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“Fresh” Thoughts on Studying Sexual Assault

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In the 1960s and 1970s, feminists used to talk about having a “click” moment when they realized that some personal experience had political implications—thus the slogan, “The personal is political.” When I started graduate school in the late 1970s, I was drawn to studying sexual assault. I had been a declared feminist since high school as the Women’s Movement even reached the coal region of eastern Pennsylvania! Attending college in New York City, with its myriad opportunities for more exposure to what feminists were up to, made me increasingly aware that violence against women was a greater problem than had been acknowledged up to that point. In light of all the studies that have been conducted since, it is amazing to think how little systematic research existed back then. Under my advisor’s guidance, I started to read everything I could find, a lot of which consisted of Freudian treatises on women’s desire to be raped. But what had the greatest impact on me (besides Susan Brownmiller’s, 1976, classic, *Against Our Will*) were books containing personal testimonials of women’s rape experiences. In the middle of reading one of these, I had my own “click” moment.

Quite suddenly and startlingly, I found myself reliving an encounter from my early teenage years. A boy whom I knew quite well, having attended elementary school with him, offered to walk me home from a dance one summer night. Being well socialized into fearing strangers jumping out of bushes, I gladly went along, especially since said boy was a football player who could undoubtedly protect me from any nasty bush-hiding monsters. Said boy had also been drinking with friends before the dance. At this point I hardly need to finish the story, except for one detail. My mother had briefly mentioned at one point that I should always carry a hat pin with me in case some boy ever got “fresh.” Frankly, I was not really sure what that meant, but I learned pretty quickly that night that “fresh” could mean “attempted rape,” and said boy learned what kind of damage a hat pin could do.

Having that “aha” experience in graduate school set the stage for a lot of the research I have undertaken since then, particularly related to alcohol and sexual assault and women’s sexual assault resistance. In this article, I will discuss how my own work in these areas developed with reference to two highly cited papers published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996) as well as my other research, how my work fits into the general body of current research on these topics, and where we might go from here. Please find the original articles at <http://pwq.sagepub.com/content/16/2/179> and <http://pwq.sagepub.com/content/20/1/123>. In particular, I would like to address three dilemmas that feminist researchers face in addressing these topics. These dilemmas focus on three areas: (a) what my colleagues and I termed the “cognitive tightrope” (Norris et al., 1996), (b) contradictory messages that women receive about drinking, and (c) how to avoid victim blaming but still empower women to assertively resist sexual assault.

Alcohol, Sexual Assault, and the Cognitive Tightrope

A few years after completing my doctorate, I pursued an opportunity to start a research program of my own at a research institute at my university. The agreement was that this program should involve women and alcohol and that I had to obtain my own external funding. I dived into the still-sparse sexual assault literature and the word “alcohol” kept appearing but almost tangentially. Nevertheless, something clicked (perhaps a reoccurrence of that initial “aha” experience), and I was ultimately awarded a small National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant to conduct an experimental study of alcohol’s effects on perceptions of sexual assault. This study built on an earlier one by Richardson and Campbell (1982), demonstrating that more responsibility for being raped was assigned to women when they were drunk than sober, but that the opposite occurred for men committing rape. Our study showed that when a man and a woman were depicted as drinking together, the event was viewed in the most sexual/romantic terms than in any other condition, even though the man had clearly raped the woman (Norris & Cubbins, 1992). In retrospect, this study seems like a fairly minor effort, but it made me aware how many questions related to alcohol and sexual assault needed to be addressed and, much to my surprise, has since become one of the most highly cited articles in this journal’s 35-year history. At about the same time, I discovered that Toni Abbey was also developing a research program in this area and published a seminal paper raising many of these issues (Abbey, 1991). Since then the field has attracted several excellent feminist researchers and our knowledge of the underlying mechanisms and dynamics of alcohol-involved sexual assault has deepened tremendously (cf. Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004; Davis, George, & Norris, 2004; George & Marlatt, 1986; Parks, Hsieh, Bradizza, & Romosz, 2008; Testa & Livingston, 2009; Ullman, 2007; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003).

Over the next few years, it became increasingly clear to me and my colleagues that few researchers were addressing how women responded to situational cues that might indicate a heightened risk for being sexually assaulted and ultimately to sexually aggressive acts. To some extent, this is understandable because, as feminists, we do not want to fall into the trap of victim blaming (see discussion below). Nevertheless, it does women little justice to ignore the possibility that at least in some cases (such as mine) effective resistance can discourage a would-be rapist from pursuing his goal. It seemed especially important to understand women’s responses to sexual aggression from her perspective, that is, through her eyes (Norris et al., 1996). Accomplishing this goal required expanding our methodology to include qualitative approaches in addition to experimentation, which we did in another, now highly cited article published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (Norris et al., 1996). We decided to conduct focus groups with sorority women to try to understand how normal socializing could sometimes lead to sexual assault. This was a mind-expanding experience, to say the least. There is nothing quite comparable to hearing women discuss their own experiences with and views of interacting with men, especially at parties where there is a great deal of alcohol. On one hand, the women talked about the fun aspects of parties, taking me back to the days when the rallying cry was “If it feels good, do it!” On the other hand, there was a general awareness of sexual assault risk.

From these discussions emerged an image of the “cognitive tightrope”—balancing expectations imposed by traditional gender roles to be attractive and managing social interactions with men while avoiding sexual assault (Nurius & Norris, 1996). Women feel a need to maintain a delicate balance between generating desirable men’s interest and pleasing them, on one hand, and not succumbing to being their victims, on the other. Although our participants acknowledged that sexual assault was a constant threat, they expressed little concern that they personally were at risk. In general, they largely assumed that familiar men were safe and even expressed more concern about strangers. This perception was especially

surprising because one of the most important (and, we thought, widely known) findings from the early years of sexual assault research was that the overwhelming majority of rapists were acquaintances of the victim (cf. Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Unfortunately, the illusion that one is less likely than others to experience negative events (Taylor & Brown, 1988) is commonly experienced in many circumstances.

We also learned that “walking the cognitive tightrope” results in a number of psychological barriers that restrict effective resistance to unwanted sexual advances (Norris et al., 1996). If a woman’s attention and concern are directed at pleasing men, “making nice,” and in general keeping relations on an even keel, then when things go terribly wrong (such as being attacked by someone she thought she could trust), how can she suddenly become Buffy the Vampire Slayer, defending her honor without regard for his feelings or any social repercussions? Since then, in addition to our own work (Macy, Nurius, & Norris, 2006; Nurius, Norris, Macy, & Huang, 2004; Nurius, Norris, Young, Graham, & Gaylord, 2000; Stoner et al., 2007), others have shown that psychological barriers are related to nonassertive resistance (Turchik, Probst, Chau, Nigoff, & Gidycz, 2007).

Contradictory Messages

It actually stands to reason that after all the years of preaching about the dangers of acquaintance rape, many women still do not recognize that it can happen to them. First, most women’s experiences when socializing with men are usually quite positive—fortunately sexual assault is not the modal social experience. Second, from a woman’s psychological perspective, how could she maintain a constant state of hyper-alertness about possibly being sexually assaulted and still carry on a normal life? As one of our respondents put it, “... When I go into an exchange or party, I don’t think to myself ... ‘I hope I don’t get date raped tonight.’ I think, ‘I hope that I get a chance to meet people’” (Norris et al., 1996, p. 133). Living in a state of fear does not make for mental well-being. One major dilemma then is how to empower women not to be blindsided when faced with sexual aggression, but rather to muster a direct assertive response (without arming every woman with a hatpin).

Rozee and Koss (2001) presented a practical scheme for enhancing women’s risk recognition and sexual assault resistance that builds on the cognitive appraisal conceptual model (Nurius & Norris, 1996). This model arose in part from our conversations with undergraduate women. The basic idea is to promote women’s sense of agency in any given situation. This would involve, for instance, teaching women how sexually aggressive men operate, thus resulting in better recognition of risk cues; helping women to understand how psychological barriers can inhibit effective resistance; and providing the necessary self-defense training on which women can draw when physical resistance is necessary. Of course, all of this would require counteracting the messages of male dominance and female vulnerability fostered by traditional gender roles (Norris et al., 1996; Rozee & Koss, 2001).

In many cases, alcohol decreases a woman’s ability to recognize possible risk cues (Davis, Stoner, Norris, George, & Masters, 2009; Testa, Livingston, & Collins, 2000) and mount an effective resistance response (Norris et al., 2006; Ullman, 2007), although its role is not clear-cut (Gidycz, McNamara, & Edwards, 2006). But our focus groups made clear that alcohol consumption is a normal part of socializing. This is no surprise, but it presents another dilemma for the sexual assault researcher who also studies alcohol consumption. Underage drinking is rampant (Arnett, 2005) and results in a variety of negative consequences (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2006). Yet, the party line conveyed by major alcohol research funders and other government entities is to preach abstinence from drinking for those under the age of 21. Is this realistic? Women are at particularly high risk for being sexually assaulted after consuming excessive amounts (cf.

Testa & Livingston, 2009, for a review). Therefore, should we be teaching women (and men) to drink moderately rather than waving the abstinence flag? By making it illegal for those under age 21 to purchase alcohol at all, does drinking become the forbidden fruit that many young people want to indulge/overindulge in? To date, sexual assault risk-reduction programs have largely not included material about alcohol consumption but should not they? (For a full discussion of this issue, see Testa & Livingston, 2009).

Don't Blame the Victim: The Dilemma of Empowerment

A third dilemma is how to study women's responses to sexual assault and promote assertive resistance without appearing to blame the victim. In other words, if teaching women to directly, perhaps physically, resist unwanted sexual advances becomes the norm, will the tendency to blame women if they are raped result in a backlash of blame? ("She took self-defense ... why couldn't she defend herself?") And will women blame themselves even more than they do now for not "controlling the situation"? Alcohol consumption can play an especially important role in this regard. Many women ascribe blame to themselves for having been sexually assaulted after drinking. They truly believe—undoubtedly due to messages conveyed by key elements of society—that they could have controlled the situation if only they had not drunk so much. Therefore, this reasoning goes, they deserved whatever happened to them. But this assumption belies the fact that many perpetrators are very good at what they do—being charming and perhaps providing women drinks to debilitate them enough to get what they want. (Our respondents referred to these men as "scam masters.") Often in these situations, if a woman does resist (after drinking or not), the assailant simply overpowers her. Besides, is rape a proportionate punishment for getting stinking drunk? A hangover usually suffices. So, how can we reverse this tendency to assign responsibility for someone else's unacceptable behavior to the victim? How can we succeed in placing the onus where it belongs?

I have noticed a preference in the last few years for the term "sexual assault risk-reduction" over "rape prevention." This change is a positive trend in that it removes the burden of *preventing rape* from the woman and emphasizes taking steps to reduce risk, acknowledging that risk reduction does not ensure risk elimination. No matter how assertive or effective a woman's resistance to sexual aggression, she does not have complete control over whether she is raped. In American society where personal responsibility for one's destiny is held in high regard, it is difficult to accept that sometimes bad things happen because of bad luck. Sometimes there is just nothing one could have reasonably done to prevent a tragedy.

As feminists, we need to keep emphasizing that sexual assault is the perpetrator's responsibility, and as such, perpetrators need to suffer consequences. Additionally, we need to find more and better ways to promulgate this message. Just as views of other public health problems, such as smoking, have changed by constant and consistent dissemination of information about their ill effects, so too must we address the issue of sexual assault. Until we as a society disavow the notion that it is acceptable to get a woman drunk to take advantage of her vulnerability ("Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker"), I fear that at *PWQ*'s next significant anniversary we will still be decrying the lack of progress made in decreasing sexual assault rates.

Reflections and Future Directions

Although we have accomplished a great deal in the last two decades of research on sexual assault, particularly with regard to understanding alcohol's role and how women resist, I recognize the need to expand our efforts in several ways both methodologically and substantively. One of the greatest epistemological contributions of feminist researchers has been recognizing the need for multimethod approaches to studying any issue. I find that

employing both qualitative and quantitative research allows a depth of exploration that neither alone could provide. But both also have their limitations. Although women's narratives about their experiences are powerful and provide unique insights, it is difficult to collect and analyze sufficient numbers to know how far one can generalize to the greater population. But these narratives can do much to inform survey instruments and experimental paradigms.

Many feminist researchers have drawn on interviews and focus group discussions to incorporate aspects of women's actual experiences into experimental scenarios (cf. Abbey, Saenz, Buck, Parkhill, & Hayman, 2006; George et al., 2009; Norris et al., 2006; Testa et al., 2000). Laboratory experiments can never completely replicate real life, and with regard to sexual assault, we certainly would not want them to! But by making experimental stories somewhat realistic and developing dependent measures that tap into women's thoughts and feelings, we can complement what we learn from qualitative approaches. We can both develop and test sophisticated statistical models that allow us to examine many variables simultaneously and apply our findings to large numbers of women.

Furthermore, as an alcohol researcher, I find that there are some questions, such as identifying specific dose effects, which can only be addressed using experimentation. Individuals' recollections of how much they had drunk on a particular occasion can be suspect, especially if they were quite intoxicated and had been drinking over several hours. Thus, controlling and manipulating doses in the laboratory and having participants provide hypothetical responses to an event similar to one that many women have actually experienced can build on the narrative approach to understand how alcohol affects responses to risk cues and male sexual aggression (Norris et al., 2006).

However, as with having women recount sexual assault experiences in interviews or written narratives, it is essential when conducting experiments on sexual assault that we do not re-traumatize women. Although it is essential that we give women a voice, we have to be sensitive to any internal discomfort that could be evoked. In my lab, we do not portray a completed assault. In fact, one strategy we have used is to have participants complete a scenario in their own words (Masters, Norris, Stoner, & George, 2006). Not only are the themes provided rich with insight, but many women express feelings of empowerment from the exercise. We also survey participants several weeks after their session to determine whether there have been long-lasting negative effects. More than 95% of participants have responded, and their feedback have been overwhelmingly positive. Many express gratitude that we are studying a phenomenon that they know to be all too common.

Unfortunately much of the work on sexual assault resistance has focused on college undergraduates. This is not an inappropriate population to study, given its high prevalence of sexual assault. However, many women who never go to college or attend sporadically also experience high rates. Given that these are more likely to be members of minority groups and/or lower socioeconomic classes, much of our research is limited by both class and race biases. As feminists, we are bound to widen our scope of research participants. Because alcohol administration experiments require participants to be over the age of 21, to some extent alcohol researchers are forced to cast our net beyond the college campus. Still there are barriers to attracting minority and lower SES women (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006) into university-based research that must be addressed and overcome.

One regret that I personally have in my own work is not having used my own theoretically based studies to inform, develop, and test a risk-reduction program. Although there is recognition that many interventions are neither theoretically based (Yeater & O'Donohue, 1999) nor particularly effective (Bachar & Koss, 2001; Ullman, 2002), not many basic

researchers have stepped up to the intervention plate (for one exception, see Senn, Saunders, & Gee, 2008). As with many things, it is easier to remain within our particular comfort zones than to venture into unknown territory. But if we are to make any further advances in getting women to recognize risky situations and assertively resist sexual aggression, we need to develop more effective interventions.

This is true not just for women's risk-reduction programs but for targeting men who are at high risk for committing sexual assault. Lack of effectiveness is a particular problem for sexual assault prevention programs aimed at men. When these programs do demonstrate reductions in rape-supportive attitudes, which in turn might decrease sexual aggression, these changes tend to be among men who probably would not have committed sexual assault in the first place (Stephens & George, 2009). But why should sexually aggressive men change their behavior when there is little chance of suffering any consequences? Getting a woman drunk is still seen as an acceptable way to "get her" to have sex, and any kind of adjudication is unlikely no matter what the circumstances surrounding a sexual assault are.

The comment my mother made to me about boys getting fresh is the only time I can recall that we ever approached the subject of sex or sexual assault. I never told her about the incident, and so I never had the chance to thank her for making resistance, in some sense, normal. Although not my specific intention, telling the story and researching the topic have been my tribute to my mother's effort to protect her daughter. My hope is that I have done something to "pass it on"—to let young women know that there are a lot of guys who get "fresh," some of them drunk, and that it is perfectly acceptable to defend oneself.

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