Changing Perceptions of Sexual Violence Over Time

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"Perceptions include people's views and ideas about the causes and impact of sexual violence. These are most often understood by exploring people's attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence in general as well as their thoughts about victims and perpetrators. Understanding the way in which perceptions of sexual violence have evolved over the years is important for a number of reasons. It acknowledges the positive changes that have occured in shifting societal attitudes about sexual violence, while also offering a roadmap of future directions the field needs to take in engaging communities to further develop their understanding of the issue."

The acknowledgement of sexual violence as a major social problem occurred relatively late in our country's history, emerging during the 1960s and 1970s. This was largely due to the efforts of the anti-rape movement which was born out of the civil rights and feminist movements (Bevacqua, 2000). Since that time, advocates have achieved numerous, far- reaching milestones to make the problem of sexual violence more visible. Major and positive shifts have occurred in the way our society responds to and views sexual violence (Gavey, 2005). Such shifts include: increased public awareness of the problem, many more services for survivors, widespread legislative reform, additional research and funding to understand the issue, and implementation of prevention education in communities across the country.

Despite this impressive progress, more work is needed to shift people's attitudes toward supporting victims and holding perpetrators accountable. There is evidence that a gap exists between those who are actively involved in the field of sexual violence (such as advocates, practitioners, and researchers) and the general public. In particular, the way the public perceives the causes of sexual violence, their definitions of sexual violence, and their ideas about victims and perpetrators appear to be lagging behind those of advocates and experts in the field. This gap was most recently explored in a report by the FrameWorks Institute on "American Perceptions of Sexual Violence," where the authors concluded that there are major and complex differences in the ways that experts and the public think about the causes, outcomes and solutions related to sexual violence (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to review the research available on changes in societal perceptions over the past few decades. Perceptions include people's views and ideas about the causes and impact of sexual violence. These are most often understood by exploring people's attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence in general as well as their thoughts about victims and perpetrators. Understanding the way in which perceptions

of sexual violence have evolved over the years is important for a number of reasons. It acknowledges the positive changes that have occurred in shifting societal attitudes about sexual violence, while also offering a roadmap of future directions the field needs to take in engaging communities to further develop their understanding of the issue. Below, we provide a historical overview regarding perceptions of sexual violence, and then review the ways perceptions have changed over the past few decades regarding the definition of sexual violence, and views of victims and perpetrators. We conclude with implications for advocates and future directions.

Author's notes:

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on sexual violence in adulthood, with child sexual abuse warranting separate attention.

The author acknowledges that the terms "victim" and "survivor" are both used in the field of sexual violence, and that the term "survivor" connotes the strength and resilience of those who have experienced this type of crime. For the purposes of this paper, the term "victim" is used to reflect the larger public conceptualization and language predominantly used in the research literature.

Historical overview

Early studies of social perceptions of sexual violence suggested that most people pictured the crime in an extremely narrow way, involving rape in situations where the victim was violently attacked outside by a stranger at night (Anderson, 2007; Gavey, 2005). In this "classic stranger rape stereotype," those victims who were considered to be "legitimate" were typically women who were not engaging in any "questionable" behavior such as drinking alcohol or dressing suggestively (Anderson, 2007; Dumont, 2003). According to this stereotype, clear physical force was used by the perpetrator, which was regarded as evidence that in no way had the victim consented (Dumont, 2003). Perpetrators of sexual violence were typically viewed as strangers who were psychologically disturbed, pathological men who preyed on women and children (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). Together, these stereotypes about rape, perpetrators and victims have served as a powerful blueprint for what society has considered a "real" rape, and who is a "real" victim (Dumont, 2003; Estrich, 1987). These stereotypes still influence perceptions that people have today.

Over the years, many scholars and those working in the field of sexual violence attempted to challenge the classic rape stereotype. The 1970s introduced feminist writing on the issue of rape, largely concerned with redefining it with a focus on holding the perpetrator accountable. This included framing it as an issue of power and control, not mental illness (e.g. Brownmiller, 1975; Griffin, 1971; Russell, 1975). During the 1980s, advocates and researchers emphasized that an exclusive focus on stranger rape prevented recognition of the majority of sexual assaults, which were committed by acquaintances (see Koss, 1987). As a result, "acquaintance rape" became a major public concern, and the topic was seized by the media (Parrot & Bechhofer, 1991). Since that time, a large body of research has evolved that explores sexual assault occurring in acquaintance situations, particularly on college campuses.

Despite the production of a significant body of research and expertise that contradicts the classic stranger rape stereotype, there is evidence that many individuals in current times still understand rape according to this image, or that there are elements of this stereotype that persist, especially in subtle ways. This lag is demonstrated by research which documents the way the public defines sexual violence, as well as through their perceptions of perpetrators and victims. Each of these is further explored below.

What constitutes sexual violence?

Perceptions of what constitutes sexual violence have broadened over time but are still emerging (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). Early, legal definitions

of sexual violence focused only on rape, describing it as "carnal knowledge of a woman, not one's wife, by force and against her will" (Spohn & Horney, 1992, p. 21). This narrow definition of sexual violence included three essential elements: vaginal penetration, use of force, and absence of consent (Spohn & Horney, 1992). Advocates and feminists questioned this definition in the 1970s, pushing for legal reforms and an expanded understanding of sexual violence. Laws have continued to change over the decades to reflect a definition of what constitutes sexual assault that is more sensitive to the needs of victims (see Spohn & Horney, 1992, for review), yet the shift in societal attitudes is not necessarily keeping pace. Below, we explore how perceptions have changed over time regarding the three essential elements in the traditional rape statute.

Continuum of sexual violence

Prior to rape law reform in the 1970s, sexual violence was defined exclusively as vaginal penetration. Research studies in the 1980s demonstrated that women reported experiences of a wide range of other forced and coerced sexual acts in addition to rape (Gavey, 2005). Since that time, state laws have broadened their definitions to include a number of other acts (Spohn & Horney, 1992). There is evidence that the definition of sexual violence continues to expand to include a wide spectrum of behaviors. For example, the Centers for Disease Control (2009) describes sexual violence as "…a range of offenses, including a completed nonconsensual sex act (i.e., rape), an attempted nonconsensual sex act, abusive sexual contact (i.e., unwanted touching), and non-contact sexual abuse (e.g., threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, verbal sexual harassment)."

Similarly, over the years, those working in the field have proposed a broad spectrum of behaviors that support sexual violence. Advocates and educators describe a continuum of sexual violence, suggesting that a wide range of behaviors are linked to one another (Kelly, 1987; McMahon, Postmus & Koenick, 2011; Stout, 1991). At one end of

the continuum are behaviors that are generally considered sexually violent in our society, including rape. These acts are recognized as crimes in our culture. They are judged more harshly and carry legal ramifications and punishments (Stout, 1991). At the other end of the continuum are behaviors that are more commonly accepted, including sexually degrading language, pornography, and harassment (McMahon et al, 2011). The behaviors at this end of the continuum are often normalized as a part of our culture and their connection to sexual violence is not widely recognized nor judged as harmful (Stout, 1991). The behaviors on the less severe side of the continuum are important because they contribute to a culture of violence that supports and tolerates the more severe forms of violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Sanday, 2007; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Lydia Guy has pointed out that the continuum should be re-visioned to understand that in addition to sexism, all forms of oppression (such as racism, classism, heterosexism) should be acknowledged as contributing to a culture that allows sexual violence (Guy, 2008).

While this broadened definition may be familiar to advocates and those working in the field, it appears that the community at-large retains a much more narrow definition of sexual violence, understanding it mostly as vaginal penetration. In particular, community members may not understand the link between less obvious behaviors with more blatant forms of sexual violence. For example, McMahon et al. (2011) explored the continuum of sexual violence among 951 college students and found that students were more able to identify acts at the more blatant side of the continuum as problematic, such as rape, but not the less recognized, more subtle forms, such as harassment. Other research shows that individuals characterize sexist and degrading language about women as harmless and unrelated to violence (McMahon, 2007; Stout & McPhail, 1998). These differences may be due, in part, to differing views of the causes of sexual violence. For example, in the FrameWorks report, the authors found that experts from the field use a continuum to talk about sexual violence and view it through a lens of "cultural

context," recognizing sexual violence as linked with larger cultural systems and societal level factors such as sexism (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010, p. 4). On the other hand, members of the public often regarded sexual violence as an individual-level occurrence, typically the result of moral failing or lack of self-protection, without identifying the connection with larger societal factors such as sexism (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010, p. 4).

These studies show that although many who work in the field find the continuum of sexual violence to be a useful tool, it is not necessarily understood by the public. This suggests that further work is needed to translate the continuum of violence to the community in ways that are clear, relevant, and meaningful.

Use of force and consent

Early rape laws required proof that the victim had not consented, and that force had been used, typically through evidence of physical harm (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992; Estrich, 1987). While this "resistance requirement" has been removed from the laws, research shows that many individuals still believe physical harm proves lack of consent, thereby meeting the criteria for legitimate or "real" rape. For example, in the recent study by the FrameWorks Institute, the authors found while most respondents understood sexual violence as non-consensual, unwanted and forced, many believed that acts of sexual violence must result in some sort of physical harm (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). The issue of defining rape by evidence of physical harm is also visible in the legal system. Dumont (2003) found that while other elements of the stereotypical stranger rape perception may be changing, the issue of physical harm is still significant, and those victims who experienced injury were most likely to report to authorities. Additionally, another study showed that police officers were more likely to believe that a sexual assault occurred and charge the perpetrator if there is evidence of physical injuries to the victim (McLean & Goodman-Delahunty, 2008).

Hamby and Koss's (2003) series of focus groups with a diverse group of individuals about their

definitions of sexual violence found that participants described a complex continuum of coercion. At one end they described the use of physical force and a clearly non-consensual assault, and at the other end, a fully consensual sexual experience. The authors found that in between these two ends, individuals described many "shades of gray" (p. 252), and varied perceptions of what is consensual or coerced. Their research reinforces that talking about sexual violence as simply either forced or not forced does not adequately address individual's complex notions about consent.

The issue of consent and alcohol is another area that shows the gap between legal reform and public definitions of rape. Over the years, federal laws and most state laws now indicate that a victim who is intoxicated is unable to give consent. However, there is evidence that the public still questions whether an act should be considered rape when alcohol is involved. A number of studies have shown that individuals hold victims more accountable if they were drinking alcohol, yet perpetrators are judged less harshly if they consumed alcohol (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). In a recent study by Stewart and Jacquin (2010), they found that when mock jurors were presented with scenarios that involved the victim willingly using alcohol, they were likely to find her less credible and more worthy of blame. The public discourse around this issue is somewhat complex and subtle as well. For example, in her study with college athletes, McMahon (2007) found that when alcohol was used by the perpetrator, some respondents indicated a belief that rape could happen "accidentally" or "unintentionally".

Related to the issue of consent is the issue of marital rape. Early laws stated that married women could not be raped. The issue of consent was non-existent within marriage. It was not until 1993 that marital rape became a crime in all 50 states (Ferro, Cemele & Saltzman, 2008). While our laws now declare rape within marriage as a criminal act, perceptions within society remain mixed. In her review of marital rape, Yllo (1999) explained that although marital rape was criminalized, it was still yet to be regarded as a social problem or public issue. Current research

supports that this is still a challenging issue for the field. For example, Ferro et al's (2008) study with undergraduate students found that participants were more likely to support false beliefs about rape in scenarios depicting assaults within marriage as compared to acquaintance situations. Other research indicates that even professionals working with victims in domestic violence programs may not ask victims directly about marital rape because of feeling uncomfortable discussing intimate issues (see Bergen, 2006 for a review of research related to marital rape). This reluctance may be connected to our societal views regarding the intimacy of marriage, and the complexity of defining consent (Yllo, 1999).

Together, these studies suggest that perceptions of what counts as sexual violence have evolved over the decades. There have been important changes, especially in our legal system. Despite this critical progress, it appears that the community at-large still holds onto some early conceptions of sexual violence, including that it results in physical harm and includes some evidence that it was clearly non-consensual. Altering these ingrained ideas about sexual violence is a challenging task for advocates and those in the field.

Who commits sexual violence?

As a part of the stranger rape stereotype, perpetrators were typically regarded as mentally ill predators. During the mid-1900s, society as a whole perceived rape as an issue of psychological illness rather than a criminal offense, and therefore many men convicted of committing rape were often assigned to psychiatric hospitals. An emphasis on rape as a form of sexual deviance, or abnormal sexual behavior, contributed to the development of the "sexual psychopath" image that inspired increased public concern (Freedman, 1987).

A number of studies have contradicted this image over the past few decades, revealing that many sexual assault perpetrators are not mentally ill but rather "everyday" type men. For example, a body of research on college campuses has established that

anywhere from 6% to 14.9% of men report behaviors that meet the legal definitions for attempted or completed rape (Lisak & Miller, 2002). David Lisak's work has been instrumental in highlighting the role of the "undetected rapist," a male who is an average person, who commits repeated assaults yet is not reported. This type of rapist uses physical violence only when verbal and psychological coercion fail (Lisak & Miller, 2002).

Despite this information, the general public still stereotypes perpetrators as violent strangers. For example, in her recent study with 119 undergraduate students in the UK, Anderson (2007) asked participants to describe what they considered to be a "typical" rape and found that participants conceptualized rape according to the classic stranger rape stereotype rather than the acquaintance rape scenario. In particular, participants described perpetrators as male, using force, grabbing the victim, attacking at night, and resulting in trauma for the victim. Similarly, the FrameWorks study found that respondents perceived perpetrators as sick, mentally disturbed predators (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). Participants tended to view poor upbringing, poverty, and lack of education as "making" predators. Additionally, Krahe, Temkin, Bieneck and Berger's (2008) study with over 1,500 prospective lawyers found that the perpetrator was found to be more liable when he assaulted a stranger and used force.

Additionally, racism has come into play since our country's origin, sculpting perceptions of who could be a rapist (Estrich, 1987). Throughout history, men of color have been disproportionately accused of rape, often did not receive fair judicial processes, and received harsher penalties than white counterparts (see Gavey, 2005 for detailed discussion). The "myth of the black rapist" was often used as a justification in early days for lynching, usually when a man of color was accused of sexually assaulting a white woman (Apetheker, 1977; Brownmiller, 1975; Donat & D'Emilio, 1992). A number of recent studies (Donovan, 2007; George & Martinez, 2006; Varelas & Foley, 1998) found that black men were viewed as more blameworthy perpetrators than

white men, especially when the victim was a white woman (although George & Martinez, 2006, found that interracial rapes of any kind were regarded as more serious than those that occurred intra-racially). Most of these studies were conducted with college students; therefore, further research within the community is also needed. Additionally, there is a lack of research available exploring whether racism significantly impacts perceptions of perpetrators from various racial and ethnic groups.

It is clear that misperceptions about perpetrators and their accountability still persist. The historical stranger rape stereotype is surprisingly still operating for many individuals, who report perceptions of perpetrators as psychologically disturbed. Our beliefs about perpetrators are reflective of our thoughts about the causes of sexual violence. These beliefs are linked to how we treat victims and how we plan prevention efforts. If we believe that perpetrators are not entirely accountable for sexual violence, we may blame victims, even if unintentionally. If we focus only on individual characteristics as the cause of sexual violence, we fail to see the larger picture of factors that contribute to the perpetration of sexual violence such as community norms.

Perceptions of victims

Over the years, research literature on perceptions of sexual violence victims has grown exponentially. Research indicates that public perceptions are often victim-blaming in nature, including beliefs that the victim's behavior or character provoked the assault, and that she asked for it or enjoyed it (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). There is evidence that blatant victim-blaming has decreased over the years, yet the extent of this change is questionable and quite complex.

Rape myth attitudes

Most commonly, researchers have measured public attitudes about victims through the assessment of "rape myth" acceptance, originally defined by Burt (1980) as, "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs

about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). Rape myths typically blame the victim and/or excuse the perpetrator, such as beliefs that the way a woman dresses or acts indicates that "she asked for it," or that rape occurs because men cannot control their sexual impulses. Research indicates that women are blamed more for rape than other crimes such as robbery (Bieneck & Krahe, 2011). Victim-blaming has been well documented as resulting in serious, negative consequences for survivors including apprehension about reporting, self-doubt and blame.

A substantial body of literature has evolved over the years to measure rape myth acceptance. Research has provided us with a further understanding of who is more likely to adhere to rape myths (see Currier & Carlson, 2009 and Suarez & Gardalla 2010, for excellent reviews). Many studies indicate that in recent times, individuals generally have a low level of rape myth acceptance (Ferro et al, 2008). However, other research suggests that rape myths are still very much present in our culture. Evidence of this can be found in media coverage of sexual assaults. The media is a key indicator of public perceptions because it is often a reflection of our cultural attitudes and beliefs. An example of the influence of the media is an analysis of news coverage of the recent Kobe Bryant case. In this study, Franiuk, Seefelt, Cepress & Vandello (2008) analyzed 156 newspaper articles about the case and found that nearly 42% endorsed some type of rape myth. The most common was "she lied." The researchers also found that those individuals who read a rape-myth endorsing article versus those who read one that was not were more likely to blame the victim.

Additionally, research suggests that blaming the victim has not disappeared, but rather, has become more subtle over time. Blatant forms of victim blaming have become socially unacceptable, and our traditional measures of rape myth acceptance may not detect this shift (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). For example, Ferro et al's (2008) study found that college students knew that forced sex was rape and that the victim should not be blamed, however,

they were less clear about how accountable the perpetrator should be. This was further illustrated by a study conducted with college student-athletes, where McMahon (2007) found that respondents would not directly blame the victims for their assault, but expressed the belief that women put themselves in bad situations by dressing a certain way, drinking alcohol, or demonstrating other behaviors such as flirting. Similarly, the FrameWorks report found the presence of a complex discourse around victim blaming. The participants in the study overwhelmingly stated that victims are not responsible for their assault. However, the authors discovered a "deeper assumption about responsibility and blame," where participants commented that individuals are responsible for being aware of their surroundings and protecting themselves (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010, p. 19). The participants went on to talk further about certain situations that victims put themselves in, making them more vulnerable, such as going to bars or dressing provocatively.

This body of research presents a complex picture of perceptions of victims. On one hand, blatant forms of victim blaming appear to have become socially unacceptable, which is an important step in changing perceptions. However, the research suggests that these attitudes have not disappeared, but rather become more covert and subtle, which presents a new set of challenges for those working in the field.

"Real" Victims?

Early perceptions of sexual violence indicated that certain victims were considered legitimate, "real" victims and others were not (Estrich, 1987). Research suggests that while notions of who can be a victim have expanded in some ways, there still exists a subtle yet powerful uncertainty about members of certain groups of people. These are often based on assumptions about gender, race, ethnicity and moral behavior.

For example, most of the work on understanding perceptions of rape victims has focused on women as victims. One of the changes over recent years,

however, is a small but increasing number of studies drawing attention to the experience of male victims. This research appears most often within the context of child sexual abuse. There is little research looking at men's experiences of sexual assault during adulthood, but we are learning more and more about it. In their review of this emerging literature, Davies & Rogers (2006) note that consistently, research on perceptions of male sexual assault victims finds that gay victims are more harshly judged than men assaulted in heterosexual situations. Interestingly, a small pocket of research indicates that homophobic attitudes are highly correlated with blaming the victim (see Davies & Rogers, 2006). There is almost no literature available on perceptions of male victims sexually assaulted by a female, nor research on perceptions of sexual violence occurring in lesbian relationships.

It is also clear that racism has impacted our view of "real" victims, with women of color historically excluded, dating back to slavery when black women were viewed as property of their masters and rape was a legal impossibility (West, 2006). Some scholars argue that the criminal justice system still regards the rape of black women less seriously than white women (Wriggins, 1983). Additionally, research suggests that there may still be public attitudes that view black women as more promiscuous and therefore more blameworthy for their sexual assaults, with these attitudes held more often by men than women (Donovan, 2007).

Moral judgments by the public may also influence the perception that certain groups of people cannot be "real" victims of sexual violence, even though research is starting to shed light on their experiences. For example, women sex workers experience extremely high levels of sexual violence, yet public views of these women often prevent them from seeking assistance, especially when compounded by other issues such as drug use, homelessness, and HIV (Romero-Daza, Weeks & Singer, 2003; Surratt et al, 2004).

We still do not know much about perceptions of sexual violence about and among various ethnic and cultural groups. There is a growing body of research indicating that cultural norms and barriers exist for a number of groups such as American Indian women (Hamby, 2008); Latinas (Low & Organista, 2000), Asian women (Lee & Law, 2001), and women in the military (Turchik & Wilson, 2010), to name a few. These cultural barriers may prohibit women from defining acts as sexual violence and coming forward to report. This means that we do not have an accurate sense of the prevalence nor perceptions about sexual violence in various groups (Lira et al, 1999).

Implications for practice and research

It is clear that advocates and others working in the field of sexual violence have achieved a number of important gains over the past few decades. Efforts to reduce victim blaming and to hold perpetrators accountable have increased and influenced legislative reform, service delivery, and general attitudes about victims and perpetrators. However, there is evidence that discrepancies exist between advocates and larger communities. Based on the research revealing gaps between advocates and the public, four main areas are identified in this paper as needing attention:
1. shifting educational efforts to the causes of sexual violence,
2. addressing subtle victim blaming,
3. finding ways to engage communities, and
4. developing culturally-specific interventions.

Shifting educational efforts

Research suggests there are discrepancies between the public and advocates on a basic conceptual level. The public reports a narrow definition of sexual violence, and misinformation about who are perpetrators and victims. This may be in part because beliefs about causes of sexual violence are deeply ingrained, and thus influence people's perceptions of victims and perpetrators. Addressing people's underlying views about the causes of sexual violence is the priority. While advocates and those in the field see causes of sexual violence as multi-

level and including broad factors, the predominant public view frames sexual violence as more of an individual problem due to poor upbringing or personal problems. Therefore, merely providing communities with the information that most assaults are committed by someone known to the victim – a common educational approach – is not reaching the deep-seeded misperceptions about the reasons why perpetrators commit acts of violence and what can be done to address the problem (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). Educators need to seek ways to address communities' understandings about the causes of sexual violence. This can be done by incorporating interactive activities that facilitate a discussion of the causes of sexual violence as a part of training and education efforts.

Based on the current review, it is also apparent that those working in the field must be careful that education efforts do not operate on the assumption that everyone is familiar with the language or concepts that are second-nature to advocates. For example, it is important for educators to clearly explain the continuum of violence and how these behaviors are linked, while providing examples of the behaviors. One way to do this is by engaging community members in a discussion of the continuum by asking them to describe behaviors that they view as linked to sexual violence. Advocates can use clips from popular media or lyrics from music to generate conversation about the connection with sexual violence. The curriculum from "Bringing in the Bystander" also includes an interactive exercise to engage participants in exploring the continuum of violence (see Moynihan, Eckstein, Banyard & Plante, 2010). Additionally, Lydia Guy (2008) presents a visual tool to depict the continuum of violence that may be useful for advocates (available at http://www.acha.org/sexualviolence/docs/ACHA_PSV_toolkit.pdf).

Additionally, there is a need for further, more sophisticated research to explore the gap between the public and professional views on what constitutes sexual violence. While research such as the FrameWorks report provides a foundation for

understanding this gap, their conclusions should be considered with caution because their sample was very small. Their study can be replicated with larger samples to provide more conclusive information. Additionally, beyond asking the public what they define as sexual violence, it is important to understand why. For example, Gavey (2005) suggests that we need better research to understand why some women report experiences that meet the legal definition of rape yet do not label it as such, why they reject this label, and how advocates can best respond to their experiences.

Addressing subtle victim blaming

Another finding of this review is that education about sexual violence has provided individuals with the knowledge that blatant forms of victim blaming are unacceptable, but these may exist in a more covert manner. Many of the messages delivered by advocates have made their way into the public psyche, at least on some level, as most individuals identify rape as wrong, can define it as non-consensual, and no longer blatantly blame a victim for her assault (Gavey, 2005; O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). However, this change in public discourse must be interpreted with caution, as there is evidence that attitudes that the victim has some level of responsibility is still operating in more subtle ways. Therefore, advocates are challenged not to rely on surface responses provided to questions about sexual violence, and to discover ways to tap into the more subtle expressions of victim blaming. Educators can carefully select scenarios or examples of sexual assault that present more complex situations such as the use of alcohol or marital rape to open dialogue with community members.

Engaging communities

Based on the nature of these discrepancies, it is evident that those working in the field of sexual violence must develop strategies to further bridge the gap that exists with the public around understanding sexual violence. Continuing to provide community education and to raise awareness about sexual

violence is clearly a priority, but the approach must be re-examined. Traditionally, education programs have addressed audiences as potential victims or potential perpetrators. Since most people do not fit either of these categories, information presented about sexual violence may feel impertinent to the majority of individuals. Therefore, finding ways to engage communities through inclusive means is important so that sexual violence is perceived as an issue that is relevant to all community members.

Bystander education is an example of one strategy that frames sexual violence as a community problem, and one that all members have a responsibility to help resolve (Banyard, Plante & Moynihan, 2004). According to this approach, bystanders can intervene before, during, or after an assault occurs to help the situation (Banyard et al., 2004). The bystander model fits with recent calls for more ecological approaches to prevention that move beyond changing individuals to changing peer and community interactions and norms and behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007; Casey & Lindhorst, 2007; Moynihan, Potter, Banyard, Stapleton, & Mayhew, 2010). Additionally, it is clear that individuals need concrete examples of bystander action and opportunities to develop skills and discuss barriers (McMahon et al, 2011). A number of bystander education curricula are in the process of being developed and tested, with some that have curricula available to advocates (see Additional Resources).

In addition to traditional community education methods, advocates can consider a number of ways to engage community members in the prevention of sexual violence. One increasingly promising practice is the use of social norms marketing. This approach uses marketing vehicles such as posters and the media to change perceptions about what attitudes and behaviors are approved and desirable within their community (Paluck & Ball, 2010). Social norms marketing is based on the theory that people behave according to the way they perceive their peers to behave, as well as their perceptions of their peers' approval or disapproval of behavior (Berkowitz, 2005; Haines, 2009).

Perhaps the most well developed social norms marketing program designed to address sexual violence is the "Know Your Power" campaign, based at the University of New Hampshire. The campaign includes displaying poster images and other forms of media that show bystander intervention scenarios across campus. Exposure to the social marketing campaign has been shown to be effective in raising awareness and teaching bystander behaviors, increasing knowledge about how to safely intervene and increasing active bystander behavior by encouraging students to intervene and speak out before, during and after violence occurs (Potter, Moynihan & Stapleton, 2011). In particular, this study showed that it is critical for individuals to be able to identify with the people and images displayed on the posters (Potter et al, 2011). Social marketing strategies can be adapted based on the norms around sexual violence in the particular target community (see Potter & Stapleton, 2011, for a number of excellent suggestions for advocates interested in using social marketing campaigns). Another social marketing campaign aimed at boys and men is CALCASA's "My Strength" campaign. (See Additional Resources for more information on these social marketing campaigns.)

Along similar lines, it is essential that those working in the field of sexual violence carefully reconsider the language used in their efforts to engage and educate community members. It is challenging to determine how to talk about sexual violence in a way that community members will not view as threatening or irrelevant. (See FrameWorks report for an excellent discussion of how to address these "communication challenges" to help reframe public perceptions about the causes and outcomes of sexual violence.) Action Media, a strategic communication group, suggests that advocates and those working in the field of sexual violence engage communities by using language that builds upon mutually shared values, such as safety and respect (Goldberg, 2011).

Developing culturally-specific interventions

It is also important for those working to change public perceptions of sexual violence to recognize the critical need to develop culturally specific approaches. Attitudes, beliefs and behaviors related to sexual violence are heavily influenced by community norms and therefore, interventions must be tailored to meet these specific contexts, including those shaped by particular ethnicities, religions, socioeconomic status, disability and many other salient factors that communities use to organize and identify (McMahon & Banyard, in press). Cultural meanings and norms around issues such as sexuality, marriage, and gender roles may influence whether certain acts are perceived as sexual violence (Lira, Koss & Russo, 1999). Therefore, there is no "one size fits all" approach for addressing sexual violence with the public. Identifying the social norms and structures that need to be addressed should be done in conjunction with community members who can speak to the particular norms of their context (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Research needs to be conducted in partnership with community members, with a developed understanding and respect for particular community values (ie Ahrens, Isas & Viveros, 2011). There is currently a dearth of research exploring this critical area and therefore much work is needed to better understand the needs and strengths of various groups.

In sum, the work of advocates and others in the field of sexual violence has been successful in many ways, including increasing the level of public awareness of the problem. There have been significant efforts to challenge the notion of the classic stranger rape stereotype, and there is evidence that certain aspects of this myth have been dissolved over time. However, further work is needed to replace the more deeply ingrained yet subtle public misconceptions about sexual violence. Additionally, advocates must find creative ways to engage diverse groups of individuals in viewing sexual violence as a community issue that affects all of us.

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Additional Resources

Bystander Intervention

Bringing in the Bystander (through Prevention
Innovations)
http://www.unh.edu/preventioninnovations/

The Green Dot
http://www.livethegreendot.com/

The Men's Program
http://www.oneinfourusa.org/

Mentors in Violence Prevention
http://www.jacksonkatz.com/mvp.html

SCREAM Theater
http://sexualassault.rutgers.edu/scream.htm

Social Marketing

Know Your Power Campaign (University of New
Hampshire)
http://www.know-your-power.org

MyStrength Campaign (California Coalition Against
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In Brief: Changing Perceptions of Sexual Violence Over Time
Sarah McMahon in consultation with Karen Baker

Despite a rich history of advocacy for legal reform, community education, and the rights of victims, many people still hold on to a stereotyped image of rape occurring by a stranger in a dark alley. These stereotyped ideas have become more subtle over time, but there is still work to do to improve public understanding.

We've moved to an understanding of sexual violence as a continuum. Laws have changed in a way that recognizes a continuum of acts and behaviors as sexually violent (Spohn & Horney, 1992). Laws now recognize a range of acts, from completed rape to unwanted touching or sexual harassment (Centers for Disease Control, 2009). Degrading language and pornography, which are more common, also contribute to the continuum but are less understood by the public (Kelly, 1987; McMahon, Postmus & Koenick, 2011; Stout, 1991). The general public is still most likely to call something sexual violence if force is involved (McMahon et al, 2011).

Perceptions about perpetrators can reinforce rape myths. Research over time revealed that many rapists are actually "everyday" type men. Studies on college campuses suggested that many men (6-14%) report sexually violent behaviors (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Despite this, many people still believe that a perpetrator is sick or disturbed (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). Racism also plays a role in how the public perceives a perpetrator. Black men are often viewed as more blameworthy than white men (Donovan, 2007; George & Martinez, 2006; Varelas & Foley, 1998). Outdated beliefs about who commits sexual violence still influence perceptions. These beliefs also impact the way we understand the causes of sexual violence.

Many people still blame the victim. The way that the public perceives a victim of sexual violence often involves victim-blaming (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). Blame for sexual violence has become more subtle over time (Ferro, Cermele, & Saltzman, 2008). Blatant blame may be socially unacceptable, but many attitudes that shift responsibility onto the victim remain the same.

Sexual violence is connected to all forms of oppression. There are also many attitudes and beliefs about who can be a victim of sexual violence. Most research focuses on women. Research with male victims has found that gay victims are judged more harshly (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Homophobic attitudes are correlated with whether or not a person will blame the victim for their experience (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Racism has played a role in how the public perceived victims in the past, and still plays a part in attitudes today (West, 2006; Donovan, 2007). Cultural norms and public perceptions may actually keep many people from accessing services or reporting sexual violence.

Taking steps towards changing perceptions in the future. The current research available may help to guide the efforts of advocates and practitioners. Based on the research shared in this paper, there are four main areas outlined for future work on sexual violence: 1) shifting educational efforts to the causes of sexual violence; 2) addressing subtle victim blaming; 3) finding ways to engage communities; and 4) developing culturally-specific interventions.