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Sexual Violence, Consent, and Contradictions: A Call for Communication Scholars to Impact Sexual Violence Prevention

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The goal of this paper is to provide an overview of the conflicting findings from existing sexual violence and consent communication research with the intention of motivating communication scholars to study these areas. Generally, normative roles and alcohol add to the inherent complexity of consent communication. Moreover, contradictory findings in the literature make it difficult to define a practicable approach to the reduction of sexual violence across college campuses. This paper broadly reviews the current literature in this area of research with the ultimate goal of creating a guiding research agenda based in communication theory. Sexual violence prevention programming may benefit from this insight gleaned from communication research. For future research, we suggest consent communication, sexual negotiation, and other factors influencing sexual violence as topics that may inform more specifically targeted prevention programming, leading to measurable reduction in the instances of sexual violence.

Over 23% of undergraduate female students and over 5% of undergraduate male students in America experience sexual assault or rape perpetuated through physical force, violence, or incapacitation (Cantor et al., 2015). In recent years, the issue of sexual violence on college campuses has gained the attention of the media, politicians, and the nation as a whole. As sexual violence and consent are discussed, colleges and universities face pressure to address their campus cultures and policies to prevent sexual violence and assist victims.

Some campuses are adopting sexual violence prevention programming as an attempt to reduce instances of sexual violence. While these programs may shift immediate *attitudes* towards sexual assault, Breitenbecher (2000) found that *incidents* of sexual assault did not decrease in response to this temporary shift in attitude.

Sinozich and Langton (2014) noted that female college students between the ages of 18 and 24 are three times more likely to experience sexual violence than the general population of women. The same report explains that males perpetrate 97% of these victimizations. Although sexual violence may occur in any type of relationship and can be perpetrated regardless of gender, sexuality, race, or other demographic factors, the aforementioned statistics lead this particular literature review to focus on sexual violence perpetrated by males against females. This is not to vilify men or disregard other salient issues, but rather to closely focus on a significant area of concern in an effort to create positive change.

The following literature review is a broad examination of factors that make sexual violence prevalent on college campuses and the possible solutions for improving prevention programming. Previous research has been done regarding how normative roles, campus culture, alcohol, and miscommunication can lead to sexual violence. However, very little research has applied communication theory to the subjects of sexual violence, consent, and prevention programming. By viewing this issue from a communication perspective, insight on how to improve sexual violence prevention programming on college campuses can be leveraged into practicable solutions.

This study reviews literature with the goal of providing a broad overview of the existing findings in sexual violence and consent communication research. It aims to point out inconsistent conclusions and contradicting claims from existing literature with the intent of creating interest in future research. The review begins by defining sexual violence and consent, then examines reviews research on factors that influence sexual violence, including: normative roles and expectations, the complexity of consent communication, and alcohol's influence in sexual encounters. It concludes with a summary of critiques and suggestions for prevention programming, a brief investigation of communication theory that might be applied to these topics, and suggestions for future areas of study.

1 Method

Literature was collected using The University of Tennessee, Knoxville library's One Search tool, which allows researchers to search through the university's collections as well as some external articles and databases. Initial keywords included "consent," "communication," and "sexual violence." Scholarly articles focusing on young adults in the United States, particularly college students in heterosexual relationships, were selected for review. Articles came from a variety of disciplines, such as communication, psychology, and sex research.

The initial review of literature resulted in the searches branching out from consent communication to include studies that focused on gender roles and alcohol's influence on sexual violence. Pulling from One Search and other studies' references, over 60 sources were collected. After preliminary reviews of these sources, approximately 20 were eliminated as they did not pertain to the focus of the literature review.

The remaining scholarly sources reflected the disparate nature of sexual violence and consent communication research. As a result, the literature review is organized into a broad, general overview of the many different approaches researchers have taken in addressing this topic. Depth of inquiry was sacrificed for breadth of focus. The conclusion of the literature review summarizes

the contradictions among the studies' findings and acknowledges the dearth of research from communication scholars in this area of study.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Definitions

2.1.1 Sexual assault and rape.

While sexual assault victimizations can manifest in different forms of unwanted sexual contact – both forced and unforced – rape is specifically defined as unwanted sexual intercourse involving penetration (The Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016). This literature review will use “sexual violence” in reference to both sexual assault and rape.

2.1.2 Consent.

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) website, the definition of consent varies by state (RAINN, n.d.). Some states have no legal definition of consent. For example, the state of Tennessee has no expressed definition of consent, but one of its circumstances defining rape is:

The sexual penetration is accomplished without the consent of the victim and the defendant knows or has reason to know at the time of the penetration that the victim did not consent (Tennessee Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2013, para. 3).

RAINN explains that there are three common measures for consent: free will, affirmation, and capacity to consent. This means that consent must be freely given using “overt actions or words,” and an individual must possess the “legal ability” to give consent (RAINN, n.d., para. 2).

2.1.3 Defining consent in research.

Not all research that discusses sexual violence provides a definition of consent (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Beres, 2010; Breitenbecher, 2000). In fact, there is some ambiguity in research regarding the difference between sex that is wanted and sex that is consented to. Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) bring attention to the dichotomy of wanted versus unwanted sex by asserting that constructing feelings about sex, as such, oversimplifies the complexity of sexual consent.

Beres (2014) explains that many scholars have discussed consent in research without critiquing or explicitly defining consent, instead using unofficial lay understandings of the concept. If a lack of knowledge about consent and how to communicate consent is a common factor leading to instances of sexual violence, then the absence of a clear definition is part of the problem. However, in research that rejects miscommunication as a common problem (Bondurant & Donat, 1999; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; O’Byrne, Hansen, & Rapley, 2008), the absence of an explicit definition supports the argument that people have an innate understanding of consent and consent communication.

For the purpose of this literature review, “consent communication” will refer to explicit communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, between sexual partners regarding the presence or absence of sexual consent. “Sexual consent” will be simply defined: freely given actions or words that affirm willingness to participate in a sex act.

2.2 Normative Roles and Expectations

2.2.1 Men as initiators, women as gatekeepers.

Numerous articles address the normative sexual roles that cisgender men and women are assigned. Men are assigned a dominant, sexually agentic role and are termed *initiators* of sexual en-

counters. Women, on the other hand, are assigned the role of *gatekeeper* and have the responsibility of allowing or disallowing sex (Jozkowski & Zoed, 2013). According to these roles, men are expected to pursue sexual encounters while women have the duty of verbalizing consent or non-consent.

As gatekeepers, women are expected to know when and how to communicate their decision to engage, or not engage, in sexual activities. Through school sex education and even from family and friends, women are inundated with risk-avoidance messages teaching them to assert their choices about sexual activity decisively (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Simultaneously, women are beholden to a set of social norms that hold “immediate clear and direct ‘no’s’ (to anything) is not a normal conversational activity” (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999, p. 310). Even further complicating this dynamic is the idea that female victims of sexual violence are responsible for the violence if they did not express enough resistance (Jozkowski & Zoed, 2013). Thus, women are charged with making explicit refusals that they are socially disallowed from verbalizing. This has negative consequences by placing sole responsibility of sexual communication on women and undervaluing the importance of consent communication (i.e. asking for consent from a partner and needing to give a partner consent) from men.

Modern research appears to agree that prevention of sexual pressure and coercion should not focus solely on teaching women how to communicate, but rather on educating young men to think critically about their own approaches to sexual communication (Powell, 2007). Unfortunately, a consistent theme throughout literature finds that women receive more messaging about sexual negotiation than men. Specifically, women are taught how to reject sexual advances.

Additionally, the normative assumption that men initiate sexual encounters suggests that it is more common for men to decode consent signals from women than vice versa (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). There are critical flaws with this assumption; chief among them being women, in their gatekeeper roles, may expect their partners to initiate the explicit opportunity for them to verbalize their consent or non-consent (Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). Another flaw is that heterosexual partners may assume that the man’s consent is affirmed unless explicitly stated otherwise (Jozkowski et al., 2014b). Thus, women may not feel the need to seek affirmative consent from their male partners.

These normative roles carry inherent assumptions that cause problems with consent communication. They insinuate that women cannot have sexual agency to pursue consent from their partner; discourage men from learning how to effectively communicate their consent or lack thereof; and may lead to confusion where men expect women to proactively express non-consent while women expect to be proactively asked for consent by men.

2.2.2 Women conforming to expectations.

Women are often tasked with a balancing act of maintaining their sexual reputation while conforming to expected reactions to sexual advances on a case-by-case basis. This can lead to women feeling obligated to submit to unwanted sex acts for a variety of reasons, including: feeling that consent was implied through earlier actions, believing that submitting to a sex act is necessary for relational maintenance, or fearing violent or non-violent repercussions.

Even in cases where women adopt a dominant role in sexual behavior, they may end up sacrificing their authority for the sake of being polite or meeting expectations. For example, women may believe that choosing to go to a man’s apartment implies consent, and a refusal would be inappropriate. Similarly, relationships characterized by sexual activity, such as friends with benefits, may lead to unwanted sex if women feel obliged by the assumed purpose of the meeting to engage in sex acts (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). When women do refuse sex, they may feel that their absence of sexual interest is insufficient explanation for a blatant refusal and feel pressured to justify their disinterest with factors outside their control, such as a preexisting obligation (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999).

Relational maintenance can also lead to unwanted sex if a woman sees sex as necessary for sustaining her relationship or making her partner happy (Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010).

Here, it is important to note one study found that, in their lifetime, almost 90% of the male sample had consented to an unwanted sex act (Quinn-Nilas, Kennett, & Humphreys, 2013). These men most often participated in unwanted sex for reasons like satisfying a partner's needs or protecting their feelings, as opposed to verbal or physical coercion (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013). While proximal causes may vary by sex, the pressures of relational maintenance impacts both men and women during sexual negotiation.

The darkest source of compliance with unwanted sex is force or coercion. Abuse, disrespect, loss of love, or being thought of differently are a few of the repercussions that may lead to women to be afraid of saying "no" to unwanted sex (Powell, 2007). Worse yet are coercive behaviors that are not always recognized as aggressive, and may even be perceived as "socially normal" or "expected" (Oswald & Russell, 2006, p. 93). Some socially normalized behaviors include sex being an expectation in a relationship or threatening to terminate the relationship if one partner will not have sex. Ultimately, women as gatekeepers are tasked with managing their relationships, their sexual reputation, and their own desires every time they negotiate sexual engagement.

2.2.3 Women defying expectations.

In cases where women choose to defy the expectations of their roles in sexual encounters, they face repercussions. Even when choosing not to conform to their expected gatekeeper role, women are placed in contradictory situations.

Women who actively pursue sexual encounters – thus adopting the non-traditional initiator role – may be viewed as too sexually aggressive. Agreeing to sex "too quickly" may label them a "slut," and if they participate in some sex acts but refuse others they risk being called a "tease" (Jozkowski & Zoed, 2013, p. 521). The traditional sexual script assigns men the role of initiator, and a woman's deviation from that script may be perceived as emasculating (Fagen & Anderson, 2012). One study described women as having "an innate female tendency to understate sexual desires for the sake of reputation," because "female value to a male is influenced by her sexual reputation" (Crawford & Johnston, 1999, p. 199). It seems, then, that neither conforming to nor defying traditional gender normative expectations benefits women or gives them true sexual agency in negotiating sexual encounters.

2.3 Consent Communication

2.3.1 Implicit consent.

Although college students seem to know that consent should be explicitly verbalized, the practice of doing so is not common. While college students may define consent "as an explicit communication of agreement," in practice they use more ambiguous cues (Jozkowski et al., 2014b, p. 912). This tendency to use inexplicit and nonverbal cues throughout sexual activity (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014) could be a result of the way college students conceptualize sexual communication (Jozkowski et al., 2014b).

Lim and Roloff found that, when given scenarios with a verbalized script of consent, students found sexual intercourse to be "more appropriate and less likely to constitute rape" than the scenarios using nonverbal scripts (1999, p. 17). Yet, the study found that in most nonverbal scenarios, students also responded that the scripts communicated consent, although consent was less clear. Despite the knowledge that consent should be explicit, men and women prefer normalized, implicit sexual communication (Lindgren, Schacht, Pantalone, Blayney, & George, 2009). This form of cognitive dissonance has the potential for negative consequences.

Because of the many ways sexual communication can be ambiguous or misunderstood the reliance on implicit consent communication can lead to nonconsensual encounters (Lindgren et al., 2009). For example, in the event that a woman allows some sex acts to occur with the expectation or hope that a man will cease his progression at a certain level of intimacy, the woman's silence may be interpreted as consent to both continue and escalate sexual behavior (Jozkowski et al., 2014b).

It seems clear that necessitating explicit consent communication would resolve these issues, but effective consent communication may not be an easily acquired skill.

2.3.2 Miscommunication.

Even verbal consent can be a fallible measure of agreement to sexual activity. Sexual coercion is often the unfortunate aftermath of misunderstood or ambiguous expectations for normal sexual negotiation (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). Although verbalized communication may be more reliable than implicit consent, a person's desires can differ from their verbal consent (Higgins et al., 2010). For example, someone may verbally consent to unwanted sex in order to please his or her partner. The fallibility of verbal consent seems to be agreed upon. Formal research, however, is divided regarding whether miscommunication is a result of legitimate misunderstanding by perpetrators or perpetrators selectively listening to consent cues.

Jozkowski explains that miscommunication theory posits that "at least some men either do not understand what they need to obtain consent from their sexual partners or they do not understand what obtaining consent looks like during a sexual encounter" (2015, p. 19). Consent communication may also deteriorate when women and men anticipate their partner's consent cues to be identical to their own (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). For researchers subscribing to the belief that consent communication is difficult and misinterpretation is common, affirmative consent policies offer a solution by creating an expectation of explicit consent communication (Jozkowski, 2015).

The opposing viewpoint is that while explicit, affirmative consent policies may resolve some problems, most consent miscommunication is actually a result of selective listening by the perpetrator. Researchers who support this argument do not deny that true miscommunication may occur, but hold the stance that research does not provide evidence that women commonly fail to communicate consent clearly (Bondurant & Donat, 1999). Rather, sexual violence because of miscommunication is a result of "sexually aggressive men selectively [ignoring] or [reinterpreting] what women say to fit what they want to hear" (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999, p. 270). In fact, Kitzinger and Frith argue that men claiming not to understand indirect or implicit refusals "are claiming to be cultural dopes, and playing rather disingenuously on how refusals are...understood to be done" (1999, p. 310). Considering that research has shown that women are consistently taught to refuse sexual advances in understated, indirect ways, it makes sense that men may be expected to understand subtle refusals.

The problem, as conceptualized by the latter viewpoint, is not rooted in miscommunication. It is not an issue of men misunderstanding or failing to recognize sexual refusals, but rather of men not liking refusals (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). While a small number of sexual violence cases can be attributed to miscommunication, most instances of sexual assault occur when a man chooses to pursue a sex act in spite of understood non-consent (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). Still, it seems undeniable that consent communication is marked by ambiguity and that adolescent adults are expected to learn how to navigate this uncertain territory without any proper guidance.

2.3.3 Complexity in consent communication.

Although miscommunication is not the predominant cause of nonconsensual sex, it is still a common occurrence. Consent communication and sexual negotiation are difficult skills to master, particularly in the common context of casual sex. Communication in casual sexual relationships is "complex, begins early in an interaction...and continues until the couple are having sex" (Beres, 2010, p. 11). The ongoing nature of consent may be difficult for people who have not been educated about the topic to understand.

Those with apprehension regarding verbal consent may have sexual interactions characterized by subjective and possibly misaligned expectations for consent cues (Jozkowski et al., 2014b). This perceived discomfort with sexual negotiation and consent communication may be an indicator of why sexual coercion is viewed "as a complex, multiply determined, social behavior that has its ori-

gins in normal heterosexual interactions” rather than psychopathology (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004, p. 113).

Additionally, there are multiple behaviors common in sexual encounters that may be mistaken for consent cues. Actions like kissing or purchasing condoms may be mistaken as agreements to sexual activity, when they are actually indicating the possibility of sex (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Muehlenhard et al. (2016) explained the complex nature of consent:

Consent can be conceptualized in numerous ways: as a feeling or decision, as an explicit agreement, or as behavior indicative of willingness; as something that can be assumed or as something that must be given explicitly; and as a discrete event or as an ongoing, continuous process. All this is further complicated by numerous factors: Individuals are often ambivalent or uncertain about what they want or are willing to do. Gendered expectations and sexual double standards create unequal environments for women and men (p. 482).

Even though it can be difficult to understand the nature of consent communication, it does not mean we should not try. Those who are less apprehensive about consent communication and previously been educated about sexual consent may be less likely to perpetrate sexual violence (Warren, Swan, & Allen, 2015). Teaching young people to communicate their consent or non-consent may aid them in negotiating expectations surrounding sex acts, contraception, etc. (Higgins et al., 2010). Regardless of whether or not consent complexity and consent communication are leading factors in the perpetration of sexual violence, no harm comes from empowering young people and equipping them with knowledge to better understand consent cues.

2.4 Alcohol and Sex

2.4.1 Alcohol and sexual violence.

For some, alcohol is used as a social lubricant (i.e. using alcohol to more easily navigate common social interaction). However, it becomes a risk factor when it catalyzes potentially dangerous situations into acts of sexual violence. Alcohol, particularly in cases of binge drinking, increases the risk of sexual assault (Hall & Moore, 2008). This is likely an understood fact, as one study reported women that self-report high weekly use of alcohol perceive that they are more at risk for sexual violence than women who drink less frequently (Untied, Orchowski, & Lazar, 2013). Sexual aggression in public environments with alcohol is generally seen “as an inevitable by-product of alcohol-fueled nightlife” (Becker & Tinkler, 2015, p. 253). Because students likely understand the nature of alcohol as a facilitator for sexual violence, victims may feel greater responsibility and experience feelings of guilt.

Often, women “feel more responsible for sexual assault if they had been drinking alcohol,” and they are criticized for “failing in their gatekeeper role” (Abbey, 2002, p. 124). This is a result of their understanding alcohol’s role as a facilitator of sexual violence combined with the gatekeeper responsibility that is forced upon them by gender norms. This victim-blaming mindset is disturbingly ignorant of the manipulative ways in which perpetrators of sexual violence employ alcohol as a weapon.

Perpetrators of sexual violence may excuse their actions as solely a result of their intoxication. Men have justified their violent acts as drunken misinterpretations of the level of their partner’s initial interest in sexual activity, which enabled them to comfortably use force after women finally made their non-consent explicit (Abbey, 2002). Even more blatant violence occurs when perpetrators, with the intent of engaging in nonconsensual sex later, administer alcohol to their victims. Men with a previous record of sexual violence are more likely to consider themselves capable of obtaining sex using coercive tactics or alcohol (Untied et al., 2013). These behaviors become especially concerning when the prevalence of drinking and hook-up cultures on college campuses are taken into account.

2.4.2 The culture of alcohol and hooking up.

College environments are home to a number of drinking settings, from bars and clubs to residential parties and Greek parties. Of these, parties affiliated with Greek-life are the most notorious for the presence of alcohol and risk of sexual assault. In a study that compared Greek parties, residence-hall parties, and off-campus parties, Greek parties measured as the highest-risk setting for alcohol-related sex between strangers (Bersamin, Paschall, Saltz, & Zamboanga, 2012). Drinking heavily and engaging in casual sex is the norm at most fraternity parties (Abbey, 2002), and men are typically in charge of distributing alcohol, thus having power over its scarcity and making it an “unequally distributed resource” with which they can “engineer social interactions” (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006, p. 495). This is not to say that people attracted to Greek organizations are more sexually violent. The environment cultivated by Greek parties and the people attracted to those parties – both Greek and non-Greek – are most likely to blame (Bersamin et al., 2012).

Social settings that attract “young, single, party-oriented people concerned about social status” host high rates of party rape (Armstrong et al., 2006, p. 494). Individuals with high sensation seeking and impulsive decision making tendencies have an increased likelihood of getting involved in situations and engaging in behaviors that have health risks (Donohew et al., 2000). Sensation seeking may be the trait responsible for the connection between alcohol use and hookup behavior (Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2012). Some personal traits and behaviors may alter one’s likelihood to perpetrate sexual violence. Participation in hook-up culture, for example, increases male perpetration of sexual violence and female victimization (Sutton & Simons, 2015). Impulsivity, specifically combined with strong emotions, is a trait more common among perpetrators than non-perpetrators (Mouilso, Calhoun, & Rosenbloom, 2013). Whether these parties are risky environments due to the nature of the event, the people attracted to them, or both, there is no question that alcohol consumption impacts sexual behavior.

Those who report recent heavy drinking are more likely to report higher instances of “ever hooking up” and “hookup partners [and frequency] in the prior year” (Thomson Ross, Zeigler, Kolak, & Epstein, 2015, p. 592). These correlations are probably because of alcohol’s effect of lowering inhibitions and its ability to provide justification for hookups, which may otherwise be considered inappropriate (Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2013; Thomson Ross et al., 2015). Men who need courage to approach a potential sexual partner, fear rejection, or are disinterested in the risks of emotional intimacy choose to drink alcohol as social lubricant when attempting to engage in casual sex (Stinson, Levy, & Alt, 2014). Overall, drinking alcohol increases one’s likelihood of engaging in casual sexual relationships or experiences (Claxton, DeLuca, & Dulmen, 2015). This may not seem directly dangerous; however, the tendency for sexually aggressive men to administer alcohol in attempts to receive sex (Untied et al., 2013) and the inability for partners to give consent while under the influence makes the culture of drinking and hooking up a very risky environment.

2.4.3 Alcohol Myopia Theory.

Alcohol may also impair sexual communication as it makes interpreting cues more difficult. Alcohol Myopia Theory states that alcohol makes the drinker focus on “salient factors that impel risk-taking and diverts attention from less salient considerations that might otherwise inhibit risk-taking when sober” (George et al., 2009, p. 509). As a result, those who consume alcohol may have weakened sexual negotiation skills (Scott-Sheldon, Carey, Cunningham, Johnson, & Carey, 2016). Alcohol Myopia Theory, though, may not even be the most useful theory when explaining alcohol-related sexual violence.

One study suggests that Alcohol Disinhibition, rather than Alcohol Myopia Theory, better explains alcohol-related sexual aggression. Noel, Maisto, Johnson, and Jackson (2009) note that anti-force cues are more likely to be ignored by intoxicated individuals when deciding how acceptable sexual violence is. Nevertheless, both of these theories suggest that alcohol impairs one’s ability to interpret cues, which is especially dangerous when the already ambiguous discussion of consent is at hand.

2.5 Prevention Programming

Many colleges and universities are responding to the crisis of sexual violence on campus with preventative programming. Inviting students to have constructive dialogue about the nuances of sexual negotiation and consent gives them the opportunity to work through any confusion they have about topics that may normally be considered taboo (Powell, 2007). Programming that involves discussion and participation with practical implications rather than lecturing on legal policy shows the most benefit (Borges, Banyard, & Moynihan, 2008).

There is, however, no uniform standard for how these programs should be carried out. Do schools educate students on the many technical definitions of sexual consent, or do they use metaphors and catchy slogans? Do schools teach students how to protect themselves, or how to protect others as active bystanders? Most agree that some sort of programming is needed; although, research has varied opinions on how – and how not – to teach sexual violence prevention.

2.5.1 Normative roles in programming.

Even beyond their formative years, students may encounter sexual education that applies normative roles and expectations. In particular, women may still find themselves tasked as gatekeepers, being taught how to protect and defend themselves from sexual violence.

Prevention programs may teach women how to protect themselves from victimization by using assertive sexual communication, using caution when drinking alcohol, and using a network of friends as caretakers (Jozkowski, 2015). These programs attempt to empower women to protect themselves from sexual violence, but “there is probably an upper limit on the strategies that potential victims can employ to protect themselves” (Breitenbecher & Scarce, 2001, p. 401). Even the buddy system is flawed. Cantor et al. (2015) found in their study that nearly 45 percent of respondents had seen an intoxicated person about to engage in a sexual activity, yet 77 percent of those witnesses indicated no intervention.

The danger with the sort of messaging that implores women to be more careful is that it may minimize accountability for male aggressors (Jozkowski, 2015) and abdicate male responsibility, inadvertently perpetuating sexual violence (Olszewski, 2009). Several researchers suggest that it would be beneficial to have programs addressing men and their specific role in preventing sexual violence. Programming that challenges “internal cognitions and social norms about sexual behavior” (Warren et al., 2015, p. 910) and encourages men to consider how gender influences expected roles without vilifying them may be useful in reducing incidences of sexual violence (Breitenbecher & Scarce, 2001; Powell, 2007).

2.5.2 Consent communication in programming.

Some prevention programs focus on teaching women to refuse sexual advances and men to interpret that refusal, but this insinuates “that the only way to tell if someone is interested in sex is to make sure that they are not resisting it” (Beres, 2010, p. 12). A better methodology may be teaching students to expect each other to understand the ways consent is communicated and to be prepared to interpret this type of communication in return (Beres, 2010). One group of researchers suggests teaching students that consent communication is enjoyable and attractive by educating them on “well-constructed, developmentally appropriate, and noncondescending programming” that emphasizes consent communication as a way to reduce risk (Lindgren et al., 2009, p. 500).

2.5.3 Alcohol related programming.

As research points out, alcohol – particularly in settings where there is binge drinking – increases the risk of sexual violence. It is vital that campaigns exist to warn students about this risk (Olszewski, 2009). Some researchers suggest teaching women to distinguish characteristics of

perpetrators and situations that lead to sexual violence and how to minimize their risk when drinking (Untied et al., 2013). Others recommend teaching students to drink less alcohol prior to engaging in sex acts (Lewis, Rees, Logan, Kaysen, & Kilmer, 2010). It has been noted that university prevention programming could benefit from a better understanding of the role of Alcohol Myopia Theory when intoxicated men interpret overt non-consent cues (Griffin, Umstadd, & Usdan, 2010). In addition, challenging the norms for consuming alcohol and bystander behavior could be incorporated into sexual violence prevention programming (Fleming & Wiersma-Mosley, 2015).

2.5.4 Other ways to improve programming.

The importance of sexual violence prevention programming cannot be underestimated, and it is a worthwhile pursuit to seek ways to improve programs and their results. It should be noted that a single, universal program could not be expected to produce meaningful results. Instead, a variety of tools are necessary, and prevention message should be shown recurrently (Borges et al., 2008). It is also suggested that prevention programming be well funded and be a requirement for all students as an ongoing lesson, rather than only exposing them to the program at freshman orientations (Jozkowski, 2015).

Having consent measures developed could help clarify consent and improve sexual violence prevention initiatives (Jozkowski, Sanders, Peterson, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). Stressing how important sexual consent is may make consent a more common point of discussion among students, leading to “behavioral approaches to consent that reflect this concern” (Humphreys & Herold, 2007, p. 314). It may also be advised to avoid catchy, abstract slogans in preference of unambiguous and frank phrases that are less likely to be misinterpreted (Beres, 2014).

Rather than addressing students as potential victims or perpetrators, some sexual violence prevention programming takes the format of active bystander training. Active bystander programs like Green Dot (Coker et al., 2015) seek to:

- (a) candidly present the risk of violence, the consequences of violence to the victim, family, and friends; (b) train students to identify situations that may potentially increase risk of dating violence or sexual violence; and (c) empower students to do what they can to safely and effectively address the situation by themselves or with others. (p. 1522)

Instead of teaching students how to protect themselves from sexual violence or how not to perpetrate sexual violence, these programs educate students on how to care for others who are in potentially dangerous situations.

Further customization of messaging in programs has also been suggested. Donohew et al. (2000) suggested that intervention programming should be attentive to the target audience’s specific needs and attentiveness. Segmenting different student groups could allow for more specialized, targeted, and effective prevention programming.

2.6 Communication Theory

2.6.1 Face Negotiation Theory and condom use.

The driving concept of Face Negotiation Theory is that people of all cultures attempt to “maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations” (Ting-Toomey, 2009, p. 371). For example, if something embarrassing happens to you at a party, you may later deny to acquaintances and friends that the embarrassing act happened in an attempt to maintain or save your projected reputation, or face. Similarly, you might save face for a friend if they express disappointment in themselves by saying you have made the same mistake. The importance of face increases in “emotionally threatening or identity-vulnerable situations,” giving it potential to be an interesting concept for studying sexual negotiation and consent communication (Ting-Toomey, 2009, p. 371).

No research was found studying Face Negotiation Theory in the context of consent communication, however Politeness Theory, an extension of Face Negotiation Theory, has been used to

study the negotiation of condom use. Reel & Thompson (2004) noted that, when discussing condom use, concern for face is considered alongside safety risks. Failure to use a condom has obvious physical dangers, but a partner may be hesitant or unsure of how to discuss condom use for fear of damaging their partner's face. Perhaps they are concerned that suggesting condom use will imply their partner has an infection or is unsafe, thus threatening the partner's face. The study found that "messages that provided some reason for condom use or combined the request with a statement of attraction toward or concern for the partner" were given higher ratings than messages that only requested condom use (Reel & Thompson, 2004, p. 116). Thus, face is a central concern during this type of sexual discussion. Research on sexual consent negotiations could similarly benefit from a focus on Face Negotiation Theory.

2.6.2 Activation Theory of Information Exposure and safer-sex.

Activation Theory of Information Exposure posits that messages that are delivered with accompanying stimuli may receive more attention than messages delivered alone. Attention to a message is dependent on "how well the need for stimulation is met by the amount of stimulation provided by the message" (Donohew, 2009, p. 12). High sensation seekers, who are more likely to be in risky health situations (Donohew et al., 2000), are more likely to attend to messages characterized by risk or unexpected stimuli (Donohew, 2009). Donohew et al. (2000) noted that safer-sex curricula focused on logical thinking would be less likely to hold the attention of high sensation seekers than curricula that incorporated novel messaging, like discussing how alcohol affects sexual activities. This could have implications for improving certain audiences' receptivity and attentiveness to sexual violence prevention programming.

2.6.3 Social Exchange Theory and coercion.

The premises of Social Exchange Theory are based in the assumption that resources are necessary for human survival. We must negotiate the exchange of these resources. The norm of reciprocity guides "direct exchanges," so that "receiving a resource obligates one to return a benefit" (Roloff, 2009, p. 895). Exchanges, or negotiations, could involve explicit bargaining, implicit bargaining, argumentation, and coercion (Roloff, 2009). Consent communication and negotiation could benefit from a focused study based on Social Exchange Theory. Coercive sexual violence and unwanted sex, for example, could potentially be results of a darker side of Social Exchange Theory.

3 Conclusions and Future Research

A review of research reveals unsettling circumstances that put young adults at risk of victimization and perpetration of sexual violence. Women are assigned a gatekeeper role that makes them responsible for allowing or disallowing sex. However, they must balance contradictory cues concerning how to decline unwanted advances. They are expected to be assertive, but not so assertive that they are impolite. Yet, if not assertive enough, they are held at fault for any sexual violence perpetrated against them. These same messages impact how young men script sexual encounters. Men are left unsure of whether they should initiate a verbal request for consent or assume consent is present, barring any overt verbal or nonverbal rejection of sexual advances.

Consent communication is rarely a taught skill; often, it is left for adolescents to learn by experience or through media depictions of consent communication. Research is divided in whether or not this is a fair expectation, with some studies stating that consent cues are ambiguous and easy to misinterpret (Beres, 2010; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Jozkowski et al., 2014b) and other studies arguing that young adults should have an innate understanding of verbal and nonverbal consent cues (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). Regardless of which is most accurate, young adults – particularly those with high sensation seeking personalities – often find themselves in situations where alcohol both increases their likelihood of engaging in sexual behavior (Bersamin et al., 2012)

and lowers their ability to effectively interpret consent cues (Scott-Sheldon et al., 2016). Sexual violence prevention programming seems like a promising solution for reducing instances of sexual assault on college campuses, but with seemingly disparate and inconclusive research, it may be difficult to design a truly effective lesson plan.

Future research might investigate more deeply what verbal and nonverbal cues signal consent, as well as how specific contexts change the meaning of those cues. It would also be beneficial to know how consent communication works in situations where sex is unwanted. Social exchange theory might be applicable in understanding the role of sex in relational maintenance. A “dark side” approach to consent communication might investigate sexual negotiation as part of an implied social contract; for example, in a friends with benefits relationship, where a party might feel obliged to engage in an unwanted sexual encounter (Perlman & Carcedo, 2011). Finally, future research centering on the initiator-gatekeeper paradigm would shed light on how men and women view their respective roles in initiating consent communication.

Sexual violence and consent communication research is still relatively new, and the nature of the studies may tend toward subjective, non-generalizable results. Still, as research continues, it only seems appropriate that researchers find some redemptive application in proposing solutions to a prevalent issue on college campuses. In particular, communication scholars may have an opportunity to generate meaningful research on these topics. If, as Donohew et al. (2000) suggest, sexual violence prevention programming could benefit from messages more intentionally targeted towards specific audience’s needs and attention styles, then communication scholars have an unfulfilled opportunity to influence the future of these programs, and by extension, the safety of a significant portion of young adults.

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