulfillment of basic criteria. The first criterion was that the participant had no previous relationship or contact with the interviewee. The second criterion measure was that the interviewee was a student on the small, liberal arts college and that they were willing and able to volunteer their time in order to participate in the study.

The participants were contacted and recruited initially by Gender Studies faculty at the liberal arts college studied. The researcher asked the Gender Studies faculty to forward an email written by the researcher that contained an informational paragraph that described the purpose, nature, and contact information of the researcher (Appendix A). The informational paragraph also includes the location of the sign up sheet where interested participants could sign their name to indicate their interest in participation (Appendix A).

Due to initial lack of response, the researcher used secondary recruitment measures to obtain participants. With permission, the researcher discussed information about the study in one class session of the Gender Studies class. Individuals interested were able to indicate their interest in participating in the study by signing their name on a sign up sheet.

**Participants**

Eleven female undergraduate college students indicated their interest in participating in the study by signing-up on the sign in sheet. After contact from
researchers, four participants did not end up participating in the study due to conflicts or lack of response to the contact. In total, seven individuals from the original sample size participated in the study.

The seven participants were given an anonymous identifier when transcribing and completing data analysis measures. The seven participants were assigned a single letter, with the first participant being identified as “Participant A” and the last participant being identified as “Participant G.”

Location and Conduction

The interviews were conducted in a private room on the campus of the liberal arts college studied. In the location, the researcher interviewed participants through the use of a semi-structured interview model in which the researcher asked the participants to describe a “typical” strange perpetrator rape scenario, alcohol-drug scenario, and date-rape scenario and asked what type of scenario occurred was experienced most frequently by female college students. The responses of the participants were recorded through the use of recording equipment and written field notes by the researcher.

Ethical Concerns

Like other social science research studies, the study did raise some ethical concerns. One of the major ethical concerns in the study is the adverse effect the discussion of rape potentially could have had on the participant. The discussion of rape could have adverse effects on the participant as the participant could have witnessed or been a survivor of rape. The discussion of this topic could trigger them into having anxiety attacks or lead to decline in their mental health. Along with triggering an
individual, the discussion of rape perception could have inadvertently lead them to disclosing information about a rape.

In order to combat these ethical concerns, the researcher listed a warning on the consent form and on the sign up sheet for the study about the potential side effects of the subject matter (Appendix B, C). The participant was also notified during the informed consent process that they could leave the study or not answer one of the selected questions at any time. Following the conduction of the study, a form with access to on-campus counseling resources and the on campus rape and sexual assault survivor advocate was given to participants in the event that they wanted to discuss their experiences with another staff member (Appendix D).

Semi-Structured Interviews

In the semi-structured interview portion, the participant responded to series of approved and prepared questions asked by the researcher. While the main portion of the data collection occurred through structured interview, the researcher also took field notes based on the observations of the interviewees. In the field notes portion of the study, the researcher observed language use and body language of the participant.

Concepts Examined In Interviews

The concepts that the researcher examined are the descriptions and perceptions of rape scenarios and how they are similar or different from the

Process Of Data Transformation

After the interviews took place, the researcher transformed the data into an analyzable form through transcription of the recordings into a word document.
Through transcribing and then analysis, the researcher was able to identify themes and sociological components present in the majority of three rape scenarios the participants were asked to describe and in the rankings that the participants were asked to formulate about the likelihood of the each of three scenarios occurring to a female undergraduate college student victim.

**Results**

From the interviews, the researcher was able to identify common key words and themes that were present in a majority of the participants’ responses in the study. The common key words and themes present in the stranger perpetrator scenario, the drug and alcohol scenario, and the date rape scenario and the common rankings of the likelihood of each scenario are discussed below.

*First Scenario: Typical stranger perpetrator rape scenario*

The first typical rape scenario that participants were asked to describe is their perception of what they thought of when they heard the phrase “the typical stranger perpetrator rape scenario.”

*Setting*

In terms of the setting, four of participants discussed how they pictured that a typical strange perpetrator rape scenario would occur at night. While the setting component of nighttime is present in the majority of the participants’ dialogue about the strange perpetrator rape scenario, the actual location of the rape scenario varied amongst the participants. The locations described by the participants included dormitory lodging on a college campus, a party, a classroom, a street, and a park.

*Nature of rape*
In examining the nature of the rape or assault, a common component present in two of the participants’ responses to the strange perpetrator rape scenario is that the attack comes as a surprise to the female undergraduate college student victim. Participant D and E both described that the assault came as a surprise to the victim. This commonality is not present in all of the dialogue of the participants.

**Perpetrator**

In terms of the perpetrator, the responses varied in terms of how the participants described the perpetrator in the attack. Six of the participants repeated that the participant would have no knowledge of the identity of the perpetrator, similar to what was stated in the question.

One of the participants stated that the perpetrator would most likely be male. Participants C stated that the perpetrator would most likely be a male.

Two of the participants described the clothing that the participant would be wearing. Participant C specifically described that the participant would be wearing “darker clothing,” and participant F mentioned that they did not know if there was a common aspect in terms of appearance of the perpetrator but that types of clothing that the perpetrator wears a characteristic that often comes to mind when thinking of the strange perpetrator rape scenario.

**Victim**

In examining characteristics described about the victim, two of the participants described that the female is isolated and participating in an activity by herself when she is assaulted. Participant C described that the victim could be “…Unlocking her car…” and Participant E described the victim as “…Walking outside…” prior to being assaulted.
Second Scenario: Typical drug and alcohol rape scenario

The second scenario participants were asked to describe was their perception of what they thought of when they heard the phrase typical drug and alcohol rape scenario

**Setting**

A key component present in all the participant’s responses is that they thought that this type of scenario would take place at a party. In terms of location, the party was described as taking place anywhere like in a house, a fraternity, or another placed located on or off the college campus.

As stated in the scenario, another key component present in all of the participant’s responses is that both drugs and alcohol would be present and available for consumption at the location of the party.

**Nature of rape**

In terms of the nature of rape in how the rape would occur, the responses of the participants varied. Two of the participants suggested that the rape could be premeditated in nature in the case that the perpetrator slipped a date rape drug like rohypnol into the drink of the victim. Participant G and B both described a drug and alcohol rape scenario that involved the perpetrator using rohypnol to incapacitate the victim.

While two of the participants described the rape as being premeditated in nature and involving the use of date rape drugs, the other five participants described an alcohol and drug rape scenario that involved the perpetrator taking advantage of the inebriated nature of the victim. This scenario was described as being both premeditated or planned by the perpetrator or not planned. Situations that were described as not being premeditated in nature were rape scenarios in which the perpetrator is seen taking
advantage of an inebriated female undergraduate college student victim without prior planning of getting the victim inebriated or incapacitated. Participant D described the alcohol and drug scenario as being premeditated by the perpetrator. Participant D described an example of a premeditated situation like one where the perpetrator purposely makes alcoholic beverages sweet tasting in nature in order to entice females into consuming alcohol in large quantities and gets them inebriated at quicker rate. Participant D stated that the perpetrator “…Is very aware of what they are doing,” when they increase the quantity of alcohol in drinks in order to possibly take advantage of the inebriated state of a female undergraduate college student victim.

While Participant D described a scenario where the rape was more premeditated in nature by the perpetrator, four of participants described what they perceive as the nature of a typical drug and alcohol scenario as not being premeditated in nature. Participants C, E, F, and G described the nature of a drug and alcohol rape scenario as the perpetrator taking advantage of the inebriated state of the victim in the moment of a situation and assaulting the victim in that situation.

Perpetrator

In terms of the perpetrator, three of the participants described the perpetrator as being male. Two of the participants stated that that the victim knew the perpetrator. While not all of the participants specifically stated that the perpetrator knew the victim, it can be inferred that if the victim knew the identity of the perpetrator, than the perpetrator would be familiar with the identity of the victim. As only two of the participants stated this component in their description of their perception of a typical drug and alcohol rape scenario, this idea can be only an inference.
Five of the participants also stated that the perpetrator would be inebriated due to alcohol or drugs in this rape scenario.

Victim

In examining the participant’s descriptions of the victim in their perception of a typical drug and alcohol rape scenario, six of the participants described the victim as being inebriated due to alcohol or drug consumption. Another key component present in a two participant’s responses is that the participant had knowledge of the perpetrator’s identity or is familiar with the perpetrator.

Third Scenario: Typical date rape scenario

In the third typical date rape scenario, the participants were asked to describe what they thought of when they heard the phrase “typical date rape scenario.”

Setting

In terms of setting, the participants had a variety of responses to where they perceived a typical date rape scenario occurring. The responses consisted of a car, a house, and a secluded location (Participant E, Participant D, Participant A).

Nature of rape

Similarly to descriptions about the setting of the date rape scenario, the descriptions varied among participants in their descriptions about the nature of the rape. A common component in the responses of four of the participants is that the rape would come as a surprise to the victim and would not be planned by the perpetrator in advance. The description of the nature of the typical date rape scenario is similar to some of the participant’s responses to the nature of the typical drug and alcohol rape scenario in that
the perpetrator took advantage of a situation to rape the victim in the moment and that the action was not planned in advance.

One of the participants also included use of drugs or alcohol in their responses about date rape. One of the participants discussed how in a date rape situation, the perpetrator and victim could have been consuming alcohol or drugs on their date and the use of alcohol or drugs by the perpetrator, the victim, or both could be a way in which the perpetrator takes advantage if the victim is too inebriated to consent to participation in sexual activity.

**Perpetrator**

One of the participants described as being male. Following with the title of the scenario, all of the participants also described that the perpetrator was on a date or outing with the victim. Three of the participant’s described the male as having knowledge of the identity of the victim or being familiar with the victim. Interestingly, two of the participants mentioned that the perpetrator may know the identity of the victim through the use of dating or hook-up applications and websites like Tinder. While the use of the applications does not mean the perpetrator is personally familiar with the victim, the perpetrator would still have basic knowledge about the victim if they met and made a prearranged date through dating and hook-up applications like Tinder.

**Victim**

In terms of the victim, four of the participant’s described the victim as being comfortable with the perpetrator in the scenario. Four of the participants discussed how the victim would have knowledge of the perpetrator’s identity or would have been familiar with the perpetrator on a personal level. Two of the participants discussed how
the victim could have met the perpetrator through websites or dating and hook-up applications like Tinder.

*Ratings of likelihood of rape scenario occurrence*

After discussion of perceptions of the three rape scenarios, the participants were asked to rank the three scenarios above from the rape scenario they perceive as being most likely to occur to the female undergraduate college students and the least likely to occur. The participants were asked to assign a numerical value to each of the three scenarios with 1 being the rape scenario that they perceive as being the least likely to occur to female undergraduate college student victims, 2 being the second most likely, and 3 being the least likely.

In terms of the ratings, five of participants rated that the alcohol and drug scenario would be the most likely or common rape scenario to occur to female undergraduate college students. The second most likely type of rape scenario to occur to female undergraduate college students is perceived as being the date rape scenario. The least likely rape scenario perceived as occurring to female undergraduate college student victims is the strange perpetrator rape scenario.

**Discussion**

The results of the study support none of the hypotheses, based on the results of Littelton et al. (2009).

For the strange perpetrator rape scenario, all of the participants did not discuss the use of violence or a weapon in the description of the nature of the scenario. In
contrast, two of the participants described the perpetrator as surprising the victim in terms of how the rape takes place or the nature of the assault.

For the drug and alcohol rape scenario, five of the participants did not mention the use of rohypnol as the method in which the perpetrator incapacitates the victim. While two of the participants did mention the use of rohypnol, the other five participants did not mention any use of a date rape drug like rohypnol in describing this type of rape scenario. The hypothesis about the mentioning of the date rape drug would still not be supported even though a portion of the participants mentioned the use of rohypnol as the majority of participants in the results of Littleton et al. (2009) did describe the component of rohypnol in their responses (Littelton et al. 2009:801).

In terms of the date rape scenario, only one of the participants described the scenario as being premeditated or planned by the perpetrator in advance. In contrast to Littleton et al. (2009), none of the participants described the perpetrator as being charismatic.

The lack of support for the hypotheses suggests that the participants in this study hold perceptions that align with objective data about the nature and the likelihood of the rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college student victims. The hypotheses based on the results of the Littleton et al. (2009) did not support current research about rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college student victims. For example, all of the participants in this study did not describe the use of violence or a weapon by the perpetrator in their description of a strange perpetrator rape scenario. This finding supports current research statistics that have found that more than 90% of female college student victims reported the victim not using force. The lack of support for the hypotheses
suggests that the participants in this study hold perceptions that align with objective data about the nature and the likelihood of the rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college student victims. The hypotheses based on the results of the Littleton et al. (2009) did not support current research about rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college student victims. For example, all of the participants in this study did not describe the use of violence or a weapon by the perpetrator in their description of a strange perpetrator rape scenario. This finding supports current research statistics that have found that more than 90% of female college student victims reported the victim not using force or a weapon in describing the rape or sexual assault (Littleton and Radecki Breitkopf 2006; Littleton et al., 2009; McMullin and White 2006; as cited by Littleton et al., 2009, p. 801).

The results of the study indicate that the perceptions that the participants in the study hold align with what statistics and research on rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college students. In both the strange perpetrator rape scenario and the alcohol and drug rape scenario, the majority of the participant’s responses aligned with what current research reports about the nature and likelihood of the two types of rape scenarios (Littleton et al. 2009). The results of both the strange perpetrator rape scenario and the drug and alcohol scenario suggest that current knowledge possessed by undergraduate college students is growing and is more accurate to what research reports about the nature and likelihood of rape of female undergraduate college students.

While the results of both the strange perpetrator and drug and alcohol rape scenarios indicate that the participant’s perceptions align with what current research reports, the results of the date rape scenario indicate that confusion still exists in terms of
perceptions of date rape scenarios. In contrast to the previous two scenarios, two of the participants in the study were unable to describe characteristics and features about a date rape scenario. While two participants were unable to even describe their perception on the date rape scenario, the majority of participants expressed hesitation or confusion when asked to describe a “typical” date rape scenario. This finding suggests that there are still areas of knowledge that the college student participants struggle in understanding and defining like the specific type of rape scenario of date rape. The results about perceptions of date rape scenarios are important as they suggest that participants are unable to recognize or fully comprehend the elements of a date rape scenario. The lack of awareness of what date rape consists of and presents could be potentially harmful to individuals in that situation as they may not be able to realize what is occurring or report characteristics and features of the rape. In a vulnerable population, like female undergraduate college students, lacking knowledge about date rape could be potentially more harmful as they already at a high risk for experiencing rape or sexual assault on college campus (“Statistics About Sexual Violence,” 2015: N.P.).

The results of the study did not support the hypotheses formulated from the findings of Littleton et al. (2009) and found the existence of common misperceptions amongst the participants; limitations of the study could have impacted these results. One of the limitations of the study is that was unable to recruit male participants to participate in the study. While one goal of the study was to examine the perceptions that females and males hold about rape and sexual assault, a gender comparison was not possible with an all-female subject pool. The use of a sample size of just females could have influenced
the findings as the majority of females could commonly hold perceptions of rape and sexual assault that males do not commonly endorse or hold.

Another limitation of the study is that a portion of the participants was enrolled in a Gender Studies class at the liberal arts university where the study was conducted. The participants in this sample size may have possessed more knowledge about rape and sexual assault than other students, influencing the majority of the conclusions formulated about the results.

While the current study possesses limitations, the results of the study suggest that undergraduate college students may hold more accurate perceptions about rape scenarios and their likelihood of occurrence to female undergraduate college student victims than previously found in studies like that of Littleton et al. (2009). This finding can be supported due to the lack of support for hypotheses that were derived from the findings of Littleton et al. (2009). While the study did suggest that undergraduate college students may hold more accurate perceptions about rape scenarios and their likelihood of occurrence to female undergraduate college students, the results of the study suggest that misperceptions do exist due to the lack of clear understanding about date rape scenarios.

**Conclusion**

The results of the study suggest that more research needs to be completed in the area of research on sexual assault and rape perceptions of female undergraduate college student victims. Specifically, research in areas like date rape perception of undergraduate college students should be completed in order to better understand why the results of the
current study indicate that misunderstanding exists over this definition. Research involving male undergraduate college student participants should also occur as the lack of research completed on male perceptions of rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college students hinders the understanding researchers have about rape and sexual assault perceptions that undergraduate college students hold.

References


Appendix

Appendix A

Information paragraph about study sent by faculty members

Title of Study: College Students’ Perceptions of Rape and Sexual Assault of Female Undergraduate College Students

In this research study, the researcher is interested in examining Carroll College undergraduate students’ perceptions about rape and sexual assault of female undergraduate college students. In order to complete this study, the researcher is looking for 8-10 Carroll College undergraduate students interested in volunteering their time as participants in the study. The study will be 30 to 45 minutes in length. If interested, please go visit the sign up sheet in St Charles Hall 110 and sign you name and email so the researcher can contact you to arrange a time to conduct the study.

Appendix B
Title of Study: College Students’ Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Rape of Female Undergraduate College Students

You are being asked to participate in a research study about perceptions of sexual assault and rape of female undergraduate college students. From this study, the investigator(s) intend to learn about the perceptions of female and male college students about rape and sexual assault scenarios and if they differ from documented cases.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate college student at Carroll College. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to fill participate in a semi-structured interview with one- one with researcher. The researcher will ask you open-ended questions about rape and sexual assault scenarios. The study is expected to involve eight to ten participants and will be conducted over a single period of thirty to forty-five minutes.

Participation in this study may involve certain risks, including time out of your day and the triggering of potential negative emotional reactions in response to the subject matter. However, the researcher has taken precautions to minimize risk of psychosocial harm. The study is of no direct benefit to you.

If you choose to participate, the cost to you will be 30 to 45 minutes of your time.

Your privacy is important to us. Confidentiality of records identifying you will be maintained by locking physical documents in a locket cabinet in St Charles Hall.

Further information about this research study may be obtained by contacting Janie Reid at (206)-348-6117 Or jreid@carroll.edu. Additional questions about the rights of human subjects can be answered by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Alan Hansen (406) 447-5401 or ahansen@carroll.edu.

I, _____________________ (name of subject), agree to participate in this research. The investigator has thoroughly explained the nature and process of this research to me. I have read the above risks involved with this study. I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in this study and that refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I also understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. To the best of my knowledge I have no physical or mental condition that would be adversely affected by my participation. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.
I, ________________________ (name of subject) certify that I am 18 years-old.

________________________________________
Signature of Participant

________________________________________
Printed Name of Participant

________________________________________
Signature of Witness

________________________________________
Printed Name of Witness
Appendix C

**Sign Up Sheet for Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Email</th>
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Appendix D

Script for Sexual Assault and Rape Semi-Structured Interview

Hello, My name is Janie Reid and I am the head researcher and investigator of this study entitled “College Student’s Perceptions of Rape and Sexual Assault of Female Undergraduate Students on College Campuses.”

In this study, I am interested in learning more about Carroll College Student’s perceptions of sexual assault and rape on college campuses and if these perceptions differ from documented statistics and external data on rape and sexual assault.

In this study, I will be asking participants to describe their perceptions about three types of rape and sexual assault scenarios that could occur to a female undergraduate student on or near a college campus. The types of scenarios are strange perpetrator rape scenario, a drug and alcohol rape scenario, and a date rape scenario. After description of these scenarios, the participant will then be asked to describe what scenario is most likely to occur to female undergraduate students and why. The descriptions of these scenarios will be recorded through note taking by myself and through audio recording through a transcription device.

You are being provided with an informed consent sheet that describes the potential risks that could occur to participants through participation in this study. The investigator has taken all measures to eliminate and reduce potential harm that could occur to the participant through participation in this study. The Carroll College Institutional Review Board has approved this study. As a participant, you have the right to withdraw at any point in this study if you feel you cannot continue. If you have any concerns or questions following your participation in the study, the contact information for the head chair of the Institutional Review Board and the head investigator of this study is provided for you on your informed consent sheets.

At this time, please read and fill out the informed consent sheet if you still would like to participate in this study.

Following your participation in this study, you will a sheet of paper containing contact information to counseling and law enforcement services on or affiliated with the college campus. These services have been notified about the conduction of the study and are resources that participants can go to in the event that the subject matter of the study triggered or provoked negative emotional reactions.

I would ask you now to please turn off any electronic devices. Again, I thank you for volunteering to participate in this study, as I would not be able to complete this study without your participation.
Appendix E

Questions for Sexual Assault and Rape Perceptions Semi-Structured Interview

1. Describe your perception of what a typical strange perpetrator rape scenario would present as and consist of for a female undergraduate college student victim.

2. Describe your perception of what a typical drug and alcohol rape scenario would present as and consist of for a female undergraduate college student victim.

3. Describe your perception of what a typical date rape scenario would present as and consist of for a female undergraduate college student victim.

4. Out of the three scenarios you described above, rank and describe in order which scenario you perceive as occurring most frequently to female college students with “one” being the most common and “three” being the least common.
### Contact Information for Services on or affiliated to the Carroll College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Phone Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carroll College Counseling Services Location: Guadalupe Hall Wellness Center</td>
<td>(406)-447-5441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If you determine that you are in crisis, let the office manager know and your appointment can be expedited</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carroll College Victim Advocate from The Friendship Center, Location: Room 108 O’Connell Hall</td>
<td>(406)-447-4362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Friendship Center</td>
<td>(406)-442-6800</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>24 hour crisis line</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Title IX Coordinator: Renee McMahon Location: Room 214 O’Connell Hall</td>
<td>(406) 447-5501</td>
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