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Creating lasting attitude and behavior change in fraternity men and male student athletes: The qualitative impact of an empathy based rape prevention program

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### Abstract

Fraternity men and male student athletes responded in writing to four open-ended questions assessing the impact of an empathy based rape prevention program presented in an all-male, peer education format. All participants reported either lasting attitude or behavior changes; most reported both. Participants reported attitude changes involving increased understanding of how a rape experience might feel and attributed this change to seeing a videotape in which a male-on-male rape situation was described. Participants' behavior changed in that they refrained from telling and confronted jokes about rape and reported feeling more effective when helping survivors who came to them seeking assistance. Behavior changes were primarily attributed to the videotape and to a section of the program encouraging participants to confront rape jokes and challenge sexist behaviors. Important implications for rape prevention programming strategies are discussed.

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The overwhelming prevalence of men's violence against women is well documented. For example, research has consistently shown that roughly one out of four college women have experienced rape or attempted rape since the age of 14 (Douglas et al., 1997; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Numerous rape prevention educators have applied theory, research, and outcomes assessment studies to help end sexual assault.

Two promising theories are belief system theory and the elaboration likelihood model. Belief system theory suggests that lasting attitude change results from interventions designed to maintain people's existing self-conceptions (Grube, Mayton, & Ball-Rokeach, 1994). Thus, rape prevention programs should appeal to the way men perceive themselves. While few if any men see themselves as potential rapists (Scheel, Johnson, Schneider, & Smith, 2001), many programs approach men as such (Lonsway, 1996), and therefore limit their probability of success.

In addition, the elaboration likelihood model suggests that lasting attitude and behavior change occurs when participants are motivated to hear a message, are able to understand it, and perceive the message as relevant to them. Such conditions lead to a type of thinking called central route processing, whereby listeners actively process program content and are far more likely to have long-term attitude and behavior change. Applying this model to rape prevention has shown signs of success (Heppner, Humphrey, Hillenbrand-Gunn, & Debord, 1995).

Some prevention programmers have focused their work on addressing populations shown to be at a higher risk of perpetration, such as fraternity men and male student athletes. Both populations have attitudes that are more supportive of rape than other men (Boeringer, 1999). In addition, fraternities have been found to commit 55% of gang rapes on college campuses, with

40% being committed by student athletes (O'Sullivan, 1991). Fraternity men have been found to have group norms that reinforce within-group attitudes that perpetuate sexual coercion against women (Martin & Hummer, 1989), to have more traditional attitudes toward women than other men (Schaeffer & Nelson, 1993), and to be more sexually coercive than other men (Garrett-Gooding & Senter, 1987). Male student athletes are more likely than other men to physically and sexually abuse women (Chandler, Dewayne, & Carroll, 1999). Collectively, these findings point to the need to study which prevention methods are most effective with these populations.

Several studies point rape prevention programmers in promising directions. For example, a meta-analysis of rape prevention programs has found that all-male, peer education programs are far more successful than mixed gender programs and those not presented by peers (Brecklin & Forde, 2001). In addition, as men increase their empathy with survivors, understand rape trauma better and have more aversion to rape, they report less likelihood of raping (Hamilton & Yee, 1990; Schewe & O'Donohue, 1993). Low rape proclivity and high empathy toward rape survivors are strongly linked (Osland, Fitch, & Willis, 1996) suggesting that finding ways to increase men's empathy toward survivors may lower their likelihood of raping.

Research on men's empathy toward rape survivors has consistently shown that describing a male-on-male rape experience leads to significant declines in men's likelihood of raping and/or their rape myth acceptance (Foubert, 2000; Foubert & Marriott, 1997; Foubert & McEwen, 1998; Gilbert, Heesacker, & Gannon, 1991; Lee, 1987; and Schewe & O'Donohue, 1993). Conversely, describing a male-on-female rape experience can increase rape myth acceptance and/or likelihood of sexual aggression (Berg, 1993; Berg, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; Ellis, O'Sullivan, & Sowards, 1992). Thus, recounting a male survivor experience seems necessary to develop the empathy leading to lower likelihood of raping and attitudinal improvement.

Schewe (2002) reports in his recent review of rape prevention programs that only one program has ever been shown to produce clear, long-term change in men. This program, evaluated in the present study, is commonly referred to as The Men's Program (Foubert, 2003). This all-male, victim empathy based, one hour peer education rape prevention program is titled "How to Help a Sexual Assault Survivor: What Men Can Do." Quantitative research has shown that it significantly lower men's rape myth acceptance and their self-reported likelihood of raping for an entire academic year (Foubert, 2000). Qualitative findings have clarified how men understand and make meaning of their experience with this program. Foubert and Lavoy (2000) found that seven months after program participation, a clear majority of fraternity men reported lasting attitude changes of increased awareness or sensitivity toward rape. The program component mentioned most frequently as responsible was a videotape in which a male police officer describes the rape of another male officer by two male perpetrators.

More recently, Foubert and Cowell (2003) conducted focus groups with fraternity men and male student athletes immediately after seeing this program. They found that participants reported substantially increased empathy toward rape survivors, which participants overwhelmingly attributed to seeing the aforementioned videotape. Participants also reported being more able to help survivors, better understanding consent, being less likely to tell and more likely to confront rape jokes, and being more likely to believe rape survivors' stories.

The present study followed up on the focus group study conducted by Foubert and Cowell (2003). Five months after seeing The Men's Program, these fraternity men and male student athletes responded in writing to four open-ended questions asking whether and how their attitudes and behavior had changed since they saw the program and if so, what about the program led to that change. The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways are participants' attitudes different five months after participating in The Men's Program? How do participants account for this change?
2. In what ways have participants behaved differently since participating in The Men's Program? How do participants account for this change?

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants for this study were traditional age undergraduate male students enrolled at a public, southeastern university with an enrollment of approximately 5,000 undergraduate students. Participants were either current members of a varsity athletic team including Baseball, Football, and Gymnastics or were members of one of five participating fraternities. All were full-time students in good academic standing. Participants were 12 fraternity men and 12 student athletes who came from a pool of 26 men who participated in focus groups after seeing the program five months previously. Two football players had to be eliminated from being eligible for the present study after the focus group phase because they subsequently applied for and were accepted into the peer education group ("One in Four") presenting this program. Fully 100% of those eligible to complete follow-up surveys did so.

### Materials

Five months after the program, participants responded to the following four questions:

1. Compared to before you participated in this program, are any of your attitudes different today as a result of seeing the program? If so, what attitudes?
2. What about the program led to this change?
3. Compared to before you participated in this program, have you behaved differently in any situation as a result of seeing the program? If so, in what way did you behave differently?

4. What about the program led to this change?

Procedure

Participants were encouraged to attend the first phase of this study through emails sent directly to purposive samples from each athletic team and each fraternity on campus and through general announcements at their meetings. A pre-paid long distance phone card with 600 minutes or a \$25 campus bookstore gift certificate was offered as an incentive for the initial phase.

Participants attended a one-hour presentation of The Men's Program by thoroughly trained and experienced peer educators, followed by a 60-90 minute focus group session. The Men's Program, also called "How to Help a Sexual Assault Survivor: What Men Can Do" started by setting a non-confrontational tone, where participants heard that they would not be blamed for rape, nor would it be assumed that they wanted to rape a woman. Participants were told that instead, they would learn how they can make a difference with women who come to them for help minutes or even years after being sexually assaulted. After disclaimers, an overview, and a basic review of rape definitions, presenters told the audience that they would be viewing a videotape that describes a rape situation. This tape described a male police officer being raped by two men who were depicted as violent, known previously to the officer, and heterosexual.

At the conclusion of the video, presenters noted that as with most male-on-male rape, the video they just watched depicted two presumably heterosexual men using rape and battery to exert power and control over the survivor. This portion was important because it confronted the homophobic misunderstanding some men may have that male-on-male rape is primarily perpetrated by homosexual men. Presenters then drew parallels from the male police officer's experiences to common experiences of female rape survivors. Participants were then taught basic skills on how to help a woman recover from rape. Next, presenters discussed how to

define consent in intimate encounters and how to intervene as a bystander to help change social norms that condone rape. After answering questions, participants were reminded of the prevalence of rape and of the necessity for everyone to end men's violence against women.

Focus groups then took place with 2 groups of 6 fraternity men each and 2 groups of 7 athletes each. Participants responded to questions regarding their attitude and behavior changes and their suggestions for program improvements. For the present study, participants were given the option of responding to the previously mentioned questions over email or by writing down their responses and returning them anonymously. For emailed responses, identifying information was removed prior to analysis, as described in their instructions. Participants received 120 minute pre-paid phone cards after completion of the follow-up survey.

The open ended questions were analyzed using a multi-stage inductive analysis (Patton, 1990). This process begins with identifying key phrases or terms used by program participants in their responses; in this case, responses to open ended questions. Secondly, researchers identify themes that help organize participants' responses to the program in a careful approach to identify what is truly meaningful. Next, consideration of "causes, consequences, and relationships" (Patton, 1990, p. 422) occurs whereby researchers attach meaning to findings and draw any appropriate conclusions to help illuminate, understand and extrapolate the data.

Each response to the open ended questions was typed on a 3 x 5 card, along with a participant number to facilitate matching participant responses if necessary. Two researchers followed the process suggested by Patton (1990) for the four open ended questions. Initially, each researcher followed the process separately. Afterward, the two researchers discussed their coding schemes and came to consensus decisions on a common framework.



## RESULTS

The first question asked “Compared to before you participated in this program, are any of your attitudes different today as a result of seeing the program? If so, what attitudes?” Answers clustered around four themes, with an additional uncategorized response that reflected an increased understanding of the need for societal change. The themes are listed in order from those with the greatest to least number of participant responses. Three participants’ responses described more than one attitude that changed and were coded into more than one category.

Theme 1: The program increased my understanding of what rape feels like. The ten responses in this category emphasized a better understanding of what rape survivors go through, increased empathy toward rape survivors, and more sensitivity toward rape in general. Many in this group used the word “understand” to describe their increased sense of empathy toward survivors. A fraternity man best exemplified the responses in this theme:

“I now have a much greater understanding for what it must feel like to be in a sexual assault or rape situation. Just from watching the video I was frozen like they said young women are in those situations. I was utterly speechless and shocked. I now understand the importance of being a listener and not trying to make the victim do anything she doesn't feel comfortable doing...”

An athlete described his attitude change in this way:

“I can't emphasize how incredible I thought the program was. It was nothing like I expected going in, therefore sort of shocking my attitude toward sexual assault. I always previously had trouble relating to the feelings or point of view of a sexual assault victim but the presentation really hit home. My attitude toward the general significance of

sexual assault has been raised significantly with the new perspective the program offered.”

Another athlete commented:

“I think the biggest thing that changed for me is the magnitude of the effect that assault can bring to the women. Consequently, I am far more, I guess sympathetic, but more empathetic too, towards survivors.”

Theme 2: I now have a greater understanding of how to support survivors. The seven responses that clustered around this theme emphasized how they now had a better idea of how to help a sexual assault survivor. In each case, participants gave specific examples of supportive behaviors. An athlete noted how he now sees retaliation toward the rapist as inappropriate:

“My attitude toward how I would react to someone close to me being raped is one of the big changes. Before the program I believe that if any one of my close friends were raped I would go out and try to fight the one responsible. But after the program I know that it is better to comfort my friend, the victim, and not make the situation worse for them.”

Theme 3: Understanding the gravity of the term “rape.” The six responses that clustered around this theme emphasized how participants developed a newfound appreciation for the misuse of the word “rape” in everyday conversation. An athlete commented that:

“My attitude towards treating the term rape lightly has changed. I think back to the presentation, whenever someone says “that test just raped me” and how that contributes to a dumbing down of the severity of what rape means.”

A fraternity man took things one step further, noting “I also no longer make any type of rape comments, like ‘that test raped me’ and call out friends that do.”

Theme 4: The program strengthened my existing beliefs. Three participants noted that the program reinforced and strengthened their pre-existing anti-rape attitudes. These participants reported that the program gave them more information on why rape is damaging and that they now feel more comfortable speaking out against rape.

Possible Causes, Consequences and Relationships.

Overall, we found it impressive that after five months, participants were able to clearly articulate lasting attitude changes. The overwhelming majority of participants mentioned that they understood rape better. Their answers suggested that this understanding was caused by seeing a video of a male-on-male rape situation. To some participants, a consequence of this new understanding was to apply it to other attitudes – either better understanding of how to help survivors or having increased sensitivity toward the use of the word “rape.” The depth and application involved in their comments suggested that they had retained and cognitively elaborated upon their new attitudes. Such elaboration indicates central route processing and is thinking characteristic of long-term attitude and behavior change. We were also struck by the repeated use of the term “understand” by participants, conveying more than just awareness but a deeper empathy toward survivors. Participants repeatedly made specific mention of the video as a source of their attitude change, even before being asked to report why change occurred.

The second question asked “What about the program led to this change?” This question attempted to determine what portion of the rape prevention program accounted for the attitude change they mentioned in their response to the previous question.

Theme 1: The video of a male-on-male rape. Nearly three quarters of respondents (17 out of 24) wrote that the video describing a male-on-male situation was the most powerful part of the program. Several individuals within this group noted the effects of how the video was

processed – relating the male survivor’s experience to experiences commonly had by female survivors, as influential in changing their perspective on rape. Participants commented that the video “helped emphasize how real and graphic assault really is” and that “the portrayal of a man being raped, a situation I could understand, helped me understand the severity of the event.” An athlete noted that:

“The story of the male cop who was sexually assaulted remains in my mind to this day. Aside from its shocking and dramatic nature, it has stayed with me because it allowed me to put myself in the position of a sexually assaulted female. By far I feel it was the most memorable and thought-provoking element of the program.”

Another athlete added that:

“The police drama where the police victim was sexually assaulted had the most impact on me. It forced me to place myself in the shoes of an assault victim and to really consider all of the emotional trauma that goes along with sexual abuse. I had never really done this before because as a guy, it is hard to relate to stories of rape and to fully comprehend the emotional baggage that goes along with the crime. This at least gave me a better perspective on the situation.”

A fraternity member further noted that the video “set the stage to put you in the shoes of a victim and think about it from a somewhat new and uncomfortable position.” Another fraternity member noted that the video and the empowering tone of the program were influential:

“the video had an incredible impact on me as well as the information provided afterwards. I really think the approach 1 in 4 (the group presenting the program) takes of teaching how to help rather than how not to be an offender made me look at this a lot

differently. I now feel a responsibility to help rather than just the normal response of ‘I would never do that, so I don't really need to listen.’”

Theme 2: The statistics provided throughout the program. Three participants identified statistics on the prevalence of sexual assault as most influential. An athlete noted that:

“The overwhelming statistics, especially the one if four number, shows how widespread sexual abuse is among college age women. It is not something I had traditionally thought of as being such an overwhelming problem. Previously, I had conceived of rape and sexual abuse as rare, but major occurrences. Now, I realized that it happens far more frequently...”

Theme 3: The section on confronting rape jokes and changing sexist behaviors. Three participants noted the impact of information on how to change their own behavior, such as:

“the part of the program where they talked about what we can do in our everyday lives led to the change in how I treat the word ‘rape.’ And I think the portion where we talked about common attitudes towards rape changed how I see a woman's role in what happens.”

Themes 4-7: The final four themes included one or two responses. Two participants were most affected by information on how to help a survivor, another by how the video was processed, another by the graphic nature of the program, and another reported that although his behavior had changed (he no longer tells rape jokes), his attitudes had not changed.

Possible causes, consequences and relationships. Clearly the video in this study was the cause of the most meaningful attitude change mentioned by individual participants. Fraternity men and athletes made specific connections to how they better understood a rape experience after hearing about a situation in which a man was raped. A consequence of this connection is

that they seemed to develop greater empathy toward female survivors. The tone of the program of empowering men to help instead of blaming them for the problem was also mentioned. The relationship between responses to the first and second question for participants affected most by the “helping a survivor” portion of the program was noteworthy in that their responses to the first question gave specific and accurately remembered strategies suggested by the program such as focusing on listening to and believing the victim and avoiding further violence.

The third question asked “Compared to *before* you participated in this program, have you *behaved* differently in any situation as a result of seeing the program? If so, in what way did you behave differently?”

Theme 1: No more rape jokes. Nearly half of the respondents noted that they were either more conscious of or refrained from telling rape jokes. Several added that they had confronted a rape joke told by others. An athlete reported:

“Several times I have noticed myself being more conscious of the nature of jokes I was making, the language I was using, and the overall portrayal of rape that has come up in everyday conversation. For instance, if a friend makes a joke or comment about rape, I have said something along the lines of “That's not cool” or “That's not funny” in hopes that they will see they are furthering the problem in society of treating rape lightly.”

Theme 2: My behavior has not yet changed, but I would act differently in the future. Five participants noted that they had not yet faced a situation in which their behavior would be different; however, they were quick to add that there were situations in which they would act differently. Most often, they mentioned that they would be better prepared to help survivors or that they would react differently to rape jokes.

Theme 3: I behaved differently when I helped a sexual assault survivor. Three participants had helped survivors since seeing the program. Some reported that their first reaction was not to assault the perpetrator, but rather, to focus on the needs of the victim. Another noted an increased confidence in knowing ways of giving support. A third reported:

“Actually one of friends told me a few months after the program that a long time ago she had been sexually assaulted by some schoolmates and luckily she was able to get out in time before things got worse. Before the program I feel I would have just asked her questions and not thought too much about it. But since I did go to the program, I felt very sorry for my friend and tried to make her feel comfortable about it and tried to imagine how horrible it must have been for her.”

Theme 4. I am more protective of my female friends. Two participants noted feeling “more protective of female friends” and that they felt “more aware of sketchy situations and advise girls of possible threats and am just more aware of dangers for the girls I'm with.” These responses were of both interest and concern. On the one hand, it can be helpful for people to advise their friends of how best to avoid rape situations. Given that the term “protective” was used in one case, this may reflect an overly paternalistic attitude. The portion of the second response noting more awareness of the dangers for “girls” he is with, while using disempowering language toward women, may suggest that he uses more caution in his intimate encounters.

Theme 5. I have encouraged others to see the program. Two participants reported that they have “spoken in favor of programs such as ‘one in four’ (the name of the peer education group presenting the program)” and that they have “encouraged others to attend the program.”

Theme 6. I have not faced a situation to apply what I learned. An additional two participants reported comments like “I have not been placed in a situation where I had to apply any of the principles of this program.”

Possible causes, consequences, and relationships. We found it particularly noteworthy that five months after program participation, participants were able to cite specific behaviors that changed as a consequence of seeing the program. The fact that the most common change mentioned was not using and/or confronting rape jokes has several implications. First, it may have been the first thing that came to mind and among the least threatening behavior changes for men to admit on a survey. It may be easier for men to say they no longer laugh at rape jokes than to admit that they are less sexually coercive with women, because doing the latter would acknowledge more serious transgressions. In the focus group phase of this study, participants only mentioned potential changes in their intimate encounters after mentioning that they would react differently to rape jokes, and only discussed such changes when probed. In the present study, written questions were open ended, did not specifically address sexually coercive behavior, and of course did not permit follow-up questions. Thus it is unknown whether the program led most men to act differently in their intimate encounters with women. Telling fewer rape jokes and confronting them was particularly encouraging, especially in light of research showing that enjoyment of sexist humor correlates with rape myth acceptance, likelihood of forcing sex, and sexual aggression (Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998). With regard to helping a survivor, it was encouraging that 13% of participants reported helping a survivor in the previous 5 months, accurately applying information taught to them in this program. A potential cause for not using this or other parts of the program was often the lack of an opportunity to apply it.



The final question assessed what part of the program changed their behavior that they mentioned in the previous question. Responses to this question fell primarily into one of two groups – either the video or the part of the program that encourages confronting rape jokes and challenging sexist behaviors. These and other themes include:

Theme 1: The video changed my behavior. Eight (33%) of the participants attributed their behavior change to the video. A fraternity man noted how it opened the doors for him to hear the later messages of the program. Specifically, he stated:

“The follow-up discussion and presentation was done at such an emotional time after the video and presenters, that making small suggestions about behavior such as that really take effect and get through to you.”

Theme 2: The section on confronting rape jokes and challenging sexist behaviors. Another third of respondents (eight) identified the portion of the program where presenters discuss how men can help change social norms. These respondents applied a section that encourages intervening when someone tells a joke about or makes light of the term “rape.” An athlete noted that the portion about rape jokes taught him “how such statements grossly underestimate the destructive nature of rape, as well as make those who have been raped feel less important.”

Theme 3. The program in general. Three participants couldn't point to any particular part as more or less responsible for their change in behavior. A fraternity man said: “Not quite sure. The program was just very effective in my mind, and I'm glad I participated in it.”

The last themes included three participants who did not respond to the question, two participants who identified the helping a survivor section, one participant was most impacted by

the statistic that one in four college women have survived rape or attempted rape since the age of 14, and another who mentioned the question and answer period at the end of the program.

## DISCUSSION

The most overwhelming result of the present study is the consistent, passionate, and detailed comments participants made regarding the changes in their attitudes and behavior that they attribute directly to seeing a videotape describing a male-on-male rape situation.

Participants found that this video helped them to understand what rape feels like, were able to apply this newfound understanding to what female survivors may feel, and reported connecting this newfound understanding to helping survivors and confronting rape jokes. As one participant mentioned specifically, the video was not only able to help men understand what rape might feel like, but its power combined with the non-blaming tone in which the program was presented made men less defensive toward messages regarding how to change their behavior.

Despite the fact that it is a relatively short portion of the program, the section that challenges men to not laugh at and indeed to confront jokes about rape is apparently highly effective. It is remarkable that in response to an open ended question that nearly half of the participants would single out the fact that they have either not laughed at or have confronted a rape joke since seeing the program. This finding supports to the notion that length of time spent on conveying a particular message does not necessarily correlate with impact. Rather, the right timing, context, and tone of the message can lead participants to report changes in their behavior.

An important limitation in this study involved the method of survey return. Participants were emailed follow-up surveys and were given the option of either answering by email or by returning the survey in an unmarked envelope through campus mail. The latter option provided an opportunity for complete anonymity; however, no participant chose this option. Given that

participants were returning surveys that contained their email address, this may have led some to not answer the questions fully. For example, some may have changed their sexually coercive behavior, but may not have wanted to admit this on a document containing identifying information. Future research should employ more rigorous safeguards for anonymity.

Another limitation of the present study is that it took place on one campus with only 24 people, and given its qualitative nature, cannot be confidently generalized. However, results do suggest strong causal relationships, particularly regarding the video, that help breath life into prior quantitative findings and suggest promising future directions for quantitative studies. For example, further research could assess the specific behaviors where participants in the present study reported changes, such as confronting rape jokes and supporting survivors. Future research should also directly assess if changes in sexually coercive behavior occurs.

A clear implication of this study is that that the program used should not be shown without this video and the processing that follows. To do so would remove the portion reported to cause the most change among men. The program evaluated in the present study showed strong evidence of generating a greatly increased understanding among men in traditionally high risk groups for what a rape experience might feel like. In addition, results suggest that the tone, format, and content (including the video used) set the stage for information provided at the end of the program that encouraged changes in behavior. Thus, the program seems to be successful in both generating empathy and in enhancing the likelihood of behavior change. Future research might consider adding additional components to the current program and/or showing a follow-up program to capitalize on participant's newfound understanding of the nature of a rape experience. The focus groups conducted as the first stage of the present study suggest that a

more thorough discussion of the connection between alcohol and consent could be an important topic to include in such efforts (Foubert & Cowell, 2003).

It is particularly noteworthy that so many men cited specific changes in their attitudes and their behavior. All participants in this study reported either a change in their attitudes or their behavior. Most participants reported both. These findings offer strong support for the program and the general approach taken in the intervention evaluated in this study. These findings also support the elaboration likelihood model, given that an intervention focused on motivating men to participate and presenting understandable information in a manner that was relevant to them produced evidence lasting changes in attitudes and behavior.

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