

Factors Shaping College Students' Perceptions of Appropriateness or Legality of Sexual Encounters

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BACKGROUND

Sexual violence continues to be a major public health issue leading to long term negative consequences in mental and physical health as well as the social well being of the victim (Basile 2005 & 2007). The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) found that 14.8% of women and 2.1% of men have been victims of a completed rape (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Research has identified college campuses as a prime setting for rape and other sexual violence (Basile, 2007). Studies have found that incidence of rape may vary from 20% (Brenner, 1999) to 80% (Fisher, 2000) in college-aged women.

Given these staggering statistics, University officials across the nation struggle to make their campuses safer for both students and visitors. A key to ensuring safety and decreasing the number of sexual assaults and rape is effective education. In order to develop and implement an effective educational program on a college campus it is imperative that the attitudes and current knowledge of the target audience be well understood.

Our legal system's definition of rape hinges on the presence or absence of consent. However, the concept of consent differs widely among populations and is difficult to define. In the college student population, research has focused on the understanding of the context of sexual intimacy and the issue of perceptions of consent to sexual contact (Abbey 1982, 1987, 2002, DeKeseredy 1993, Lim 1999). Yet, many colleges have focused their preventative efforts on building a healthy relationship (Bertowitz, 2005). In response to the national statistics as well as the need to enhance the current preventative focus, this research further examines the topic of rape and sexual assault in order to bring to light hidden perceptions related to the concept of consent. This study complements and adds to the understanding of how consent and other factors affect perceptions about legality and appropriateness of sexual activity in the college student population.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To describe how consent and other factors affect perceptions of appropriateness and legality of sexual activity among college students.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. By the end of this session, the participant will be able to describe the attitudes of college students regarding consent and appropriateness/legality of a sexual encounter.
2. Participants will be able to identify unique sub-groups of students in order to develop group-specific education/intervention programs.

METHODS

We sought to combine several influences to determine the attitudes of college students about appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior as well as legal and illegal behaviors and the level of importance placed on these influences. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed for this study. The formative stage of the research process involved student focus group discussions, which then informed survey development for the online assessment stage of the research. Both stages of this project were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This study was conducted at a large public university in the Southeast United States. All of the participants were either enrolled as full-time or part-time undergraduate and graduate students at the time of the research.

FOCUS GROUPS

Three focus groups were conducted: two with females only and one with males only. A female member of the research team facilitated the female groups while a male member of the research team facilitated the male group. The groups were videoed in order to facilitate analysis. Throughout the course of the focus group discussions it became apparent that that there was ambiguity between the groups as to what exactly constituted consensual intercourse. The beliefs regarding consent were similar between the two female groups. They viewed consent as a black and white issue. Conversely, as a group, the male respondents tended to think very fluidly about consent, viewing it in context and taking factors like dress, alcohol consumption, and the female's reputation into account.

SURVEY

Students were sent an email through the university listserv containing a cover letter with a link to the questionnaire. An email expressing appreciation to the respondents and encouraging those who had not responded to do so was sent out 2 days and 1 week after the initial recruitment email.

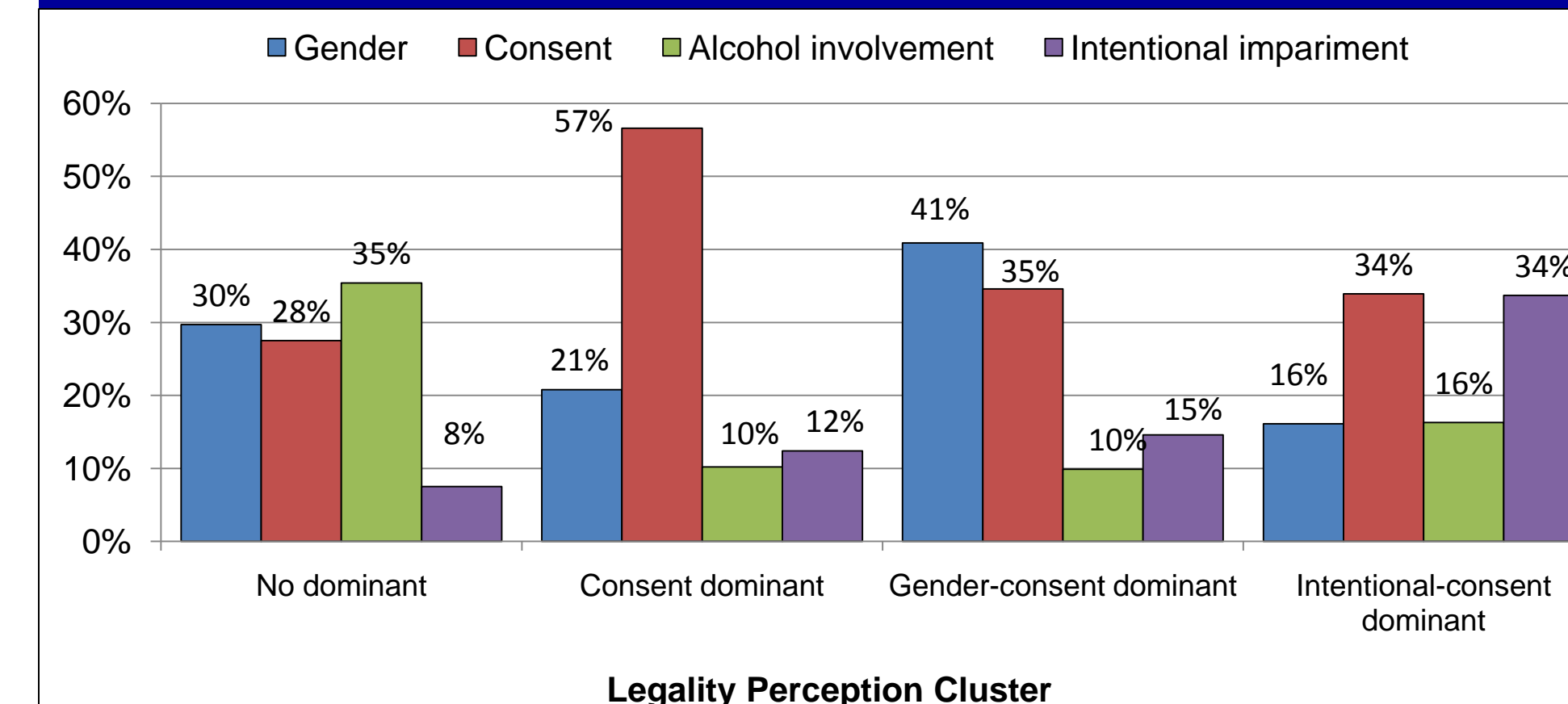
In addition to the demographic and general perception data collected, a conjoint study was conducted in which four factors (victim gender, level of consent, level of alcohol involvement, and level of intentional impairment) were varied to create nine different sexual encounter scenarios. The scenarios presented to respondents described a heterosexual couple out together socially who have intercourse at the end of the night. The next morning one of them has doubts about whether what took place the night before was appropriate or legal. Respondents rated appropriateness and legality of each scenario using a 100-point scale.

RESULTS

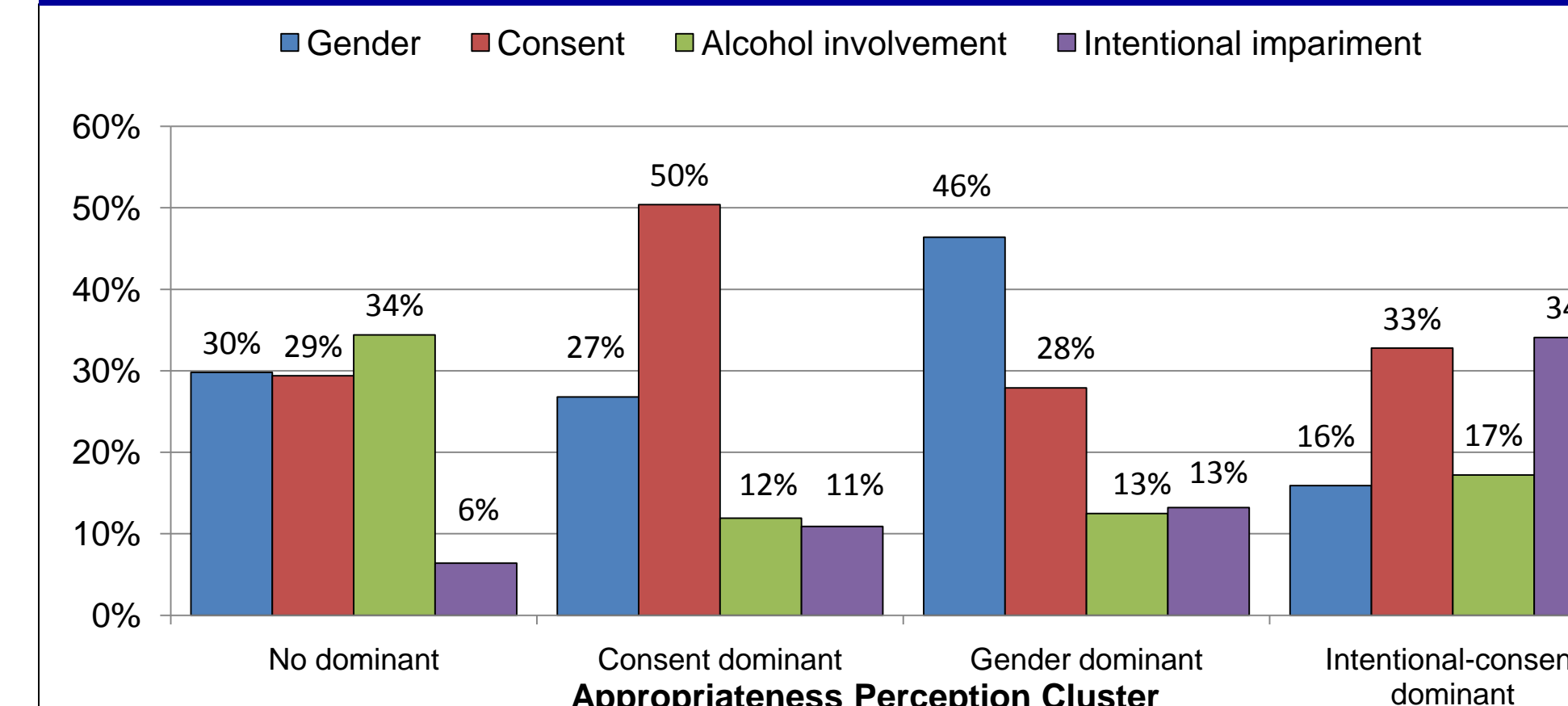
At the time of this analysis, there were 603 responses. Nearly half (48.7%) of those responding were upperclassmen, approximately 25% were graduate students and the remaining 25% were sophomores and freshmen. The majority of the respondents were Caucasian (82%) while 12% were African American. The majority of the survey respondents were female (68%). Similar to previous research, we found that college freshman and sophomores differ significantly from upper classman and graduate student on the level of knowledge they possess regarding rape and sexual assault.

Three distinct sub-groups of students were identified based on primary factors driving perceptions. Groups were labeled "consent", "balance of all factors", and "gender of the alleged victim". Contrary to our focus groups, the survey findings indicate that males tend to be more consent driven while females tend to more often consider all factors. Education and preventative efforts need to address the differences in how perceptions are formed and be varied in presentation and focus to address these differences.

IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS SHAPING PERCEPTIONS OF LEGALITY OF SEXUAL ENCOUNTER



IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS SHAPING PERCEPTIONS OF APPROPRIATENESS OF SEXUAL ENCOUNTER



CONCLUSIONS

These results have implications for college programming and prevention. University leaders should strive to provide a comprehensive and ongoing program of information dissemination and prevention/intervention skills to students, beginning with the vulnerable, high-risk incoming student cohort. These programs should be tailored to each of the distinct sub-groups.

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