

Does Education Make a Difference? A View into Sexual Harassment on College Campuses

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Abstract

When examining the dynamic of students experience on college campuses, it is evident that sexual harassment is an issue that has a large role in providing students with a negative college experience. Sexual harassment hinders student performance, and subsequently the ability to reach their full academic potential. Sexual harassment leaves those victimized in a state of fear and intimidation, detrimentally affecting the nature in which students conduct themselves. At present, the measures taken to increase education and awareness surrounding sexual harassment have had poor results, as the belief in a just world continues to reinforce victim blame. In order to find a solution, an effective method to educate individuals about sexual harassment is pertinent. Innovative processes, such as peer-led theatre education, have demonstrated positive success in reshaping an individual's understanding and awareness of sexual assault. As college administration teams express discontent with the means sexual harassment has been managed on campus, the implementation of such processes could prove to be largely beneficial.

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Individuals in society learn largely in part by the method of observation. This is critical, as an individual's actions are based upon how they perceive a situation. Society is thought to be morally fit, meaning individuals base their decisions or actions upon the proper morals expected in society that conform to standard social etiquette. Surprisingly, although individual's express basic social etiquette such as politeness, the views surrounding sexual harassment indicate that not all decisions or actions are made the same. Sexual harassment has grown to be of large concern to the population in all sectors of society, yet post-secondary institutions report high concern as the sexual victimization rates among college women are about 3 times greater than victimization rates among women in the general population (Koss et al., 1987). Though there are many reasons as to why sexual harassment is a topic of utmost concern, the issue lies within two key reasons. One reason behind the acceptance of the ideas surrounding sexual harassment is based on the system justification theory, which explains the motivation to defend and justify the behaviors of the general population, even when it may be disadvantageous to certain individuals. This theory explains why we often say that someone "provoked" an individual to harass them, therefore excusing the harm sexual harassment poses. Individual's engagement in this behavior explains how an individual is not likely to recognize the severity of the issue that is sexual harassment, enabling victim blame to thrive and leave victims in a state of hopelessness and subject to serious mental health concerns. Another reason contributing to the increase of concern surrounding sexual harassment is the fact that current policies and procedures do not provide enough support in reporting sexual harassment (Kress, Shepherd, Anderson, Petuch, Nolan & Theimeke, 2006). This is particularly an area of interest when examining the college campus

community, as students are often a target for sexual harassment. Students entering post-secondary studies are approaching a new, challenging time in their lives, and are subsequently facing times of high stress. While coping with new pressures that post-secondary education demands, as adults, students are often faced with sexual encounters. Oftentimes, individuals are not able to cope appropriately when presented with these types of situations, and are therefore subjected to unnecessary stress (Kress et. al, 2006). This can result in a poor university experience in which student success is hindered on both a personal and academic level. As this is an issue that negatively affects a student's experience, it is pertinent that changes be made to improve the quality of post-secondary atmospheres. Post-secondary institutions are vital when examining the difference that education can play in improving student life, by making education sessions on this topic that focus on what constitutes sexual harassment as well as how to challenge it, available to students (Brener & Gowda, 2001). In examining the stresses faced by post-secondary students, the main theories behind sexual harassment, as well as the effects education and awareness have on such problematic issues, it is expected that if education sessions were offered and conducted properly, students would become more aware of sexual harassment. This would result in student's expressing a decrease in experiencing sexual harassment, resulting in a decrease in reports of harassment, and an increase in levels of satisfaction with college experiences.

Transitions to Post-Secondary Stress & Sexual Harassment

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is very challenging for many young individuals in today's society. The goal to successfully become self-sufficient is a difficult task that most first-year students struggle with as they attempt to establish a concrete routine for this new phase in life. It comes as no surprise that there are many factors that indicate the level of

difficulty a student has with this process. While traditionally academic results were used as a factor, research has indicated that students who struggle with the social transition into university had a harder time dealing with challenges that were associated with their first year (Kantanis, 2000). This is of large concern due to the increase in pressure that is placed on students in post-secondary education, as changes in academia has placed larger amounts of work on students, therefore increasing expectations of student performance (Kantanis, 2000). It should therefore come as no surprise that the challenges students face while attending post-secondary institutions should be reduced in order to ensure students not only perform to the best of their ability, but to ensure that the learning process is a positive one for them. As previously stated, sexual harassment poses a threat to ensuring that this process is as positive as possible. While universities and colleges alike have programs for students such as counselling and academic support in place, some schools do not have, and do not actively engage in preventing sexual harassment on campus. It is something that is of growing concern, yet it remains a taboo subject. Many schools have posters on display, but they lack a contact person or department to deal with concerns surrounding sexual harassment. Much like the stigma around mental health, the mentality is that if the act is not spoken about, it doesn't happen, with results being just as debilitating as the acceptance of mental health stigma. Interestingly enough, when given the chance in a safe, secure environment, students often report events of sexual harassment. The college experience has become somewhat a "rite of passage" for young adults today, and should be a time to be enjoyed. However, sexual harassment results in the opposite. While colleges today offer counselling services and promote well-being to students, there is still a gap that is resulting in students feeling trapped and unhappy. This is evident, as even 55% of college administration teams report that current systems to report and address harassment are not

enough, as oftentimes, college campuses provide sexual harassment education sessions to faculty and staff, but exclude students from obtaining the opportunity to learn about it. Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem on college campuses, as 54% of college women have experienced some version of sexual victimization (Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987; Breitenbecher, 2000).

Theories Behind the Acceptance of Sexual Harassment

One reason why society often dismisses the severity of sexual harassment is due to the large number of individuals who are ignorant to the idea and that buy into the stigma around sexual harassment (Kress et. al, 2006). These myths are stereotypes that blame the victim, rather than examining the original source of the issue. This type of thought stems from the idea that individuals in society believe in a sound and just world – ideas behind the system justification theory (Blasi & Jost, 2006). This theory explains that individuals in society are motivated to defend and justify the behaviors and actions of the general population. This theory also indicates that because of this, some behaviors that currently exist are deemed acceptable, when in reality, they shouldn't. (Blasi & Jost, 2006). In addition to this theory, as we often find ourselves reasoning that a victim was deserving of harassment, arguing that they encouraged it in some way. Therefore, as a result, it is easier to act in accordance with the status quo in holding the perspective that the inequality is justified or simply doesn't even exist. These beliefs in a just world serve as the major basis as to why sexual harassment is a prominent issue that individuals face. A study by Chapleau & Oswald (2014) examined the effects that gender inequality had on moral outrage with respect to sexual violence. It was found that tolerance for inequality in general was associated with less moral outrage, as well as less support for policies that would help disadvantaged groups. In finding this, Chapleau & Oswald's (2014) research clearly

indicate that by simply accepting the current ideas in place in society, there is more damage done to individuals who are victimized by sexual violence, of which sexual harassment is part of. As a result, while moral outrage is sparked in individuals, the social constraints in place prevent us from addressing the amount of harm victim blame is causing to individuals affected.

Education and Awareness on College Campuses

As previously mentioned, a student's level of satisfaction with their college experience is extremely important, as it will affect their ability to perform in academia. Baynard, Plante & Moynihan (2004), indicate that a great deal of research demonstrates that exposure to sexual violence is associated with a plethora of negative outcomes. These results can include increased substance use, depressive symptoms, health risk behaviors, and symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder among those who suffer extreme sexual harassment. While universities often require that students complete courses to broaden their general knowledge, there is no required course offered that targets sexual harassment. As universities cannot offer courses to raise general knowledge in every discipline, they have been moving in the right direction, as they are attempting to educate individuals about sexual harassment. Post-secondary institutions now offer education and awareness sessions on the topic, in an attempt to improve student life. Essentially, it comes down to delivering education to a community of people, and bringing individuals together to counter this issue. As presented by Baynard et. al (2004), sexual violence is a widespread problem across communities, and while there is growing concern, the result of educating individuals on this topic has received a mixed reception. Therefore, views about the causes of sexual violence provide the foundation of information on which practitioners base interventions and prevention programs. A literature review examining the effectiveness of sexual violence prevention by Breitenbecher (2000) indicated the overall effectiveness of many of these

programs have a positive impact. Breitenbecher (2000) also indicated that prevention programs currently have a short-term positive effect on sexual violence, prompting the need for an innovative solution to ensure long-term positive results. In relation to the college population's attitudes about sexual violence, education plays an important role. A literature review conducted by Baynard et. al (2004) found that bystander intervention, where bystanders are educated on the topic of sexual harassment, has had positive changes in adversarial sexual beliefs, increased knowledge about sexual violence, and reduction of risky dating behaviors such as use of alcohol. It is also vital that the community students are part of (known as the campus community, which includes students, staff and faculty and senior administration) is willing to actively listen and reinforce the information provided via these programs. In working to create changes in the beliefs of the community, implementing different prevention strategies would be most effective, as communities would move from no or little awareness of the problem, toward preparation to addressing the problem and ultimately to expanding and making permanent efforts to address the problem (Baynard et al., 2004). Assessing where communities are in their readiness to change around certain social problems is key, as the effectiveness of prevention efforts is dependent on where the community lies in respect to sexual harassment. (Baynard et al., 2004) also indicate that some communities have moved beyond the historical perspective that sexual violence does not exist or is a problem. Other places have noticed the threat sexual violence poses and developed crisis centers to aid in dealing with the problem. (Baynard et al., 2004). This reflects the current ideas surrounding post-secondary communities, as institutions of higher education are not only in a position to remain consistent with change, but are also able to take initiative in reducing threats to student success. There is also a focus on future development, with a focus on having all collaborators within the campus community work toward creating such an

environment. Potter et al. (2000) indicated that simply the existence of sexual violence programs is not enough. The intent of the programs and their content must be conveyed to all members of the university community in a clear and consistent manner and to promote the idea that this is unacceptable to continue otherwise (Potter et. al, 2000; Breitenbecher, 2000; Baynard et al., 2004).

Developments in Education

A new addition to complement these programs has been established with the introduction of peer-led education theatre. While there are current information sessions and awareness training programs, this is a new approach designed to promote individual well-being via theatrical productions. These productions are based on specific topics and are delivered by an individual's peers (McMahon, Postmus, Warrener & Koenick, 2014). Most student affairs professionals consider implementing a one-time prevention program to help raise awareness. This practice is questionable, as it has yet to be seen how to best deliver such programs in a realistic, practical format for large, universal groups of college students (McMahon et. al, 2014). There is definitely a need for extensive research in regards to how effective this practice is, as some quote it as being an extremely effective method of prevention (Kress et. al, 2006). In examining this practically, the reality is that those working with college students are only able to provide one opportunity to facilitate or provide prevention programming to students in large-setting areas. As a result, to ensure that the message is portrayed clearly and effectively, it has been suggested that offering a one-time awareness session that focuses on sexual violence awareness and education may be more effective if they are carefully selected, delivered by peers, and able to evoke emotion, observed in the use of peer-led education theater (McMahon et al., 2014). This concept has gained interest and has been used for a variety of health-related concerns. Unsurprisingly, the

research on using peer education with students about sexual violence indicates that this educational approach is more successful than the traditional programs, largely due to the fact that students are more likely to pay attention to, and are more comfortable discussing these issues with, their peers (McMahon et al., 2014). The effectiveness of peer education stems from the fact that the peer educators convey information and communicate with their contemporaries in ways that professionals cannot (Black, Weisz, Coats & Patterson, 2000). Used as “entertainment education,” the underlying premise suggests that it is engaging and entertaining while also delivering educational information to the audience, with numerous studies reporting that peer led theater performances result in improved attitudes about sexual violence. (Black et al., 2000; Heppner, Humphrey, Hillenbrand-Gunn, & DeBord, 1995; Kress et al., 2006; McMahon et al., 2014). Black et. al (2000) conducted a study aimed at examining the effects that peer education had on attitude changes around sexual violence. The study consisted of 150 participants who watched an adapted production of a play called “Hold Her Down”, a theatrical production portrayed by social work students and faculty on an urban university campus, which was based sexual violence. The peers that delivered the production held expertise in sexual violence and led focus groups afterward with audience members. The discussions were based on the emotions surrounding the topic of sexual violence. They delivered surveys pre-test and post-test to measure participant’s opinions on sexual violence, with post-test mean scores significantly lower than pre-test mean scores, indicating that the use of peer-led theater education has success in educating individuals on sexual violence. There have been, as a result, positive trends in raising awareness about sexual harassment and sexual violence. As observed in the study conducted by McMahon et al. (2014), 3000 university students participated in a peer led educational session, which shows promise to be successful in preventing sexual harassment and sexual violence. It

was apparent that using a one-time intervention significantly altered students' attitudes about engaging in learning about sexual harassment as well as their attitudes about sexual violence.

The study also found that males were more likely than females to accept the myths around sexual harassment. As a result, there are some limitations to this awareness venue; however, there is a positive trend that is enabling students to not only recognize, but also challenge the ideas behind sexual harassment, helping to create a safer, engaging academic environment.

Conclusion

In trying to understand the need to shift the ideas behind sexual harassment, it has become clear that while there have been some developments within society, there is still a large need for changes in education. Whether the focus is through education or social engagement initiatives, it is evident that positive results exist when these methods are practiced appropriately, especially with respect to peer-led theater education sessions. Though it still requires time and effort, this approach could very well be an excellent opportunity to raise awareness and change the ideas surrounding the topic of sexual harassment and help improve the learning experience for post-secondary students.

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