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Predicting Sexual Offenders in a Campus Setting

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About a year ago two unfortunate incidents of sexual exploitation and violence were alleged to have occurred on or near campus. These horrific events galvanized wide discussion among the academic community at Bemidji State University. At a Center for Professional Development workshop on the topic of the two reported sexual assaults, faculty and staff expressed shock and dismay at the nature of the incidents and at who the accused students were. Professor Annie Henry, a participant in the discussion, responded by saying, "Don't be surprised if it is someone you know. It is *always* someone's son who commits these offenses, always someone's neighbor and someone's friend. We expect rapists to be strangers, but they are often known, and often known by the victim."

The question was raised: who are the perpetrators on college campuses? What characteristics do they hold in common, and can we identify those most likely to commit sexual offenses? This white paper will pursue those questions. A caveat, though: therapists like myself are actually no better than anyone else at predicting whether a specific individual will commit a sexual offense, no better at determining whether an accused offender is lying about an offense. Therapists spend most of our time believing the people who come to us for help, sometimes actually suspending disbelief in order to see things from the client's perspective and to reduce the ill effect of our potentially negative judgment on them.

How common are sexual assaults on campus?

Although the Center for Professional Development discussion session centered on the

reported assaults in the fall of 2004, a disturbing truth is that other assaults have occurred on or near campus that have remained hidden from most of the community. As is true of most college campuses, Bemidji State University is not immune to sexual assault that is neither reported nor widely known. In fact, on most college campuses, the majority of sexual assaults are neither reported nor prosecuted (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen & Turner, 2003).

Published anonymous surveys of sexual assault on other college campuses or among college-aged women may give us some estimate of the rate on our own campus, although rates derived from such surveys vary widely, depending in part on the words used (such as rape versus sexual assault) and how broadly the sexual exploitation being surveyed is defined (Abbey, McAuslan & Ross, 1998; Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Calhoun, Bernat, Clum & Frame, 1997; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984). Under some conditions women may not even recognize that they were raped, such as a forceful date rape occurring against an intoxicated woman. The woman may blame herself, rather than realizing that it is her date who is at fault, and not report the assault even on an anonymous survey.

However awkward the research findings or disparate the definitions, the rate of sexual exploitation and violence is probably horrendously high on college campuses. A recent study in the lower end of this range (Fisher et al. 2003) found that some 3% of college women in the United States are victims of rape or attempted rape every year, suggesting a rate of about 12% over a 4-year college attendance. Another recent study (Abbey and McAuslan, 2004) found that 5% of college men admitted to one or more attempted or completed sexual assaults, typically date rape, in the past year.

Who commits sexual assaults on campus?

Of course men commit the vast majority of

sexual assaults, on campus or anywhere else, but not most men by any means. Malamuth, Sockloski, Koss & Tanaka (1991) and Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker (1995) write about two particular dimensions that are positively related to committing sexual assault:

1. angry hostile attitudes towards women and
2. frequent impersonal sex.

They suggest that men who view themselves as highly masculine, and who view women with anger and mistrust, may use sexual aggression in an attempt to feel superior and in control. Abbey et al. (1998) provide additional support for this conceptualization, finding that men who assault, compared to men who do not, are more likely to have stereotypic masculine beliefs and more hostility towards women. Adams-Curtis & Forbes (2004) report more sexual assault among men who belong to fraternities or who are athletes. Kanin (1985), in a study of date rapists, and Abbey et al. (1998) find that men who commit sexual assault tend to start sexual activity at an earlier age, to date more, and to have more consensual partners than men who do not commit sexual assault.

This last finding seems contra-intuitive, since an inaccurate stereotype about rapists is that they sometimes rape because they are unable to find consensual sexual partners. However, since the finding is that rapists tend to have more dating experience and a larger number of sexual partners than nonrapists, it may be that attitude is the important variable; that men who have frequent impersonal sex are or become less aware of the intimacy and specialness of sex. This may be particularly true of date rapists, who sometimes are unaware that an assault has occurred because of an expectation that women merely feign reluctance in order to not appear easy, even though they really do want to have sex (Osman, 2003). Such men might wonder why the woman is so angry, distraught and distant from them after sex. For such men the sexual act that intimately violated their date might have been no more personal than a shared meal. Ward, Hudson, Marshall & Siegert

(1995) suggest that sexual offenders have intimacy deficits. They have trouble sharing their thoughts and feelings, and feel uncomfortable with emotional intimacy.

The relationship of alcohol consumption to sexual assault

Even men who have negative, controlling attitudes about women, who are blind to the intimacy of sex, and even who have sexually assaulted in the past do not rape at every opportunity. There need to be other factors or situational variables. The additional factor most often studied is alcohol consumption (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2001). Perhaps half of all sexual assaults on campus occur when either the victim or the perpetrator has consumed alcohol (Abbey et al., 1998). Consumption of alcohol by the victim may lower her inhibitions against putting herself in a risky situation and may also reduce her ability to extricate herself, either because of the cognitive impairments associated with alcohol consumption or because of the lessening of physical coordination that occurs after drinking alcohol. Lowered inhibitions may also affect the perpetrator after alcohol consumption, as well as a focus on the short-term gain of sexual release rather than the negative long-term consequences of an assault. While over-consumption of alcohol can increase risky sexual behavior for many students who drink, college males whose survey responses indicate that they drink heavily also report a higher frequency of sexual assault (Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999). A campus climate such as Bemidji State's, wherein frequent alcohol consumption is perceived as normative and where binge drinking is a common form of alcohol use, may add to the potential for sexual assault.

Sexual assault due to miscommunication

While some perpetrators knowingly commit many acts of sexual violence, it is possible for

an unwanted sexual act to occur unintentionally and not as a part of an ongoing pattern of behavior. Likewise, while the focus of this white paper is on college men who assault and women who are victims, the most common pattern by far, it is possible for men to be victims as well, assaulted by other men or by women. Two cases from my experience as an advisor come to mind. In one case a male student of mine, and a woman college student he had met earlier one night and with whom he had no prior relationship, came to see me. On the night in question they had met at a party (“we hooked up”) and later withdrew to his room and engaged in consensual mutual masturbation. She reported that she was happy with that part of the sexual experience, but had no desire to have intercourse with this relative stranger. He expected the masturbation to be a prelude to intercourse. Neither of them discussed this at the time. When he realized that he was about to lose control he was embarrassed because intercourse had not yet begun, so he quickly rolled over onto the woman and penetrated. She immediately told him to get off, but he had already had a rapid orgasm. She was furious at this unwanted, unprotected intercourse. He was deeply embarrassed at being thought of as a perpetrator. In another case a student of mine reported sleeping on the floor at a party with a number of other students. Her former boyfriend (“my ex,”) was in the room, passed out from too much alcohol. She opened his clothing and began fondling him in the hope that he would wake up and realize that he was still attracted to her. He responded sexually in a semi-awake fog, but when he woke up fully and realized who was stimulating him he was surprised at who it was, and was horrified by the thought that his new girlfriend might find out and misunderstand. Like the male student in the first example, this student was also deeply embarrassed by her former boyfriend’s accusation. She had expected him to like what she was doing.

While in both of these cases unwanted sexual activity occurred, it is unlikely that either of these particular offenders will repeat the

offense. Both experienced deep embarrassment and remorse. Both sought counseling to help recover from the experience. In a third, contrasting, case, a student told me of having attended an outdoor party, getting drunk, and passing out on the grass during the warm summer evening. She said,

“I woke up to find [a man she knew] feeling me up. He had pushed up my t-shirt and bra and was really enjoying himself. When I told him how pissed I was he said that it was my own fault for getting drunk and looking so hot. He just laughed at me. He thought that it was very funny. I later learned that he bragged to other people about what he had done.”

Although none of the three offenders in these cases thought that they were doing anything wrong at the time of the act, this last offender seems not to have learned from his experience and seems likely to re-offend.

Repeat offenders

Many offenders do re-offend. I talked with Professor Riki Sheela, a local expert on the treatment of sexual offenders to ask her about the factors involved with those who re-offend. Although much of our conversation centered on the effectiveness of treatment, Professor Sheela said that early denial, interestingly enough, could actually be a positive sign, in that it suggests that the offender knows that what they have done is either wrong or at least perceived as wrong by others. Continued denial, though, is a problem. Failure to take responsibility for their behavior (one form of responsibility would be attending treatment sessions regularly) predicts re-offense, as does lack of empathy for the victims. Narcissistic personality traits, which would interfere with empathy, predict a poor response to treatment. Professor Sheela gave me a list of risk factors for sexual violence that had been compiled by Jane Gilgun, Professor of Social Work at the University of Minnesota, suggesting that many of the factors on that list would predict both likelihood of

sexual assault and resistance to treatment. Two of those factors: difficulty sharing feelings and thoughts and disregard for the impact of one's behavior on others, supported Professor Sheela's earlier comments. Chemical abuse was on the list, supporting Abbey et al. (1998) and Ullman, et al. (1999). The list also contained elements of personal history supported by other studies (Kanin, 1985, and Abbey et al., 1998) such as early sexual experience (here defined as masturbation prior to age 12) and belief in the value of sexual conquest, but added a new dimension: having observed or been the victim of exploitation by others.

In a recent study that has particular bearing on the subject of perpetrators who establish a pattern of offense, Abbey and McAuslan (2004) surveyed the same group of 197 college men twice, one year apart. A limitation of this study is that there was a high attrition rate; 343 men filled out the initial survey. The first survey asked the respondents about assaultive behaviors they had committed since age 14. The second survey asked about similar behaviors in the last year only. They found that about 14 % of the men who responded admitted to some form of sexual offense, very broadly defined to include the use of verbal pressure, in the last year. One way of looking at this data is to think of this 14% as men who think of sex as a purely personal pleasure rather than as a shared intimacy, men towards whom we should direct educational intervention.

Of more interest is a further breakdown of the findings. In the first survey 35% of the men admitted to engaging in unwanted sexual contact (i.e. uninvited touching of intimate areas) some time after age 14, a not unusual behavior among teenaged boys. For the last year only, that figure was about 6%. Some young men, as they mature, become less likely to commit some sexual offenses. Disturbingly, about 9% of the men admitted to attempted or completed rape in the first survey (almost all date rapes). That figure did not decline much in the second survey, with about 5% of the men admitting to attempted or completed rape, again

almost all date rapes, within the one-year period. That 5% of men in a sample of college students would admit to using force or violence to complete or attempt rape in the last year alone is a shocking statistic by itself, but this study carries the implication that many of the men who assault at this level are repeat offenders.

In addition to asking about assaultive behaviors, Abbey and McAuslan (2004) asked about other experiences and about attitudes and were able to compare the responses of men who did not assault to those who did. Significant differences between repeat assaulters and non-assaulters were found on several dimensions. Repeat assaulters demonstrated or reported more:

Hostile gender-role beliefs.

Callous attitudes towards women.

Acceptance of using verbal pressure to get women to have sex.

Alcohol consumed when dating.

Delinquency in adolescence.

Intervention strategies

Although this is a brief review, I think that a picture is emerging about which men in a college campus setting are more likely to commit sexual assault. We need to be particularly concerned about the attitudes of some 5 to 10% of men. This is a small number from a programming point of view, in that most of the men who attend sexual violence prevention programs already have no desire to offend, but attitudes can exist on a continuum, and increasing civility, respect, and empathy need have no upper limit. The evidence suggests that men who are willing to sexually assault are more willing to engage in other illegal behaviors as well and have negative attitudes about women that make it more likely for them to see women as sometimes irritating inferiors in the world. They may believe that women should be taught a lesson about the superiority of men by forcing them to accept the sexual attentions of men: to serve men's needs. These men have

difficulty with intimacy and may not see sexual relations as particularly intimate. Alcohol can play a role, both for the perpetrator and for the victim, especially in the date context, during which most campus sexual assaults occur. Miscommunication is another factor, as is misunderstanding, although probably not for repeat offenders .

Adams-Curtis & Forbes (2004) note that in the last 50 years, even though rape laws and enforcement have been strengthened, feminist thought has had a strong influence on social science research, rape prevention programs have increased, and awareness of date rape has expanded, sexual assaults on college campuses have not decreased. *“Plus a change, plus c’est pareil.”* I suggest that we need to think about a continuum of two different types of students who assault. One end of the continuum does not intend to assault, but has communication difficulties, erroneous gender expectations, and misunderstands the role of sex in relationships. Such students might benefit from campus programming about sexual assault. The other end of the continuum *intends* to assault. They have little empathy for their victims, callous attitudes towards women, are very egocentric, have problems with intimacy and probably have a history of prior offenses. Campus programming will very likely have little effect on them. It is their potential victims who need to become more aware.

So, what can we do? The BSU Campus Community Civility Advisory Group is taking an inventory of all current programming efforts aimed at preventing sexual violence/harassment within the campus community and will be communicating those results soon.

We should begin each year with a clear statement from upper level administration that the institution places a high value on civility. Although the university has clear discrimination, harassment and sexual violence policies, verbal statements, as outlined in the *2005-2006 Student Guide and Planner* (pages

60-67) and elsewhere, add an additional dimension. The precise definition of what constitutes sexual assault, while important, is best understood in a context that underlines the importance of respect, civility, and empathy. Renee Hogoboom from the Office of the Chancellor has come to campus during Fall Start-up to speak to new faculty on Nondiscrimination and Sexual Harassment, but returning faculty do not have to attend the presentation.

Alcohol use is a factor in many sexual assaults. We should consider increasing support for alcohol intervention programs on campus such as that conducted by Jay Passa’s Office of Health Education. That office speaks on alcohol issues to FYRE and other classes, conducts programming in conjunction with National Collegiate Alcohol Awareness Week, presents during Responsible Men Responsible Women training and conducts the annual Safe Spring Break campaign. With additional resources, the campus could offer more free no alcohol events, giving students more opportunities for something to do that does not involve alcohol. We should also consider expanding chemical dependency treatment opportunities offered through the Counseling Center.

We should continue to require the Responsible Men, Responsible Women (RMRW) programming, which deals with gender-based attitudes and behaviors. While the annual surveys that RMRW conducts on its own programming suggest that most students think that the content of the programming is valuable, the recent analysis of student focus groups on student centeredness conducted by the Student and University Services Committee (Reitmeir, 2005) found that students complained about the length and simplicity of the program. It is very difficult to program on this topic, in that most students think that they do not need it, even those who really do need it!

Jon Blessing, Director of Student Life and Counseling, does a training session with the student employees of the Office of Security and

Safety during their fall start-up training, and has been working with the Women's Resource Center and the Student Affairs office to clarify and coordinate their roles in matters of sexual assault. The Women's Center and Women's Studies, directed by Pat Rosenbrock, sponsors Take-Back-the Night each year, usually in the fall. Activities like Take Back the Night probably have little effect on possible perpetrators, who are unlikely to actually attend, but can be helpful in increasing the awareness of potential victims. Were a Sexual Assault Prevention Specialist to be appointed, this work could be expanded so that activities across campus designed to reduce sexual assault would become better coordinated, able to compliment one another, and aimed at the attitudes of possible perpetrators.

We should continue to support courses that deal with gender issues and assault, such as Nursing's Sexual Abuse course and Psychology's Human Sexuality course, and those focusing on gender issues and oppression, such as offered in Sociology, History, Social Work and Women's Studies and in other venues.

We should support and expand programming on date rape issues offered by Residential Life and FYRE. Residence hall staff have provided programs for residence halls on sexual assault prevention and awareness. Presenters have come from our Counseling Center, the Sexual Assault Program, and the Northwoods Coalition for Battered Women.

We should increase programming on civility and on sexual assault offered as a part of university athletics.

Vigorous prosecution of sexual assault should be the norm.

And, well, more. There is nothing that we can do about the backgrounds and experiences that our students bring to campus, but there is a great deal that we can do about the knowledge they acquire while here and the attitudes they

develop. Faculty and staff influence those attitudes. In the classroom and in the hallways, in offices and on fields of play we need to convey and model attitudes of civility, respect and empathy, for men and for women.

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