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## How College and University Women Navigate Rape Culture and Fear of Sexual assault on Campus: A Phenomenological Study

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## ABSTRACT

### HOW COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY WOMEN NAVIGATE FEAR OF SEXUAL ASSAULT ON CAMPUS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Institutions of higher education are not safe for women-identified students regarding gender-based violence, specifically sexual assault. The existence of a rape culture, with societal norms that ignore, allow, or implicitly encourage sexual violence to be perpetrated by men against women, is alive and well on today's college campuses. Exact numbers are difficult to discern in such an underreported crime, but most researchers agree that 20-25% of all traditional-aged women are raped during their college and university experience, with the numbers being even higher for bisexual and trans-women. Further, the rates of sexual assault of women college students aged 18-25 are triple the national average. This rape culture, along with the statistics and realities in the specific context of higher education, paint a bleak picture and create a climate of anxiety, fear, and trepidation for women. The realities of this narrative have become so fixed in campus life they have become almost invisible; the burden of women taking responsibility to not get raped is a significant one that is often overlooked. This phenomenological study, using a critical theory framework, examined how six women manage their college experiences about fear of sexual assault. Students' feelings of terror, the normalization and burden of risk-reduction, along with powerlessness, combined with misinformation about rape and an unfair bargain of making sacrifices to feel secure, all lead to a sense of being controlled.

Suggestions for how post-secondary institutions can improve this climate and reality are discussed.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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AUGUST 2021

HOW COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY WOMEN NAVIGATE RAPE CULTURE AND  
FEAR OF SEXUAL ASSAULT ON CAMPUS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

BY

ROBERT BABCOCK  
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Doctoral Director:  
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## PREFACE

The purpose of this dissertation project was to examine and develop a deeper understanding of how college and university women navigate the fear of sexual assault in their college experience. The phenomenological study scrutinized the experiences of six women at two public comprehensive universities in the Midwest. The following chapters articulate the dissertation's evolution from the proposal stage to a report and discussion on the research findings, concluding with a scholarly reflection on my development and learning.

Chapter one is a piece from my dissertation proposal defense and candidacy exam. The exam occurred and the proposal was defended in January 2021. The conceptual framework used in this study was Linder's (2018) Power-conscious Approach to understanding and remedying sexual violence in higher education. This was done through the paradigm of feminist critical theory. It was through these lenses the study was conducted and research findings were interpreted and understood.

In chapter two, the findings from the study are presented. The research was conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 epidemic utilizing existing technologies, and this chapter gives full detail and explanation on the results from the interviews with the six research participants. The information gathered revealed an overlapping set of realities revealing a lack of control and power for women students in higher education. Due to feelings of terror, fear, a burden to not be raped along with a normalization of that burden, as well as feelings of powerlessness, combined with misinformation about rape and bargains about trading freedom for safety, college and

university women feel a startling lack of control over their lives; or conversely feel controlled by the realities of fearing sexual assault.

Chapter three is a scholarly reflection. In this chapter, I detail my process and learning throughout the dissertation process. The final chapter includes thoughts on how I came to appreciate the gravity and depth of the research process, as well as developing an appreciation for all the nuances that come along with original knowledge creation. I also mention the humility and responsibility that emerge from the research process.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **EXAMINING RAPE CULTURE ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES**

### Introduction

The term “rape culture” first became common in America in the 1970s, primarily popularized by feminists, to describe societal norms that ignored, allowed, or tacitly encouraged sexual violence perpetrated by men against women (Phillips, 2017). The normalization of gender-based violence (GBV) includes removing accountability from perpetrators, the acceptance and promotion of rape myths (such as what a woman wears can invite an attack), and persistence in blaming the victim/survivor for the crime (Phillips, 2017). The threat of rape and rape culture has created an unhealthy environment whose norms must be internalized by women to navigate the world successfully and safely (Griffin, 1971). Further, rape culture is best understood in the larger context of the unrelenting oppression of women in our society, and women’s collective lack of power (Phillips, 2017).

Rape culture is a significant societal problem, permeating nearly every aspect of society, and institutions of higher education are certainly not immune. The problem of GBV on college campuses, specifically campus sexual assault, (CSA) is at epidemic levels, with some estimates being around 20-25% of college women being raped (Banyard et al., 2009; Coker et al., 2011; Mackinnon, 2016; Gidycz et al., 2006; Karjane et al., 2005; McMahon et al., 2019; R. A. I. N. N., n.d.). While CSA is by no means a recent or new issue, due to increased calls for action and

institutional accountability, there is more attention and focus on this topic. Prevention programs and research on CSA have increased on college and university campuses in recent years. Government policy makers, including the courts, have also made meaningful contributions to the dialogue surrounding CSA.

In 2001, the United States Department of Education issued policies and guidelines regarding sex discrimination -- including, most notably, incidences of GBV - for schools receiving any public monies, per the mandate of Title IX of the 1972 education amendments (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Title IX was later amended, clarified, and expanded in 2011 with federal guidance in the form of the “Dear Colleague Letter” (DCL) and in 2014 (Ali, 2011; U.S. Department of Civil Rights, 2014), with new guidance in 2020. The scrutiny on Title IX compliance in institutions of higher education has produced significant court battles (e.g., *Farmer v. Kansas State*, 2019; *Ostrander v. Duggan*, 2003; *Samuelson v. Oregon State University*, 2014; *Simpson v. University of Colorado*, 2007), as well as legal opinions and suggestions for new directions in administering Title IX compliance (e.g. Anderson, 2016; Baker, 2016; Mackinnon, 2016; Ortiz & Peterson, 2016; Love, 2016; Ridolfi-Starr, 2016; Swan, 2016). With cases of GBV/CSA being vetted through the legal system, accompanied by problematic and troubling statistics about rape on campus, an environment of distress and uneasiness commonly prevails for women in higher education.

### Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this critical phenomenological study is to understand the experience of fear of sexual predation and campus sexual assault for women-identified students on four-year

college and university campuses. The pervasiveness of sexual assault perpetrated on college and university women has created a climate of trepidation and fear that is frequently integrated into their daily lives (Linder & Lacy, 2020). This study seeks to explore women-identified student's perceptions of how this climate influences their college experiences and is negotiated into their day-to-day existence.

The overarching research question for this study is: How does the fear of sexual assault shape women's collegiate experiences?

The orienting research questions for this study are as following:

1. In what contexts do women experience a fear of sexual assault?
2. How does fear of sexual assault influence women's decisions and/or behaviors?
3. How do women perceive the role of the institution regarding fear of sexual assault?

In asking these questions, perhaps we can better understand the nature and context of how sexual assault and rape culture is experienced on campus. Further, once researchers and practitioners have this knowledge, the negative effects of these realities can be mitigated.

The following proposal will first discuss the literature related to GBV, CSA, and Title IX efforts in higher education. I will then provide an overview of the conceptual framework being utilized for this study, Linder's (2018) power conscious approach rooted in power and oppression to sexual violence. Next, I will outline research design including methodology and methods of data collection. I will conclude with a discussion of the significance of the study.

## Terminology

While the terms “survivor” and/or “victim-survivor” for those who have lived through experience(s) of violence are recognized as being the most appropriate in the field, (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network, n.d.) significant portions of the literature utilizes the term “victim.” Further, much of the research does not differentiate between gender and sex, as “woman” and “female” are often used interchangeably. For this literature review, I will use the terms in which the author used.

## Literature Review

The following literature review will first provide a synthesis of research and information in higher education regarding GBV, CSA, and related Title IX efforts at compliance, mitigation, and administration, beginning with a summary of legal discussions about Title IX. Subsequently, an empirical literature review of GBV in higher education, which largely relates to CSA, will be presented.

### Gender-based Violence and Campus Sexual Assault Overview

While research on GBV covers a wide array of behaviors, including stalking, sexual harassment, sexual discrimination, intimate partner violence (this encompasses dating violence and domestic violence), sexual battery (touching a person’s private areas without penetration),

much of the literature discussing this topic specifies sexual assault and/or rape. While the types of behaviors one person can find assaultive is nearly limitless, for the purposes of research, this is usually meant to be an act of penetration (Cook et al., 2018). Moreover, many scholars use the terms “sexual assault” and “rape” as substitutes for one another.

Research on the frequency of the occurrence of CSA, as well as the nature and context of the perpetration, shows the depth and complexity of this issue. While some articles include data on men or male victim-survivors (without separating out sex and gender), most of the available research is specifically regarding GBV perpetrated by men and/or males on women and/or females (Karjane, et al., 2005; Foubert, et al., 2019; Lisak & Moore, 2002; Mackinnon, 2016). More recent research regarding GBV/CSA at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as well as among LGBTQ individuals, has begun to emerge (Krebs et al., 2011; Lindquist et al., 2013; Potter et al., 2020). While some quantitative research does ask for demographics, these populations are frequently not measured.

As awareness of GBV and CSA has increased in higher education, most recently with the DCL in 2011, some schools have strengthened their prevention and risk-reduction efforts. Many schools have instituted forms of bystander training, hoping to work with students to stop acts of GBV (Banyard et al., 2003; Banyard et al., 2007; Banyard et al., 2009; Coker et al., 2011; Breitenbecher, 2000). Additionally, other campus efforts include self-defense programs (Gidycz et al., 2006; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Senn et. al., 2018). The increase in these offerings is an element of higher education’s response to increased awareness of CSA.

Some research, as well as some of the current prevention and risk-reduction efforts in the past 10-20 years, has centered around campus and policy enforcement of Title IX. With the new guidance in 2001 and the DCL in 2011 (with clarification in 2014 and further guidelines in 2020)

offering a reinterpretation and application of Title IX, institutions of higher education have entered a new period of litigation and related entanglements. Colleges and universities are involved in legal discussions and quandaries, inviting discussion, speculation, and suggestions for Title IX policy, enforcement, and compliance (Anderson, 2016; Baker, 2016; Mackinnon, 2016; Rice Love, 2016; Ridolfi-Starr, 2016; Swan, 2016; Yung 2016). The outcome and future of Title IX is yet to be known but judging from the volume of Title IX cases in the courts, much is still to be decided, with little clear direction yet.

#### Legal Aspects regarding Gender-based Violence and Campus Sexual Assault

Two cases have shaped an understanding of how educational institutions are held liable in Title IX cases and are considered firm legal precedent. The first case was *Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District* (1998), where a teacher was allegedly sexually harassing a student. This case brought about the “deliberate indifference” standard. The court ultimately established for the school district (employer) to be liable for the harassment (not affecting any personal liability the individual might have), the employer was to have known about the harassment or, in the normal care of their duties, should have known about it, and did not take efforts to eliminate the harassment. That understanding is used to define the “deliberate indifference” standard.

The second case, *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999), expanded on *Gebser*, by allowing schools to possibly be liable for student-on-student harassment. This case also developed a definition of what was defined as harassment in the eyes of Title IX: “unwelcome conduct on the basis of sex that is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive



that it effectively denies a person equal access to the recipient's education program or activity” (*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 1999, p. 629). This definition is still in use today and is sometimes referred to as a “hostile environment”. (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.)

With the precedents set in *Gebser* and *Davis*, legal cases emerged from students suing their universities for experiencing a sexual assault, alleging a hostile environment due to deliberate indifference and failed duty to care on the part of the institution. However, the complexity of legal opinions has hardly led to a clear understanding of these matters. Four cases stand out - all involving students who were raped, and subsequently sued their universities for lack of duty to care. In both *Ostrander v. Duggan* (2003) and *Samuelson v. Oregon State University* (2014), courts found no institutional liability, (in *Duggan*, the defendant also included a national fraternity). However, for the cases *Simpson v. University of Colorado* (2007) and *Farmer v. Kansas State* (2019), the courts found in favor of the plaintiffs. While the courts and case law illustrate the convolutedness of adjudicating Title IX in the court system, legal scholars have also opined on the application of Title IX in higher education.

Colleges and universities have experienced plenty of challenge in this area, such as at Amherst College where students were punished more severely for stealing laptops than committing sexual assault (Ridolfi-Starr, 2016). Moreover, some scholars and administrators believe the 2011 and 2014 DCL and guidance were procedurally invalid and suggesting alternative approaches like restorative justice (Rice Love, 2016). Most of the legal dialogue revolved around different procedural approaches, usually regarding deliberate indifference and/or hostile environment on campus (Anderson, 2016; Baker, 2016; MacKinnon, 2016; Swan, 2016).

To understand these perspectives, it is important to note the context and nature of GBV/CSA. Some believe the deliberate indifference standard established in *Gebser* does not go far enough to remedy power differentials inherent in Title IX claims (MacKinnon, 2016). However, to better comprehend Title IX applications on campuses, looking at the roots of the social problem of GBV and sexual assault, may prove fruitful.

For many years, until rape reform laws became more common in the 1980s, rape was legally defined as “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly, and against her will” (Anderson, 2016, p. 1946). With this definition, several things become assumed. The use of force is clear and was interpreted legally as leaving visible injuries and corroborative evidence. In the last 30-40 years, rape reform laws have evolved with understandings of sexual assault and have slowly become more progressive. For example, it is now legally understood any individual can be a victim-survivor, as well as most perpetrations of rape are committed by an attacker who knows the individual in some capacity (Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, n.d.). However, those who report a sexual assault are often met with doubt, as the perpetrators most commonly do not fit with convenient narratives of rapists (Anderson, 2016).

Compounding the challenge of understanding rape in its true context are the “tough on crime” (Baker, 2016, p. 868) laws passed in the 1990s. By the passage of these pieces of legislation, the notion of the rapist as a deviant, evil, stranger-in-the-bushes kind of individual was reinforced. Therefore, if the alleged attacker did not fit that portrayal, as is often the case in CSA, many believed the act could not be considered rape (Baker, 2016). Further, this has caused many women not to seek resources when they are assaulted (Burgess-Proctor, 2016), with one study even showed that of women who did not seek services after surviving an attack, over 50% declared it was because their attack was “not serious enough,” (Cantor et al., 2019, p.25) as

women have been socialized to think if their attack was not from a stranger in a dark alley, it did not merit consideration for resources/support (Cantor et al, 2019). It is within this context in higher education in which calls for altering current methods for adjudication of GBV (including Title IX application) have come.

Instead of using Title IX as it was currently designed, there are several legal positions that have merit in changing how colleges and universities proceed with adjudicating GBV. One suggestion is borrowing from human rights law, where due diligence includes more robust investigation, protections, and remedies, and has been used in past cases for abuses perpetrated on women (MacKinnon, 2016). Tort law is another approach, as the repercussions in tort liability - financial and reputational - are like a suspension or expulsion from a university. Moreover, tort cases involving battery have already established a solid legal precedent that people should be able to decide who physically touches them (Swan, 2016).

Another alternate approach is to consider a different lens to GBV and CSA - one borrowing from discrimination law and application of sexual harassment. In discrimination law, specifically employment law, the burden of proof shifts to the employer to show a non-discriminatory rationale for an unfavorable action against an employee (Baker, 2016). Applied to Title IX cases, the respondent would have a greater responsibility to demonstrate their actions were not discriminatory/harassing. Further, in discrimination cases, juries are allowed to make inferences without direct evidence, assisting in campus adjudications as colleges and universities do not have subpoena power, chain-of- evidence protections, and access to forensics often present in criminal proceedings. Lastly, campus administrators have been doing hearings about discriminatory words and actions already providing a workable framework (Baker, 2016).

While schools and courts wrangle over different understandings of Title IX application and administration, the positions of legal scholars try to answer a somewhat different question. In looking at the struggle with Title IX, many post-secondary institutions are asking “what should we do,” whereas some researchers of law are asking “why isn’t it working.” For some, understanding the lack of fairness inherent in higher education is essential to identifying a proper remedy.

The common expropriation of sex from people who do not want their bodies used sexually creates a disorienting and discouraging atmosphere for those who feel used. It is an atmosphere that inhibits an equal sense of belonging and respect in an educational community. It is sexual harassment (Baker, 2016, p. 865).

Exploring legal positions and arguments can add depth to the understanding of how higher education manages this complex issue. Campus hearing systems may struggle with addressing power differentials and related issues, and possible solutions can be found in judicial writing and research.

### Research on Campus Sexual Assault

The numbers on CSA illustrate the prevalence and rampancy of sexual assault on college campuses. Estimates vary, but studies suggest roughly one in four to five college women will be sexually assaulted during their time on campus (Banyard et al., 2009; Banyard et al., 2007; Coker et al., 2016; MacKinnon 2016; Karjane et al., 2005, McMahon et al., 2019). Other researchers paint an even bleaker picture, finding that 3-4% of college women would be raped in just one academic quarter (Gidycz et al., 2006). Women who attend colleges and universities are sexually assaulted at higher rates than average; some studies estimating women 18-24 who are

enrolled in higher education are three-times more likely to be raped than women in general (Banyard et al., 2009; MacKinnon, 2016, R. A. I. N. N., n.d.). Further, the numbers are significantly higher and more alarming for those who experience unwanted sexual touching and similar non-consensual sexual activities. Roughly 50-54% of college women experience this, and there is some concern this is underreported (Breitenbecher, 2000, Banyard et al., 2007). Compounding the problem, in a 2015 Gallup/Inside Higher Ed survey of 641 college presidents, only 32% considered rape to be a significant problem in higher education, and only 6% thought it was an issue on their campuses (Yung, 2016).

Statistics of sexual victimization can paint a certain picture of rape on college campuses. But inside the statistics, the effects of sexual assault on the survivors are starkly negative. The individuals who live through the trauma of rape and sexual violence experience a host of long-term health issues: mood and anxiety disorders, substance abuse, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Thompson et al., 2003). Specifically, there is a diagnosis referred to as Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), which is characterized as a conglomeration of psychological and emotional responses to the severe stress of a sexual assault (Chaudhury et al., 2017). Individuals recovering from an assault frequently are afflicted with RTS, and suffer from severe stress reactions, fear, depression, detachment, and disordered sleep, along with self-blame and difficulties reintegrating with work, social, and sexual relationships (Chaudhury et al., 2017).

The damaging psychological effects can often be traced to the human body's natural response to stress. When under duress, the body's endocrine system produces cortisol; when too much of it is produced, the psychological outcomes are often result in a disproportionate reaction to fear and consistent, mild depression (Chivers-Wilson, 2006). Loved ones and supportive community members are also not immune from negative effects, such as stress, anxiety, and

depression (Gidycz et al., 2006). Lastly, negative outcomes from surviving rape are not just medical or psychological in nature. The damage a sexual assault can cause can also be measured financially. The average rape costs the victim/survivor roughly \$240,776 (in 2008 dollars) due to lost wages, medical costs, and other financial measurements (Bolger, 2016).

### Current Perceptions of College Women

The numbers and statistics of sexual assault describe the volume, challenge, and depth to this issue. Moreover, the experience of women and their perception of how institutions of higher education manage CSA adds more perspective to the discussion. In general, there is a continuum of views for how students perceive higher education's responses to reporting of CSA, and whether it is sufficient. Cisgender men held the strongest belief campuses responded appropriately, followed by cisgender women, then transgender students. Sexual minorities held more negative perspectives than heterosexual students, and international students had more favorable positions on institutions' responses to CSA than domestic ones (Mushonga, 2020). At one large mid-Atlantic university, 38.2% of the women believed CSA was very or extremely problematic on their campus, and only 45.6% felt their university would fairly investigate any official reports (Cantor et al., 2019). Additionally, the overall general perception of campus resources for survivors is low, and this was consistent for both victims and non-victims of sexual assault (Burgess-Proctor, 2016).

Student perceptions of schools' responses are shaped by a variety of factors, including campus publications, experts (police, advocates), peers, and family members (Linder & Macy, 2020). These influences have led to a cognitive dissonance in how women live and navigate

campus life. While students receive campus messages that GBV and CSA occur most often by people who are familiar with one another, many of the safety strategies taught and designed are for risk-reduction of far less frequent stranger attacks (Linder & Macy, 2020). This has led to many women making choices to limit or moderate their participation and engagement in campus life as a safety precaution to avoid being sexually assaulted.

Further, the bifurcation of information and approaches has led to nearly erasing the perpetrators, as women are increasingly given the responsibility to avoid CSA. Women students often report discussions about safety become more prevalent the closer they get to starting college, including frank talks with parents and family about weapons, alcohol consumption, how to keep oneself protected, and an increased burden to beware of strangers. The well-intended but misguided advice women receive often renders the behavior of the perpetrator invisible. Ultimately, this has led to a paradox, where women on campus receive significant amounts of information, but seldom feel safe (Linder & Lacy, 2020).

### Perpetrators of CSA/GBV

Data and background on the pervasiveness of GBV/CSA are helpful in creating a context in understanding the depth and breadth of the problem. Additional light can be shed in investigating those who perpetrate these actions. Background information on perpetration is essential for campus leaders to devise possible responses for these critical issues.

Beginning with the profile of individuals who commit these crimes, important trends become visible. For sexual assaults occurring in college environments, the phenomenon of serial

perpetration has emerged. Lisak & Miller (2002) found, and later corroborated by Foubert et al., (2019), rape on campus is largely done by a small population of men doing it repeatedly. Estimates are around 5-6% of men commit these crimes on campus (Lisak & Miller, 2002; Foubert, et al., 2019). But digging deeper into these numbers, more trends become apparent.

Of the sexual assaults committed, a relatively small percentage of men committed only one act of rape. But for those committing more than one act of sexual assault, they averaged five to six rapes per person, and committed between 87-90% of all acts of sexual assault reported (Foubert, et al., 2019), with Foubert et al., (2019) finding that 95 men each had committed an average of 10 or more acts of rape per individual. Lastly, it was revealed fraternity membership and being on a men's athletic team were associated with higher rates of committing sexual assault. There was one important caveat, however, as those holding officer positions in fraternities were less likely than other fraternity members to commit multiple rapes, while individuals holding leadership positions on athletic teams were more likely (Foubert et al., 2019).

### Marginalized Populations and CSA/GBV

While gender-based violence is non-discriminatory in nature, it is important to note how the effects are experienced by marginalized populations on college campuses. Women students at HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities) experience sexual violence in most ways' similar ways to their peers. When comparing women students at HBCUs, women attending non-HBCUs, black women at HBCUs, and black women at non-HBCUs, the rates of sexual assault for these four groups are remarkably like each other (Krebs et al, 2011). The only difference of



note was HBCU women reported statistically significant fewer rapes by means of incapacitation (meaning the survivor was incapacitated during the time of the assault). One possible explanation and correlation was HBCU women are less likely to drink alcohol than their non-HBCU counterparts (Krebs et al., 2011; Lindquist et al., 2013).

There were also differences reported among the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) college populations regarding experiencing sexual violence. In general, these students encounter greater rates of sexual violence than cisgender, heterosexual students, with trans individuals and bi-sexual women being the two groups most likely to disclose being survivors of GBV. Of note, LGBQ women were nearly twice as likely to be raped as heterosexual women (Potter et al., 2020). Research indicates the systemic and institutional inequalities and bigotry confronted by this population makes GBV more common, and the limited community resources and response compound the issue (Potter et al., 2020). This was particularly acute for bisexual survivors of sexual assault, who reported feeling they had no safe spaces on campus (Seabrook, 2018). Further, this discrimination can compound the psychological injury felt by LGBTQ individuals who survive GBV (Potter et al., 2020).

### Bystander Intervention and Other Prevention Measures

A significant amount of the available research in prevention focuses on Bystander Intervention (BI), and the focus here is on what prevention efforts are focused on women reducing risk to assault, not on preventing perpetration. Borrowing from criminology theories asserting those who are not principals in a crime (not the perpetrator or victim) could have a

detering presence on unlawful action (Banyard et al., 2009). Broadly, BI programs were also borrowing from the public health theory of rape prevention focused on stopping the root causes of sexual predation and sexual entitlement, rather than just focusing on physically preventing an act of rape (Lee et al., 2007). To properly understand prevention models and levels, Lee, et al., (2007) outlined the three different strategic levels of reducing GBV/CSA:

1. Primary - this is behavior that would work to prevent gender-based violence prior to its occurrence, including working to change attitudes, norms, and societal understandings.
2. Secondary - this form of action would occur immediately after an assault has been perpetrated, attempting to mitigate the negative effects, which would include giving support to the survivor.
3. Tertiary - this is the long-term response at attempting to deal with the ramifications of the sexual violence, including policy changes and possible offender treatment options.

The consensus is all three types of efforts are needed to successfully combat CSA and remediate the social problems accompanying it (Lee et al., 2007).

Most BI models focus on primary prevention, but not limiting it to only physically intervening in an acute situation to prevent a rape, such as preventing an incapacitated person from being sexually assaulted. Researchers theorized if they could affect the social norms, behaviors, and thoughts leading to rape through BI, they would affect the decision-making of the potential perpetrator, and lower the number of sexual assaults (Banyard, et al., 2003; Banyard, et al., 2007; Banyard, et al., 2009; Coker, et al., 2011). This was the model used in the development

of the Green Dot program, first introduced at the University of Kentucky by Dr. Dorothy Edwards (Coker et al., 2011).

The BI programs that emerged on college campuses since 2000 have mainly focused on psychoeducational models. These programs were aimed at teaching college students about background information on rape culture, including rape-supporting behaviors and beliefs, as well as skills and abilities that would be beneficial in primary prevention. There were some benefits gained, such as greater understanding and rejection of rape myths, positive results regarding dating violence, and more beneficial perception of roles regarding being a bystander. Typically, students identifying as women and/or females showed larger positive gains than men and/or male students (Banyard et al., 2003; Banyard, et al., 2009; Coker, et al., 2011; Barone, et al., 2007).

While BI programs continue to exist on college campuses, there have been serious challenges to their success rate (Banyard, et al., 2009; Coker et al., 2011; McMahon et al., 2011; Senn et al., 2018). Most notably, they were not successful in actually reducing sexual violence on college campuses (Breitenbecher, 2000; McMahon et al., 2019; Senn et al., 2018). The BI studies of one-time psychoeducational presentations and programs have serious limitations, such as only basing research on one campus and/or student sub-group, no randomized control trial, limited (if at all) longitudinal study, and rarely featuring a theoretical framework (Coker et al., 2011; McMahon et al., 2019). While these programs could be part of successful anti-sexual violence campaign, they cannot stand alone as solo efforts (McMahon et al., 2019).

Besides BI programs, self-defense programs have also been a part of the college and university campuses prevention and risk-reduction programs for women students. The programs showing the most favorable results and promise are structured to assist women in recognition and resistance of dangerous situations (Senn et al., 2018). Successful self-defense classes for women

also emphasize placing the blame on the perpetrator(s) of the attack, as well as the building of self-efficacy in believing one could defend herself (Senn et al., 2018; Gidycz et al., 2006).

Protective actions such as physically resisting, using a loud voice, and escaping are all behaviors learned by women in self-defense classes (Senn et al., 2018; Gidycz et al., 2006). But not all self-defense classes are the same, nor yield positive results. The most promising approaches structure themselves with the underlying philosophy that the perpetrator(s) are always responsible for the attack, have classes that were longer in duration than a half-day, taught a range of defensive tactics and responses, and were taught in all-women classes with women facilitators who are not fellow undergraduate students (Senn, et al., 2018).

Though the subject of GBV and CSA has received both empirical attention from researchers and exposure in the popular media, the realities are complex and multifaceted. This requires both a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the subject matter at both the macro and micro levels. As shown in this literature review, there is a strong underpinning of research about the depth of GBV and CSA in higher education, as well as prevention strategies and legal perspectives, specifically regarding interpretations of Title IX in higher education.

As these structures are built upon, there are more avenues to explore. As stated previously, the social problem of gender-based violence on college and university campuses is generally understood, at least on the superficial level. Significantly, there is data and research to explain, to some extent, the nature of the problem. What is largely missing from this conversation is how this culture is experienced by the students and members of the higher education community, and insight into why the issue of GBV/CSA is more prevalent in higher education than society at large. More scholarship is needed in these areas to create a more complete awareness as well as to explore possible solutions and remedies.

## Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by Linder's (2018) power conscious approach rooted in power and oppression to sexual violence. The framework outlines six tenets illustrating how sexual assault and other sexual violence impacts society, and specifically, for this study, college and university students.

1. Engage in critical consciousness and self-awareness.
2. Consider history and context when examining issues of oppression.
3. Change behaviors based on reflection and awareness.
4. Name and call attention to dominant group members' investment in and benefit from systems of domination and divest from privilege.
5. Name and interrogate the role of power in individual interactions, policy development, and implementation of practice; and
6. Work in solidarity to address oppression. (Linder, 2018, p. 21)

Linder's (2018) framework will apply in several ways during this study. Linder (2018) addresses the role of and relationship to power in the context of sexual assault, directly acknowledging core elements of feminist critical theory. Power and oppression will help define the subtexts of both the research questions and analysis of the data, and how access to it (or lack thereof) contributes to the experience of women on a college campus regarding fear of rape.

Similarly, the emphasis Linder (2018) puts on awareness, critical consciousness, and understanding of historical context will play essential roles in this study. As stated by Kincheloe

et al., (2011), the most effective types of oppression are when the marginalized peoples accept their subordinate role without conflict or protest or, worse, as necessary, and appropriate. In the case of this research study, that would translate to women accepting the rape culture norms as the status quo. Using critical theory through the lens of Linder's (2018) tenets regarding sexual violence in higher education, inquiry is designed to understand how this reality has evolved, as well as moving toward liberation and emancipation.

Lastly, Linder's (2018) final tenet of addressing the oppressive systems causing rape on campus will be used in the evaluation of data. A defining characteristic of critical theory is to question and ameliorate the results of unjust systems of dominance and oppression. Research data will be analyzed in ways to make appropriate recommendations and suggestions regarding education and prevention of campus sexual assault.

### Research Design

This critical phenomenological study will explore how women students navigate rape culture and fear of sexual assault on campus. I will first share the paradigm under which this study will be framed, then follow with descriptions of the methodology, methods, data collection and analysis, as well as criteria for quality and a researcher reflexivity statement. Finally, areas of potential significance of the research will be detailed.

### Paradigm

The study is conceived through a lens of both critical theory and feminist critical theory. Critical theory and feminist critical theory are transformative in nature and position the research to be comingled with a prescription for political and social change to challenge, mitigate, and reverse systemic oppression that marginalizes certain communities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, “critical methodology thus is concerned with careful explication of what is in order to ultimately liberate us from the destiny of what has been” (Morrow, 1994, p. 320) [Emphasis original]. This perspective is holistic in nature, and addresses issues of political and social structures intertwined with self-agency (Kushner & Morrow, 2003).

Critical theory is based on several assumptions and understandings, primarily that knowledge, behavior, and thought are all influenced by existing power dynamics which are oppressively constructed in historical and social constructs. Further, facts and information cannot be separated or considered individually from this imbalanced power structure, and research efforts are often unwittingly compliant with replication of these oppressions. Additionally, critical theory holds oppression has many different iterations, and having any narrow focus on one comes at the expense of others (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Unknowing compliance in perpetuating unjust systems is a key ingredient. Specifically, “oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 164).

A derivative of critical theory is feminist critical theory, which specifically focuses on challenging the position of men being dominant in society (Jones et al., 2014). Specifically, the cynosure of the inquiry process is on the “seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology on a

highly effective system of social control” of women (Collins, 2000, p. 7). In feminist critical theory, researchers engage with research subjects in working for a greater understanding and liberating through a collective raising of awareness. In doing so, it can provide a cogent, verifiable approach to women’s issues and gender impacts in a broad variety of political, social, economic, and cultural circumstances. With the continuous focus and emphasis on power, oppression, and possible transformation, as well as the transparency of an equitable research process which rejects the binary of separating the personal and political, attention is focused on emancipation from the dominance of men and social action (Kushner & Morrow, 2003).

### Methodology

To better realize, understand, and comprehend the phenomenon of rape culture and fear of sexual assault for women on American college campuses, I will be conducting a phenomenological study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). The individual and personal experiences of those living the phenomenon are the key to conceptualizing it, as well as an understanding how both the person and the world are intertwined and connected (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Phenomenological studies are “considered especially suitable for understanding affective or emotional experience” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 87) such as fear of rape and rape culture.

A key to successful phenomenological studies is understanding the basic essence and structure of a phenomenon (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The purpose of the researcher is to focus on the universal experiences and their central meaning to those individuals and condense them to a clearly understood description of the



phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher accomplishes this in several ways, such as keying into the everyday experience of those encountering the phenomenon, searching for compelling themes and “developing clusters of meaning” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 90), while constantly reflecting and rewriting on the essential themes during the research process (Jones et al., 2014).

### Data Collection

The research site will be Northern Illinois University (NIU) and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh (UWO). Both are Midwest, comprehensive universities. NIU is in Dekalb, IL, enrolling roughly 16,000 students and UWO is in Oshkosh, WI, and enrolls roughly 11,000 students. Purposeful sampling will be used to recruit research subjects. Ideally, 5-10 full-time women students will be selected to participate in the study, and all information will be kept strictly confidential along with pseudonyms being used. Of note, the term “women” referred to above is intended to reflect any individual identifying as a “woman,” regardless of sex assigned at birth. For students recruited for this study, there will be no prerequisite of any history of surviving GBV.

To recruit research participants after receiving approval from the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Institutional Review Board (IRB), I will email those in leadership at the Gender and Sexuality Research Center and the Panhellenic Association on the NIU Dekalb campus regarding this study as well as their counterparts at UWO. I will follow up that email with a phone call, and work to establish a meeting with appropriate parties in each area,

explaining my dissertation research. Once agreed upon and approved, I will work with each office to send a mass email to their constituents, explaining the dissertation research and asking for volunteers. I intend on taking 5-10 volunteers. I will explain the research to each participant, have them sign a consent form, and establish how the research will be performed.

Data will be collected in two different methods. After participants have been selected and agreed to participate, I will engage them in personal interviews and ask them to respond to journal prompts. The sequence will be the first in-person (or virtual) interview, followed by three weeks of journal prompts (one per week for three weeks), followed by a final in-person (virtual) interview. Each interview will last roughly 60-90 minutes, and be semi-structured, conversational interviews.

The first interview questions will be themed and will consist of opening and follow up questions that focuses on the participant's background and experiences regarding the day-to-day living of American college women, and their negotiation of fear of rape and rape culture into their lives. The individual interviews are intended to both gather first-hand research material as well as establish a framework for the subsequent journal entries. Following the initial interviews, research subjects will be emailed a series of journal prompts, one per week, for three weeks. In it they will be asked to reflect in some capacity about their experiences regarding the subject matter. The second and final interview is intended to be a follow-up on the previous data gathering and explore themes participants have identified. The interview questions and journal prompts located in the appendix section.

Interviews in phenomenological studies are designed to focus on the “lived experience of the participant? ...how the person experiences the phenomenon in the moment...” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p.89). From interviews and other information gathering techniques, researchers

work to assemble a formational description of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Building rapport and establishing an authentic connection with research participants are critical elements of successful phenomenological studies (Jones et al., 2014).

### Data Analysis

One of the most frequent and successful methods of data analysis comes prior to any data collection - a practice called “bracketing,” where the researcher takes special note of any preconceived notions, ideas, biases, prejudices, and influences regarding the subjects/subject matter through a process of writing and reflecting. (Moustakas, 1994; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I plan on doing this exercise by recording and discussing my thoughts and realizations with a professional colleague. The goal and purpose of this exercise is to “allow the phenomenon or experience to be just what it is and come to know it as it presents itself” (Moustakas, 1994, p.86) and for the researcher to experience the phenomenon in its rawest and most authentic form. In doing this process, it is hoped the researcher can get to a viewpoint of objectivity and transparency (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, as an initial step in the bracketing process, I will make a researcher reflexivity statement in the proposal outlining my background and interest in this subject.

In performing analysis of a phenomenological study, while the individual experiences of the research participants have merit, it is more important to reveal the crucial and indispensable elements of its structure. The desire to get to a richer and profound meaning of a phenomenon, and not simply discuss it superficially (Jones et al., 2014). Creswell (2013) suggests researchers

focus on the “what” and “how” a phenomenon is experienced, and then construct a comprehensive synthesis of these descriptions.

In getting to the raw essence and structure in phenomenological study, there are three effective thought processes I will engage: phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological reduction, I will focus in an intentional and purposeful way on the qualities of the phenomenon women are experiencing and being aware of the organic nature of the relationship between phenomenon and the participants. Using horizontal reduction allows me to view all the experiences individuals have with the phenomenon equally, and not weigh one more than others. Finally, I will engage imaginative variation to alter the lens and framework in which I see the data to create a structural interpretation of the phenomenon more effectively (Moustakas, 1994).

The specific methodology I will use to analyze the data will begin with open and initial coding (Jones et al., 2014). This critical first step is used to identify all possibilities and outcomes in the data, while sorting into practicable pieces and areas. After the initial information is assembled, I will proceed with axial and focused coding to identify classifications and themes that eventually sort the data into larger categories. During the analysis process, I will engage in constant comparison to help bracket and group information, as well as using memo writing. Memo writing is a technique where the researcher makes notes to themselves to authentically hold data in the context of how it is recorded at the time, and to properly document why a certain method or technique was utilized or decision was made (Jones et al, 2014).

### Criteria for Quality

To establish trustworthiness in the study, I will be utilizing several strategies. Initially, I will engage in member checking with my research. This will entail my following up with research subjects' post-interview and verifying I have documented their words and thoughts accurately and respectfully. Secondly, rich, thick descriptions of the data will be used to describe the phenomenon. By having a realistic and deep accounting of the phenomenon, I intend to give the reader a shared experience, and, in doing so, add to the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lastly, I will utilize a highly respected and credentialed individual in student affairs to participate in peer debriefing. This professional will appropriately challenge my research outcomes, and their interpretation will help add credibility to the data and accompanying analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### Researcher Reflexivity

The position of the researcher is important to consider in establishing the trustworthiness of the study (Jones et al., 2014). I have been employed in student affairs virtually my entire career, and have engaged in numerous policy discussions, crisis management, protocol development, and student handbook/code of conduct editing regarding sexual violence on campus. Since 2014, I have held various positions regarding Title IX enforcement and compliance, mostly as an investigator and deputy coordinator, which entailed working cases, mitigating challenges, and establishing and verifying due process. Additionally, since 1999, I have been employed as an instructor for a women's and girl's self-defense (through a self-empowerment framework)

organization. Through this work, I have worked with countless survivors of rape, incest, and domestic violence. My positions as a college administrator and self-defense instructor will inform my interpretation of the data.

Prior to beginning with research participants, I engaged in a bracketing discussion with a chief student affairs officer (CSAO) regarding my dissertation. We discussed not only how students who are raped navigate college and university campuses but also the subtext of student's lives in relation to the subject matter affect their lives. Additionally, we explored the different ways sexual assault, including Title IX and related policies, hearings, and practices, affect those who are man-identified, woman-identified, and gender-fluid/neutral individuals.

### Potential Significance

In the literature review, the expanse and depth of the issue of sexual assault and sexual violence on college campuses was established, including the finding that women ages 18-24 enrolled in higher education are three times more likely to be assaulted than their same-aged peers who are not college students (Banyard et al., 2009; MacKinnon, 2016). While rape and sexual violence are indeed social problems with reach into every area of civilization, there is something unique and compelling about post-secondary institutions making the threat of sexual violence to women such a hegemonic concern. While the outcomes and findings of this research might not have a direct and consequential impact with society at large, perhaps some light can be shed on why America's colleges and universities have created a microculture posing such an enhanced threat of rape to women.

The fear of assault and mitigating that fear has become a daily occurrence for many women in higher education. Indeed, this reality is so common it is no longer remarkable to many or seen as imbalanced. In referencing back to the lens of critical theory, oppression is most effective when those victimized by it see it as normalized (Kincheloe et al., 2011). So, if this oppression exists to the degree that it is hidden in plain sight, how does one address it?

While prevention programs such as bystander intervention along with the resuscitation of title IX and its accompanying, sometimes sweeping, changes have been an improvement in sexual violence response in the last 20 years (Banyard et al., 2003; Banyard et al., 2007; Banyard et al., 2009; Coker, et al., 2011; Anderson, 2016; Baker, 2016; MacKinnon, 2016; Swan, 2016), the reality of sexual assault on college campuses has changed little. There is a need to understand the fear women deal with, and how and why it manifests itself. Researchers need to hear from those experiencing the fear and how they experience it. The reality of incorporating fear of rape and sexual violence as an everyday means of existence needs to be better understood.

Once the understanding of the context of how and why women live with this fear of sexual assault can be even partially uncovered, perhaps colleges and universities can start to mitigate the negatives in this narrative. No one study or effort will eradicate sexual violence in society - the problem is too diffuse, pervasive, and encumbered. However, if institutions of higher education can have a rate of sexual assault that is triple the normal rate for women ages 18-24 (Banyard et al., 2009; MacKinnon, 2016), then, by that same logic, America's college campuses could have *less* than the national rate. Post-secondary institutions could eventually become beacons and/or models of how to function and incorporate new practices that challenge the daily existence of fear of rape.

To move to something positive, there must be a deeper understanding of what women deal with daily in higher education. Rape and assault statistics, bystander intervention programs, and perpetration studies have all helped policy makers to begin to understand the problem of rape in higher education. But there is little research and consciousness of what it is like to experience the encompassing fear of assault as part of one's day as a college student, and to make routine, every day, common decisions based on that fear. Once that is understood from the individual's perspective, perhaps some insight will be received to help colleges and universities mitigate the epidemic of sexual assault in American higher education.



## **CHAPTER 2: HOW WOMEN NAVIGATE FEAR OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

### **Abstract**

Institutions of higher education are not safe for women-identified students regarding gender-based violence, specifically sexual assault. The existence of a rape culture, with societal norms that ignore, allow, or implicitly encourage sexual violence to be perpetrated by men against women, is alive and well on today's college campuses (Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mobley, 2017). Exact numbers are difficult to discern in such an underreported crime, but most researchers agree that 20-25% of all traditional-aged women are raped during their college and university experience, with the numbers being even higher for bisexual and trans-women (Potter, 2020). Further, the rates of sexual assault of women college students aged 18-25 are triple the national average. This rape culture, along with the statistics and realities in the specific context of higher education, painting a bleak picture, creating a climate of anxiety, fear, and trepidation for women. The realities of this narrative have become so fixed in campus life they have almost become invisible; the burden of women taking responsibility to not get raped is a significant one that is often overlooked. This phenomenological study, using a critical theory framework, examined how six women manage their college experiences about fear of sexual assault. Students' feelings of terror, the normalization and burden of risk-reduction, along with powerlessness, combined with misinformation about rape and an unfair bargain of making

sacrifices to feel secure, all lead to a sense of being controlled. Suggestions for how post-secondary institutions can improve this climate and reality are discussed.

## Introduction

Introduced to a broader audience in the 1970s, the term “rape culture” was initially used by feminists to describe unhealthy cultural norms that disregarded, permitted, or even implicitly supported gender-based violence (GBV) and specifically sexual assault (Phillips, 2017). The main tenets of rape culture include shifting accountability from perpetrators (primarily men) to the victim-survivors (primarily women/women-identified individuals), along with promoting rape myths (e.g., rape only happens to attractive young women at night in dark alleys) (Phillips, 2017). The reach of rape culture is universal, including today’s college and university campuses, where women students often internalize the responsibility to not be assaulted (Carmody & Washington, 2001).

The problem of rape on college campuses is a substantial one. While statistics vary on campus sexual assault (CSA), the conventional wisdom and available evidence suggest an epidemic level of sexual assault in our nation’s colleges and universities. For women of traditional college age, experts estimate one in four to five women will be sexually assaulted during their time attending a post-secondary institution (Banyard et al., 2009; Coker et al., 2011; Mackinnon, 2016; Gidycz et al., 2006; Karjane et al., 2005; McMahon et al., 2019; Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network, n.d.). While much is known about the “what” of the problem of rape on campus, more needs to be explored about how that culture is experienced.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how the fear of sexual assault shaped woman-identified individuals experiences in higher education. The pervasiveness of this issue has caused many women students to integrate managing this fear into their day-to-day existence (Linder & Lacy, 2020). This study investigates how this atmosphere and environment affects women on college and university campuses. The research questions for this study were:

1. In what contexts do women experience a fear of sexual assault?
2. How does fear of sexual assault influence women's decisions and/or behaviors?
3. How do women perceive the role of the institution regarding fear of sexual assault?

Findings from this study indicated the fear of sexual assault is ever-present and participants engaged in strategies to control and mitigate this fear, including owning the burden of risk-reduction and rape-avoidance. This paper will conclude with recommendations on how to have institutions of higher education can change the culture to one that is safe and affirming for all and become leaders on the issue of preventing sexual assault instead of being partners in facilitating it.

### Literature Review

Much of the literature and research on gender-based violence (GBV) in higher education has centered rape and/or sexual assault, which often meant the act of penetration (Coker et al., 2018). However, GBV includes behaviors in addition to sexual assault such as sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual battery (touching a person's private areas without penetration), and intimate partner violence (covering both domestic violence (violence

between individuals living in the same dwelling) and dating violence (Morrison & Orlando, 2005). While anyone can either be a perpetrator and/or a victim/survivor, most research regarding GBV and CSA has focused on men perpetrators and women victim/survivors (Karjane, et al., 2005; Foubert, et al., 2019; Lisak & Moore, 2002; Mackinnon, 2016). There is a scant but increasing body of research that has studied GBV at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Krebs et al., 2011; Lindquist et al., 2013) as well as among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Potter, et al., 2020).

While exact numbers are difficult, most experts agree that roughly 20-25% of college women will be raped while attending a post-secondary institution (Banyard et al., 2009; Banyard et al., 2007; Coker et al., 2016; MacKinnon 2016; Karjane et al., 2005, McMahon et al., 2019). Women in college between the ages of 18-25 were three times more likely than the national average to be sexually assaulted (Banyard et al., 2009; MacKinnon, 2016, R. A. I. N. N., n.d.). It is estimated over half of all college women will experience unwanted touching (Breitenbecher, 2000; Banyard et al., 2007). Despite the large numbers of college women that have experienced sexual assault, only 32% of college presidents believed rape was a serious problem in America's colleges and universities (Yung, 2016). Thus, while significant numbers of women will experience sexual assault during college, campus leaders did not seem to fully grasp the scope of the problem.

Students' backgrounds and social identities often shape their perceptions about GBV and campus response. Cisgender, heterosexual women reported more positive feeling regarding their institution's collective response to CSA than their sexual- and gender-minoritized peers (Cantor et al., 2017). The perceptions women have undoubtedly been shaped by the messages they receive, which often are conflicting. While women are told CSA occurs most often by people

who know one another, the mitigating advice they receive is often about fending off stranger attacks (e.g., do not walk alone at night, travel in groups, have a weapon). Because of this bifurcation, women often make conscious choices to disengage from participating in aspects of campus life as a risk-reduction effort. These realities also serve to virtually eliminate the perpetrator from issue, making it women's responsibilities not to get raped (Linder & Lacy, 2018).

Perceptions current college women have regarding crime and crime victimization reflect an interesting narrative. Wilcox et al., (2004) found that for college women, their greatest worry was being sexually assaulted by a stranger, and this fear was significantly more than the victimization rate for stranger assaults. For women who carry weapons, their greatest concern was also being sexually assaulted by a stranger, compared to acquaintance rape or other violent or property crimes. Fear of stranger sexual assault has influenced student behavior, with women avoiding certain places and/or activities they believe to be unsafe (Day, 1994). Further, some prevention efforts and conventional campus safety measures can ironically have the opposite effect, with women perceiving they have fewer options and feeling constrained (Day, 1994).

Gender-based violence can be both perpetrated by and/or onto any person. However, because rape is based predominantly on power, it is important to note its effects on historically disenfranchised populations. When examining how CSA was experienced at HBCUs, the rates of assault were remarkably like non-HBCUs. The only exception was that non-HBCU women were more likely to be assaulted by means of incapacitation than women attending HBCUs (Krebs et al., 2011; Lindquist et al., 2013). In examining the LGBTQ population, they experience higher rates of sexual violence than their cis-gender, heterosexual peers, with trans individuals and

bisexual women most frequently experiencing assault (Potter et al., 2020). This issue is worsened by fewer resources being available for support for this population (Seabrook, 2018).

Beyond the acute trauma of an assault, victim-survivors of sexual assault often experienced long-term health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, mood, and anxiety disorders, and eating disorders (Thompson et al., 2003). There is even a specific diagnosis named Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), which is described as a collection of psycho-emotional responses to the significant psychological shock of experiencing a sexual assault, with symptoms such as depression, detachment, disordered sleep, fear, self-blame, and difficulty and challenge reintegrating previous social, sexual, and work relationships (Chaudhury et al., 2017). These issues can be compounded when the body's normal responses to threat (production of cortisol) becomes taxed and too much is produced. This often results in a disproportionate reaction to fear along with consistent, mild depression (Chivers-Wilson, 2006). While immediate medical side effects of rape are often understood, such as sexually transmitted infections, it is important to note the long-term physical and psychological effects can affect a victim-survivor for years after a sexual assault.

### Bystander Intervention and Other Prevention Measures

In discussing rape prevention and/or risk-reduction actions taken by colleges and universities, the majority fall under bystander intervention (BI) programs. Little substantive research focused on the perpetrators and how to have perpetrators stop committing acts of rape. BI programs draw from criminology theories about crime deterrence by a third party (Banyard et al., 2009), as well as public health theories of stopping diseases or threats to health

(like sexual assault) from becoming worse (Lee et al., 2007). From the public health perspective, researchers believe if they could address the thoughts, actions, and social customs/norms of possible perpetrators, they could theoretically reduce the number of rapes committed (Banyard, et al., 2003; Banyard, et al., 2007; Banyard, et al., 2009; Coker, et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2007). This was the basis for a well-known model, the “Green Dot” program, first pioneered at the University of Kentucky (Coker et al., 2011).

While BI programs and other related psycho-educational models continue to be popular, there are serious concern about their efficacy in reducing CSA. With no theoretical framework, randomized control trial, or longitudinal data showing a reduction in rape, BI programs may be limited in their scope to be a part of the solution (Banyard, et al., 2009; Breitenbecher, 2000; Coker et al., 2011; McMahon et al., 2019; Senn et al., 2018.) Some self-defense programs offer promise, but they are not all created equal. Classes focusing on half-day or longer classes, introducing a variety of defensive strategies, and were taught by non-undergraduate women instructors in all-women classes had the greatest positive effect (Senn, et al., 2018). Overall, prevention programs are noble efforts, but they do not significantly alter how women experience rape and fear of rape on college campuses.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study will utilize Linder’s (2018) Power-conscious Approach, which roots sexual violence in power and oppression. This framework specifically focuses on college and university students and offers six tenets outlining the influences and effects of sexual assault and GBV. Linder’s model (2018) calls for reflection, awareness, and

divestment of privilege, borrowing from essential components of feminist critical theory.

Additionally, Linder (2018) calls for solidarity to counteract the negative outcomes of GBV in higher education. Of the six tenets detailed, two specifically helped guide this study – understanding of context and use of power.

Linder (2018) discusses the importance of context in examining issues related to oppression, such as sexual assault, as well as naming and understanding the use of power (and consequently control) in individual actions. For college students and rape, the circumstances, and situations in which they experience GBV and fear it are highly contextual. The who, what, where, why, when, and how of sexual assault of college students all significantly matter. The use of power in GBV in colleges and universities is connected to the control rape has over women's choices and thought processes, often directing behaviors and options.

Further, part of Linder's (2018) Power-conscious Approach also focuses on critical consciousness. This is essential, as sexual assault and rape on campus are related to systemic oppression, and, as Kincheloe et al., (2011) stated, the most effective forms of subjugation are when the individuals who are marginalized accept their second-class status without contention or, in some cases, as required. Lastly, Linder (2018) calls upon solidarity to counter oppression, and this is discussed in the implications for practice.

## Methodology

This study sought to understand how fear of sexual assault shaped woman-identified individuals experiences in higher education. The study was guided by feminist critical theory and phenomenology. Critical theory also holds that current power dynamics are constructed in an



oppressive reality embedded in social and historical constructs, and data and information cannot be considered outside those constructs, with researchers often unknowingly replicating this imbalance (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Feminist critical theory challenges the position of men being dominant in society. Further, those espousing feminist critical theory (Jones et al., 2014) desire to expose an unjust system based on sex/gender and to remedy it based on increasing consciousness collectively. The aim of feminist critical research centers on oppression, power, and possible transformation through enlightened research and researchers. Further, this research does not differentiate unnecessarily between political and personal and allows the attention to be liberation from a men-dominant society through social action (Kushner & Morrow, 2003).

Phenomenological studies combine a focus on the personal, lived experience of those involved with describing the core principles that make up its structure (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2016). A key to understanding and abstracting a phenomenon is to outline and detail the unique and lived experience of the individual and how it is interconnected with the world at large (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Phenomenology was used to help understand how to grasp, comprehend, and recognize the issue of rape culture for college women overlapping with fear of sexual assault (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). This is appropriate for rape/rape culture on college campuses, as phenomenological studies are “considered especially suitable for understanding affective or emotional experience” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 87).

## Data Collection

The research sites were two comprehensive universities in the Midwest. One enrolls approximately 16,000 students and the other roughly 11,000. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants (Jones et al., 2014). Six full-time, undergraduate women aged 18-25 agreed to participate in the study. For students recruited for this study, there was no prerequisite of any history of surviving GBV and no incentives for participation were offered. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to enhance confidentiality.

Data was collected using both individual interviews and journaling. The sequence began with an in-person (or virtual) interview, followed by three weeks of journal prompts (one per week for three weeks), followed by a final in-person (virtual) interview. Each interview lasted roughly 45-60 minutes and were semi-structured, conversational interviews. In total, 12 individual interviews were conducted, and participants completed 18 journal entries.

Interviews in phenomenological studies are designed to focus on the “lived experience of the participants...[and] how the person experiences the phenomenon in the moment” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 89). The first interview questions helped in building rapport and establishing an authentic connection with participants (Jones et al., 2014). Questions focused on the participant’s background, experiences regarding the day-to-day living of American college women, and their negotiation of fear of rape and rape culture into their lives. Following the initial interviews, participants were emailed a series of journal prompts. The prompts focused on expanding on issues of rape culture on college campuses and how that was experienced by the participants. The second interview provided an opportunity to follow-up on themes and concepts gathered during the first interview and journal entries.

## Data Analysis

In performing analysis of a phenomenological study, while the individual experiences of the research participants have merit, it is more important to reveal the crucial and indispensable elements of its structure. The desire to get to a richer and profound meaning of a phenomenon, and not simply discuss it superficially (Jones et al., 2014). Creswell (2013) suggests researchers focus on the “what” and “how” a phenomenon is experienced, and then construct a comprehensive synthesis of these descriptions. Prior to any analysis taking place, I did a “bracketing” exercise, where the researcher takes special note of any preconceived notions, ideas, biases, prejudices, and influences regarding the subjects/subject matter through a process of writing and reflecting (Moustakas, 1994; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This process was then supplemented with memo-writing and constant comparison, where I made special notes to myself regarding the data gathered in real-time to document its proper context (Jones et al, 2014).

The methodology used to analyze the data began with open and initial coding to identify all possibilities. This was followed by axial and focused coding to classify specific themes and categories (Jones et al., 2014). Once the data was sorted, I used three different thought process to further condense the information: phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). These methods were utilized to examine the data and to create a structural interpretation of the phenomenon more effectively.

### Criteria for Quality

To establish trustworthiness in the study, several strategies were utilized. Initially, member checking (Jones et al, 2014) as used. This entailed my following up with my participants post-interview and verifying I have documented their words and thoughts accurately and respectfully. Second, rich, thick descriptions of the data will be used to describe the phenomenon. By having a realistic and deep accounting of the phenomenon, the intention was to give the reader a shared experience, and, in doing so, add to the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Last, collaboration with a highly respected and credentialed individual in student affairs was sought. This professional appropriately challenged my research outcomes, and their interpretation helped add credibility to the data and accompanying analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### Researcher Reflexivity

The position of the researcher is important to consider in establishing the trustworthiness of the study (Jones et al., 2014). I have been employed in student affairs for virtually my entire career, and have engaged in numerous policy discussions, crisis management, protocol development, and student handbook/code of conduct editing regarding sexual violence on campus. Since 2014, I have held various positions regarding Title IX enforcement and compliance, mostly as an investigator and deputy coordinator, which entailed working cases, mitigating challenges, and establishing and verifying due process. Additionally, since 1999, the

research has been employed as an instructor for a women's and girl's self-defense (through a self-empowerment framework) organization, working with survivors of rape, incest, and domestic violence. These positions as a college administrator and self-defense instructor will inform the interpretation of the data.

Worthy of mention are some of my identities – white, cisgender, heterosexual male. In interviewing the women in the study, it was not lost on me (and many of them) my identities are both in power positions in our society as well as similar identities to that of a perpetrator. Knowing this, I felt it was particularly important to build rapport during the interviews. This was done by having brief, friendly conversations at the beginning of our sessions, as well as similar type introductory questions for the journal prompts. Additionally, I made supportive comments when the participants shared vignettes and anecdotes about experiences they had. I believed this help to break down any possible barriers that may have existed, as many of the women thanked me for interviewing them and for doing this research project.

## Findings

Overarchingly, the women in this study indicated that the fear of sexual assault was a looming presence in their lives. As one participant, Victoria, stated, “Fear of sexual assault is a constant back of the mind stressor. It is always there.” The following will discuss how this fear shaped their college experiences by discussing the following four findings: List them. .

### Never Trust Anyone: Feelings of Terror and Fear

The feelings of anxiety and fear described by the participants exceeded the definitions of “worry” or “concern.” All the participants articulated, some quite stridently, how much extreme fear or terror was part of their lives on this subject. Further, the feelings of panic and dread were not limited to isolated occurrences or unique events. Margaret stated, “I would love to be able to go outside and not be scared.” Victoria discussed how on multiple occasions she had seen fraternity men attending first-year student mixers at the beginning of the academic year to seemingly seek out first-year women students. She shared, “It’s literally, they’re feasting on their prey...when they surround you, literally make a circle around you, that’s terrifying.” The metaphor of comparing college men to a predator was noteworthy.

The terror women experience was a common occurrence, typically in settings best described as normal for traditional-aged college students. The situations brought up by the participants were not one-time events or unique circumstances particular to their lives. There were four contexts that came up repeatedly: fear of walking alone at night; fear of house parties; fear of being drugged, and a combined fear of abduction and/or sexual trafficking. Nearly every participant described intense dread from most, if not all, of these situations.

Experiencing terror from walking alone at night, or even considering going out in the evening, was referenced quickly and easily by most participants. This action, if taken, brought upon considerable angst, and was avoided at all costs. Carolyn said, “when I am on campus, I consciously stay home more than I try to go out.” If students do venture out, they have incorporated coping mechanisms into their lives to deal with the fear and trepidation. These included carrying weapons such as forms of brass knuckles and pepper spray and using other tools such as tracking applications on cell phones. Quite simply, Victoria says, “It is incredibly

stressful to travel at night.” For most participants, going anywhere at night, especially alone, was a well-planned out decision weighing all risks and not taken lightly.

House parties and bars were also identified as risky and stressful situations. Participants reported considerable unease about these social opportunities. As Victoria says, “And it’s to the point now where I don’t go to parties. I can’t. Because every time I go, I’m always so stressed.” Some women described an awkward expectation that attendance at a house party suggested they are supposed to consent to sexual activity with a man. Hannah said, “It seems it’s almost the whole point of going to a party is to hook up and at least that’s what they’re making it feel like...the only thing that’s valuable about me is that I’m a girl.” Because of the fear of sexual assault, most participants avoiding going to house parties alone. Hannah further shared one should “make sure that you are traveling with groups of people that you trust.” This fear was not isolated to private residences, but also to bar culture. Carolyn stated, “I’m always afraid of someone bumping into me...[or] is going to put something in my drink. Or going to the bathroom, there’s only one stall and someone’s going to come in.” The vignettes share by the participants offer those large social scenes, particularly parties and college bars, are rife with risk for sexual assault, and the only legitimate way to blunt it is to travel in larger groups.

There was a similarity in the vigilance students mentioned regarding walking alone at night being echoed in going to house parties and bars. As Katie described, it is “the constant fear of, why is that guy staring at me? Why has he been kind of following me around all night?” With the specific reference to being drugged, many of the participants mentioned covering their drinks and not taking drinks from others. Katie shared a story of how a bartender specifically told her she should cover her drink to avoid being drugged. Overall, participants discussed the fear of

being drugged and engaging in practices to minimize this risk. As Carolyn stated, “Never trust anyone.” This mantra rang true for different contexts and scenarios.

The final common source of terror for college women regarding rape was a fear of being abducted, followed, and/or being sexually trafficked. Katie shared an anecdote from her spring break trip and heading back for the evening: “we also had to make sure nobody ‘sketchy’ was following us or knew which room was our hotel room because we feared for our safety.” Marie shared avoiding a particular shopping center because it was close to a highway and the local news did a story about that highway being used by sexual traffickers. Katie described walking to her house off-campus and looking over her shoulder to see if a car might be following her. If she senses this is the case, she will deliberately walk past her residence until the car passes, to avoid informing the driver of where she lives. Marie feared a trafficker could be on campus, stating: “They see a young girl that’s my age, and they could be chatting with me, and all of a sudden just decide that I must be a good candidate and just take me away.” Victoria refers to cars driving slowly as she walks on campus causing considerable concern: “But there’s always that terrible feeling of they’re going to drag me into their car with them...It’s terrifying.” The terror experienced by these women was both frequent and pervasive.

One consistent trend with the research was the volume and prevalence all participants displayed regarding fear of being raped by a stranger. This was common among all the women and often fell into expected narratives of being pulled into dark areas like bushes and alleys, in bathroom stalls of bars, having rapists climb into your car and wait for you to return or by abduction, possibly with intent for use in sexual slavery. What was of note was the amplification of these fears. Many discussed a combination of both its imminence and/or inevitability. Carolyn said, “I need to be aware of my surroundings at all times. I need to be aware. ‘Okay, is my phone



charged? If I needed to send my location quick to someone, can I do that?” Margaret talked about the extreme anxiety walking back to her residence hall after parking her car at night. For Victoria, it even led to a preventive medical decision:

I was like, ‘Mom, I need to get on birth control because I don’t want to get raped and have a kid. That’s the worst thing that could happen to me.’ And so my mom said, ‘If that’s what you need to feel safe on campus, I’ll get you birth control.’”

Decisions like Victoria made express a sentiment shared by many, if not all, of the women. There is a hegemonic feeling about rape on campus, and efforts to mitigate that threat are necessary and frequent.

#### Normalization of Sexual Assault and Burden to Prevent It

Participants believed being sexually assaulted was a distinct possibility and it was their responsibility to prevent it. Additionally, that possibility resulted in daily decisions about how to avoid being raped. The women all showed a matter-of-factness in their dispositions devoid of significant emotion, underscoring how normal the reality of altering their lives because of potential sexual assault. There was a sentiment of assumed risk displayed by participants, as they all articulated there was some understanding of inherent hazard being women college students. Further, this assumption of risk came with understood rules. Marie mentions sort of a mantra about instructions on how to stay safe: “if we go somewhere socially...we don’t go to the bathroom alone, and you don’t leave your drink unattended.” Nearly every participant recalls purchasing or being given pepper spray at some point. Marie recalled, “the one thing that everyone gave me when I went off to college was pepper spray.” Receiving multiple self-defense

weapons as college-ready gifts to women students emphasizes how normal risk-reduction efforts have become as part of the campus experience.

The ownership of pepper spray was just one example of the burden to not get raped the participants carried. Many described risk-reduction actions they took, such as avoiding times of day to travel and being mindful of social activities. As Margaret puts it, “There has [sic] been so many situations where I’ve wanted to go out and have fun but the fear of something happening to me has kinda [sic] stopped that.” The mindset described was one of hyper-vigilance, with fear and terror right around the corner, influencing many choices, including simple ones like what to wear. As Victoria says, “...it’s always stressful because I have to take the sexual assault stuff into consideration with the dress code for wherever I go.” Situations such as these, where a seemingly innocuous decision as what to wear to a social function, were often fraught with angst and worry.

Again, a consistent theme was how the burden of sexual assault prevention has been integrated into their day-to-day lives. Marie expressed a broad concern about the unpredictability of rape: “You never know. One wrong decision, one too many drinks, you never know.” Margaret one time did an experiment with herself where to see how many occasions she looked over her shoulder out of fear walking from the library to her residence hall (a few blocks) one night and counted “eight or nine times just in that short walk.” Even in situations like exercising, whether outside or in the student recreation center, students were reminded of this environment. Katie recalled during her workouts: “I feel like I am always thinking about [sexual assault] and it’s unfortunate and I’ve tried to change my mindset and just be blocking it out or not overthinking it, but it’s still there.” Margaret described even micro choices about whether to

wear to ear buds when running so she can be more vigilant in case she was being targeted for an attack.

An interesting binary emerged from the analysis of these stories. While women quickly pointed out and articulated specific scenarios causing them intense dread (walking alone at night, concern about abduction), they also described significant feelings of peril in everyday situations as well. The bottom-line results in a sentiment of consistent anxiety and dread, frequently putting women into a powerless position.

### Powerlessness to Prevent Sexual Assault

Analysis of the data also revealed a description of inevitability regarding an assault. The women felt if their risk-reduction or safety tips failed there was little one could do to prevent being raped. Students also articulated a frequent feeling of helplessness due to being physically smaller when compared to most men. As Hannah articulated, “I think personally, the scariest thing that could happen is if I was physically held down and forced to do something.” Participants expressed frustration in their inability to physically prevent an attack. Carolyn describes it more bluntly: “That my life is controlled by a lingering thought in my head that this could happen anytime.” Margaret told an anecdote of being out one night on the street and a man started blocking her path and touching her: “So to have like a 6’5” 300-pound guy come up to you and try to play with your hair and do all this stuff, it’s terrifying. It’s really scary.” Fortunately, Margaret was not sexually assaulted in that scenario, but experiences like these, where there was no assault but extreme anxiety, were described as somewhat common.

Victoria often referenced the “blue-lights” on campus, which are emergency call boxes placed around her campus, and those being a sort of lifeline. However, when further considering her assets when walking alone on campus, she stated:

I guess the only power I do have is that I am a fast runner, and I can run to the closest blue-light box. But that still takes a minute and 20 seconds for the police to get there. And in that minute and 20 seconds, I’m screwed.

The desperation described by Victoria was common among the participants. They would detail all the steps they would take to avoid being assaulted, sometimes including elaborate plans, such as Marie avoiding going to the grocery store during certain hours. However, the feelings expressed by Victoria – that they had no options if all the planning and good habits still left them alone with a potential rapist – were shared by many of the participants.

Powerlessness also appears in non-physical scenarios, but rarely in academic settings, with Katie saying, “I think if it was a creepy professor situation like that, that one’s obviously weird, but I know that there’s people that I can reach out to.” However, outside the structured confines of the classroom and/or employment settings, students described a different reality. For instance, all participants discussed being catcalled. This often resulted in uncomfortable feelings because of the inability to either retaliate or because it heightened fear of assault. Katie described being on spring break with her friends (all women) and getting catcalls “left and right.” Catcalls coming from vehicles were of particular concern, as individuals reported this with an increased fear of abduction. Victoria expressed significant worry just walking to class on the sidewalk: “Oh my God. When I get catcalled from moving vehicles... horrendous.” Again, there is an overlap of the findings, where powerlessness is combined with daily activities, like simply walking on campus.

How and where the students felt power and/or control led to interesting findings as to how students viewed the responsibility of their universities in preventing assault. Margaret put it succinctly: “But in reality, when this stuff happens, it’s a power dynamic. It’s not being equal at all.” Most felt their campuses needed to play a role in doing so, but there were conflicting positions, with Victoria calling the mandated sexual assault prevention training “a joke,” while Hannah felt “there were many great programs/trainings available for students.”

Aside from training the consensus among the students was that aside from specific campus locations that were outside, (“you never walk alone to Greek Row,” Victoria says) students generally feel secure and less powerless on campus, particularly in more densely populated areas, such as classrooms, other campus buildings, and residence halls. However, once students leave the campus, the feelings of safety evaporated. Katie said, “Especially now living off-campus my concerns with sexual assault are heightened because I don’t feel protected as I did in a campus building.” Laundromats and especially campus bars were places of concern: “I think getting roofied at Molly’s [campus bar] has always been a pretty big scare,” Marie said. The campus itself, while not perfect, seem to offer some amount of security to these women. Off-campus was mostly the reverse; a few places felt safe (usually residences), but nearly every other location was questionable.

## Discussion

This study was conducted to explore how traditional-aged college women navigated fear of sexual assault. Recognizing today’s campuses produce a disproportionate amount of sexual

assault, exploring how this phenomenon is experienced is critical in exploring possible solutions to that epidemic. The students in this study experienced extreme fear and even terror, were often encumbered to prevent all assaults in a culture that normalizes that burden and were frequently made to feel powerless.

In the interviews and journals, there were countless stories of how the women made a cost-benefit analysis about fear of rape in their daily lives. Everyday decisions about where to go, what to do, whom to see, how to get there were nearly always balanced with concern about sexual assault. Many participants shared stories and vignettes of making deliberate, calculated analyses regarding how to go about their days, and what sacrifices to consider. The fear they experienced was almost exclusively about physical assault; the only time non-physical assault was mentioned was in the context of being cat-called, and even then, it led to increased fear of rape. Figure 1 visually represents the overlapping nature of issues and concerns regarding how the participants navigated rape culture in higher education.

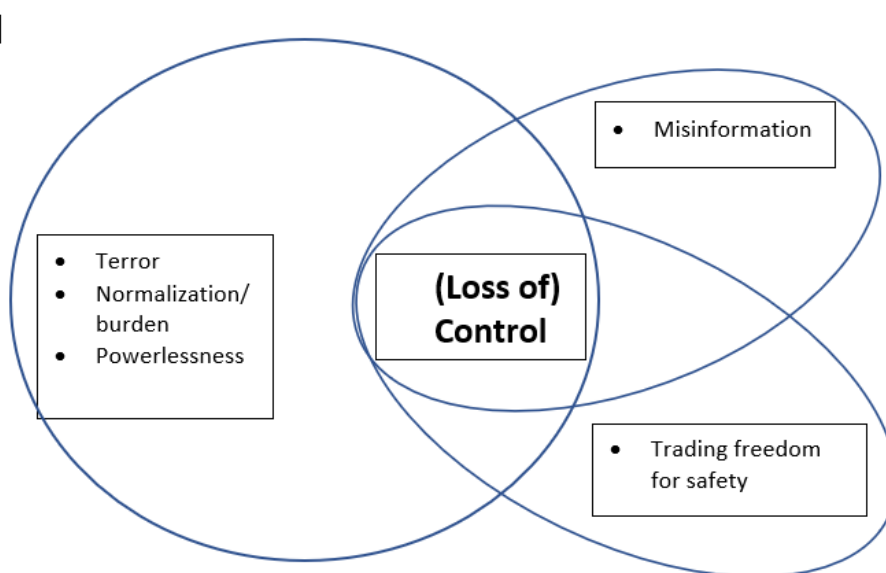


Figure 1: The overlaying concerns for college women navigating fear of sexual assault.

The reality of the terror felt by women regarding sexual assault, together with the burden of not getting raped combined with the normalization of that burden and the overwhelming sense of powerlessness felt by the students in the study alludes to a difficult and challenging existence. When these challenges were mixed with misinformation, such as being told the best way to protect themselves is to not walk alone at night (Linder and Lacy, 2020), it created a scenario where the participants were instilled and arguably programmed with risk-reduction behaviors and tactics that are, at best, misguided and at worst, dangerous. This toxic mix forced the students into a daily existence where they made decisions about everyday behaviors in which they traded freedom for safety (avoiding certain locations, times of day, social activities) and those decisions and their outcomes were the sole responsibility of these women. All of these issues combined to exert control over the participants and their lives, or, in the inverse, the students felt a lack of control in their lives because of rape avoidance. The control exercised over women can be directly connected to Linder's (2018) Power-conscious Approach, in which sexual violence results from oppression of women and an imbalance of power.

This unequal balance of power showed itself frequently throughout the research. The circumstances where students made the most frequent trades of freedom for safety were in their social lives, or at the very least outside of the confines of a more regulated environment which did not induce as much stress. This feeling of calm was contrary to the sense of panic most of the women had in most other contexts, who felt very much on their own in evaluating how to manage this fear. In some ways, the considerations the students made regarding navigating a fear of rape were so frequent as to become transactional, such as deciding to only go to parties in groups or what to wear, and it was clear the ownership of sexual assault prevention was on them.

Notably, a direct line can be drawn between the responsibility and ownership of the burden to not be assaulted and critical theory. This constant need to make decisions, take actions, or in some way take total accountability to prevent rape put college women in a marginalized status without access to power in higher education, as the world they encounter does not put any onus on the potential perpetrators not to commit the act of rape. In short, women felt they must protect themselves because no one else would. Further, when individuals who are marginalized, such as women, (in this case women college students) take part in their own subordination, it reinforces an imbalance of power on campus. Specifically, “oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 164).

A compelling piece for this part of the research was the fear felt by the students for events that while possible, are somewhat unlikely to occur in the context of how sexual assaults take place. Slightly more than four of five sexual assaults were committed by someone with some familiarity with their victim (R. A. I. N. N., n.d.) with some estimates putting the number closer to 90% for college women (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). The extreme fear and trepidation for statistically less likely stranger attacks was striking.

This was also true for drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA) and abduction for the purposes sexual trafficking. Actual statistics on DFSA and sex trafficking are difficult to find. However, one study found that of 144 sexual assault survivors tested in a hospital emergency room for DFSA, less than 5% tested positive for date-rape drugs (Negrusz et al., 2005.) Regarding sex trafficking, it is rare traffickers obtain their victims by abduction (National Human Trafficking Hotline, n.d.). Despite the statistics and evidence of the likelihood of being drugged



or abducted for sexual trafficking, the participants believed they needed to be vigilant in preventing these unlikely events from happening to them.

Participant's beliefs in the myths and/or partial truths were both broad and deep. This is not to suggest in any way they were unintelligent, uninformed, or in any way obtuse about how they handled their lives regarding fear of rape. To the contrary, many had well-thought out and sophisticated safety plans -- Margaret even created code words with her friends to indicate whether she was in danger. Their fear of being sexually assaulted by a stranger was not unfounded given that most prevention programs focus on preventing being sexually assaulted by a stranger rather than by an acquaintance. This was compounded by well-intended but poorly guided efforts, like bystander intervention programs, which reinforced sexual assaults happen predominantly in public, which empirical data does not support. Taken in its entirety, the misinformation about rape caused these women to make choices about choosing freedom or safety; both were not available. Going through life negotiating how to avoid sexual assault was largely about control, or, in an alternative view, being controlled. As detailed earlier, the research participants all described ways in which they lived their lives and made decisions about how to avoid being raped. That reality had the effect of limiting and/or lowering the options these students had.

The combination of misinformation about sexual assault layered with a pressure to choose either independence or security was used as a tool to prevent and oppress women by means of controlling their choices. All the women expressed frustration at the unfairness of their situations but ultimately felt no other option or alternative existed. These students were forced into an unjust existence where they had few real decisions and dealt with the consequences.

While there was no one person or entity directing this control and there was no clear beneficiary, the control exhibited over the research participants was stark and significant.

Deserving mention is how complicit institutions of higher education are in the sharing and spreading of misinformation. While often well-intended, campuses sponsor programs and campaigns often reinforcing false narratives, such as bystander intervention seminars and campus ride programs. This has the dual effect of telling students (predominantly women) what to be afraid of as well as how to remedy it. Being largely inaccurate, it ends up endangering more students and wasting resources. Additionally, this minimalization of accurate information, which is provided by colleges and universities, has the effect of protecting institutional reputation at the cost of providing good information and education to all students, particularly women.

In Linder's (2018) framework, the issue of control over women or women feeling a lack of control over their own lives was derived directly from access to power. Further, Linder's (2018) acknowledgement of context regarding GBV came through clearly in the study, as all the participants articulated specific situations and scenarios in which they either felt fear and/or adjusted their lives due to safety concerns. The inability for these students to freely make choices or have their thought processes free of safety concerns all related to either specific contexts and/or feeling a lack of power of their situation.

Even when subjected to catcalls, which all participants regularly experienced, the results were emotional duress at the lack of control about the situation and feeling powerless, even if they did not fear an imminent assault. The daily pressure to make choices about safety combined with the significance of those decisions was a clear impediment to college women maximizing their experience as students. Broadly speaking, the existence on college campuses for these women was clearly not a level playing field due to the ever-present fear of rape.

Cynically, colleges and universities may have a vested interest in supporting the misinformation of students regarding sexual assault. If postsecondary institutions educated students about who commits the majority of sexual assaults on campus – peers who are known in some capacity to the victim-survivor and violate a conveyance of trust – institutions might experience financial and reputational backlash. Institutions might believe it is too risky to inform students that they should be on alert that the individual who lives down the hall or sits next to them in their chemistry lecture is statistically far more likely to sexually assault them than a stranger in the bushes.

Throughout the research findings, the participants relayed stories about how their lives were compromised by not having control and agency. This was matched in the literature, where the issue of power and/or lack of access to it emerged frequently. From such broad pieces as sexual harassment law in education including groundbreaking sexual harassment cases like *Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District* (1998) and *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (establishing deliberate indifference and hostile environment standards, respectively), to influential discussions on how rape culture is a result of women lacking power (Davis, 2017), to speculation on Title IX reform (MacKinnon, 2016), and finally to iterations of critical theory (Kincheloe et al., 2011), access to power was at the core of understanding how these college women navigated rape culture on college and university campuses.

### Implications for Practice

The effects and results of GBV are certainly not limited to individuals in higher education, nor is higher education equipped or able to completely remedy this epidemic in

society. The issue is too entrenched, broad, and multifaceted for any one area (such as higher education) to make any lasting and/or permanent headway on a significant social problem. However, currently women at colleges and universities are raped at triple the national average (R. A. I. N. N., n.d.) and that is unacceptable for institutions that are supposed to be leaders in social justice and equality. Linder's (2018) approach to addressing sexual violence on campus involves solidarity. Only by working through a cross-sectional lens with multiple power-conscious approaches can institutions of higher education address sexual assault comprehensively and remove the burden placed on women (Linder, 2018).

Schools that receive federal funds are mandated to do training about sexual assault and GBV, frequently inclusive of the whole academic community - students, staff, and faculty. Many accomplish this through online training modules which make compliance easy to enforce. The unfortunate truth is too many campuses this is seen as the end, not a beginning. However, incorporating training and education outside of basic compliance would be more effective in facilitating learning and prevention.

Leveraging the authority and power of the academy, educational responses to social issues, like rape and GBV, need to be the norm. Colleges and universities have the ability, resources, and infrastructure to widely share, disseminate, and educate students; indeed, it is their core function. The scope of teaching and educating on these issues needs to be altered to be on a much grander scale. With misinformation and myth being central to the problem college women face, the best, efficient, and most direct route to remedying this issue is with what post-secondary institutions do best – education.

Linder (2018) calls for solidarity in addressing issues of oppression and power imbalance like GBV, and administrators, students, and faculty will need to work together to change the

status quo. This can begin with mandatory classes and instruction, embedded into the curriculum, for all members of the higher education community. This needs to be the norm regarding education about rape on campus to address the mountains of misinformation regarding GBV. Supplemental co-curricular offerings, town-gown agreements for campus bars, and clear and transparent campus policies and offerings (Title IX administration, orientation workshops, human resource seminars, self-defense classes) need to work with the preparation, teaching, and outreach so sexual assault prevention becomes a community value on college and university campuses nationwide.

Further, there is a need to address GBV in multiple contexts simultaneously as well as addressing history (Linder, 2018). As disclosed in the findings, how women experience sexual violence is greatly dependent on the how, when, what, and where. Deterring rape and educating about it needs to happen all over campus, such as with clubs and organizations, residence halls, the Greek system, orientation, and employee offerings. Further, post-secondary institutions need to acknowledge the historical terror and fear women have experienced on their campus to properly move forward instead of having college and university presidents largely deny a problem exists (Yung, 2016). The norm should be that regardless of how an individual experiences the campus, they will be exposed to a community that supports and assists survivors and has a zero tolerance for sexual predation.

Ideally, the burden of rape prevention needs to fall on men to not perpetrate the crime, rather than the reverse reality currently existing. While general programs aimed at men (as well as all-gender approaches) are acceptable, there needs to be specific, tailored outreaches to male athletic teams and fraternity houses, as individuals with those memberships commit these crimes at higher rates (Foubert et al., 2019). These efforts, however, cannot be one-offs aimed at

compliance. They need to be part of a systematic, comprehensive approach by colleges and universities to address as many contexts as possible to address issues of power on campus (Linder, 2018).

The primary educative response needs to be layered in its approach to making sexual violence prevention a community value, there is much that happens in other areas of campus needing growth as well. Significant resources need to be allocated for staffing and programming to educate the entire campus, including curricular partnerships. Regarding staffing, some schools have hired positions such as a sexual and interpersonal violence prevention coordinator. While well-intentioned, these positions are typically siloed to one area (and frequently to one person) and have few resources. These positions/areas need to be greatly amplified – many more staff and assets for programming – to be able to do outreach outside of classes and to non-students, as well as offering comprehensive support for survivors. Moreover, those individuals with specialized training, background, and credentials need to be invited to classes and work cooperatively and collaboratively with faculty frequently as part of a comprehensive approach to address this issue at a curricular level.

Additionally, schools need to make a staffing commitment to their Title IX work. Often, Title IX investigative and related work are done in the margins, as schools often devote insufficient resources to fully sustain these efforts. Staffing ratios need to be developed, for example, such as one full-time investigator for every 2,000 students, to properly engage and manage reports. Lastly, all the education, staffing, victim-survivor support, programming efforts and outreach should be tied to accreditation.

The bottom line is institutions of higher education need to make prevention of GBV a community value, and not the purview of one office, area, and/or student group. Nor should the

strategies and reaction be compliance-based. The paradigm shift required to do this is not subtle. But to address GBV and its existence due to lack of access to power, colleges and universities ironically need to use their power – sometimes unilaterally – to begin to address how sexual assault (and fear of it) holds virtually half their student population hostage. It will take the efforts of everyone in the academy, combined with initiatives like marketing and branding campaigns, to make this change. But it is necessary so colleges and universities can be havens regarding this issue instead of accomplices.

### Conclusion

This study offered a critical theory perspective to develop insight and context for how college and university women negotiate their lives as students through the lens of managing fear of sexual assault. The information gathered reveals a constant, daily struggle for women as they deal with anxiety, fear, and terror from the burden of avoiding rape and GBV. Only by significant shifts in resources, accountability, and perspective can post-secondary institutions hope to reverse the role that colleges and universities play in amplifying the problem of GBV on their campuses.

## CHAPTER 3

### SCHOLARLY REFLECTION ON DISSERTATION PROCESS

#### Introduction

This scholarly reflection will include several different types of observations, starting with a reflection on the dissertation process itself. After discussing how that was experienced and lessons learned, I will then delve into how my research findings will influence my work and personal practice. The following section will entail reviewing writing a journal article, including the preparation process as well as thoughts on how research will be viewed moving forward as both a professional and an academic. Some personal thoughts will close this chapter.

#### Reflection on the Dissertation Process

When I began the process of pursuing my doctorate, I had a broad goal in mind of what I wanted to accomplish. I had been doing Title IX work in my professional career for years; directly for about five years and indirectly a lot longer than that, including receiving the 56-hour training certification in Illinois in sexual assault and domestic violence response. I had also been a women's and girl's self-defense instructor in an empowerment-based model for 19 years and had worked with large numbers of survivors in that context. As a practitioner, I felt qualified and



confident, but I lacked an intellectual and/or academic base to have significant standing in the sexual and interpersonal violence prevention community. That became the new goal.

Through the lens of higher education, which was the framework of my career, my aim for the dissertation was to reveal, discover, and name the undercurrent and subculture of sexual assault existing in college campuses. While the crimes of sexual assault and gender-based violence (GBV) itself are invisible to many, the burden of fear and accommodations college women made to their lives to avoid rape are daily occurrences. However, the ways in which traditional college-aged women adjust their existence because of this fear have become so commonplace as to escape notice, not unlike Betty Friedan's (1963) "the problem with no name" (p. #) from her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Principally, the goal was to highlight, expose, and illustrate how college and university women manage their lives in the context of fear of sexual assault/GBV, while underscoring its implicit unfairness.

Through this disclosure and uncovering, the desire is to give a platform and mouthpiece to students who lack access to power, ability, and agency to articulate how the hegemon of GBV affects their lives. From my earlier work on campuses and/or with survivors, I have come to believe and understand GBV was fueled by two things: silence and isolation. To combat this, the best tools are voice and community. I believe by providing the opportunity to be heard to this subgroup (college and university women), we can work to positively affect the epidemic of GBV in higher education.

From this perspective, the dissertation process ran as expected. The data garnered from interviews and journals, while valuable, authentic, and at times visceral, did not significantly stray from expectation. The information shared fit convenient, expected, and redundant narratives and archetypes of staying safe on a college campus (do not walk alone late at night,

cover your drink when out socially, etc.), though the themes and tone provided by the participants was detailed and illustrative. The research did reveal a welcome, though not surprising, desire to talk about the issue. The students never lacked for an ability to articulate their thoughts, concerns, and fears about how they negotiated living as college students about rape. Further, many of the research participants showed a positive affect either during or after the interviews, showing some relief to be able to talk about the subject, and most thanked me for both doing the research as well as being given the opportunity to discuss this topic.

One pleasant surprise was the students use of the journal responses. While much of the data was gathered through video interviews, I believe having the video interviews four weeks apart, with journal questions during the intervening three weeks, allowed for student to keep the topic relevant and feel connected to it. During the second interview, students were comfortable with the context and spoke freely, and the journal prompts had a positive effect in this manner, as well as giving some participants an added and/or different outlet to express themselves.

The biggest challenge I endured was in respect to accumulating enough research participants. Due to my role at my current institution – both as the director of residence life and a deputy Title IX coordinator – I was hesitant to recruit my own students. That quickly became problematic, as I was not able to “pre-recruit” participants to my study as other colleagues were. Further, being physically disconnected both due to Covid and living three hours away from the Northern Illinois University (NIU) campus prohibited me from building relationships with individuals on campus to aid in recruiting. And when I did reach out, individuals were courteous and professional, but there was no connection or desire to help my research, which was not surprising. Lastly, the subject matter, fear of sexual assault on campuses, is a potentially challenging subject for folks, particularly out of context, so that was an added difficulty.

In retrospect, I would have given an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application allowing me to interview participants if they fit the demographic I was interested in researching: women, aged 18-25, enrolled full-time at a four-year residential institution. This would have allowed me to not only speak to any student interested in the survey, but I would also have been able to enlist students to take part and reduced the time and anxiety with the recruitment process. There was no other significant difficulty in my dissertation process, and any pieces related to Covid may have unintentionally been helpful. Since all my interviews were done via video rather than in person, I was able to record sessions quite easily, and have video as well as audio data to review. Further, this may have allowed the research participants, who were all women, to feel more relaxed talking to a cis-gender man whom they did not know about a subject than can be difficult to discuss.

#### Application to Personal/Professional Practice

My practice as a higher education professional and my dissertation's application to it are indirect. I am not in a position of executive leadership to enact policy changes significant enough to affect any noticeable change on this issue. Though, as a director of residence life and deputy coordinator of Title IX, there are ways my research will positively influence my work.

With more than half of the residence halls filled by women students, having a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how women experience fear on campus will certainly be beneficial, whether from an operational or from a programmatic and educational standpoint. Knowing how this phenomenon plays out in everyday life will be key for me to find gaps on both departmental and campus education on sexual assault. The largest gap appears to be a lack

of understanding about who commits campus rapes, with a disproportionate number of resources and attention devoted to stranger attacks. In whatever ways I can work with university partners to help educate our students about the true nature of campus rape will be of benefit to our students.

Another small way I can use this data as a leader of a department and make a difference is by trying to properly frame the issue for our students. The problem of rape and GBV is a social problem, not only at post-secondary institutions but in all of society. This issue is not owned or created by the criminal justice system, education system, or corporate America, though every system is complicit. But the more I can define for our staff and students that everyone has a role in preventing sexual assault, even in the microcosm of university residence halls, the better and safer our halls will be for our students.

My other main role is as a deputy coordinator for Title IX. My responsibilities in this role include investigating cases and being involved in policy discussions and decisions. While I was educated about rape and GBV before my starting doctoral work, the research and preparatory work (lit review) helped me understand the vastness of the problem in both breadth and depth. Discovering more about GBV among the LGBTQIA+ community, at Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCUs), how legal scholars have examined Title IX administration and adjudications, and especially the epidemic of serial perpetration has given me a strong understanding of how sexual assault is both experienced and understood. This knowledge allows me to be a more complete and more better-informed administrator in serving our students.

More narrowly, as an investigator, understanding the circumstances in which women feel fear makes me better at that part of my job. Being able to position questions, set frameworks, and predict responses helps me become a better investigator. One of the keys to understanding a Title IX investigation is being able to accurately discern the context in which an alleged assault took

place. Knowing and having that information as background will be beneficial in working with complainants and helping them feel understood.

### Application to Research

In looking at my research and dissertation through the lens of contribution to the field and journal articles, I gained a great deal of understanding and perspective. Writing a journal article is an exercise in and of itself, aside from whatever has been the focus of your research. Learning to refine your entire process into a consumable portion of writing is a skill as worthy as creating original knowledge. The first thing I realized and gained from this process was the amount of scaffolding and building of a foundation is needed prior to even consider writing a journal article.

For me to feel comfortable writing a publishable piece on my research, I wanted to feel as confident as possible in what I was discussing. When I look back, all the literature reviews, studies on methodologies, journal articles, and presentations for class were excellent preparation. One needs a mountain of data, context, and perspective to know what they are writing is applicable and relevant. This only comes from becoming intimate with and passionate about the subject.

Ironically, the experiencing of diving deep within a subject area to become knowledgeable about it enough to publish also means you are discovering just how little you truly know about it. With my topic of sexual assault on college campuses, there are many subcategories that could stand alone as their own study. The path to hopeful expertise is filled with humility of how much you do not know.

On a different level, I discovered how much psychological ownership is needed to both successfully research and publish. To write a publishable article, I made many choices, none of which are simple or easy to make, nor are they in a vacuum. For example, in my literature review, I had several pages on rape prevention measures which had to be distilled into two paragraphs for the journal article. The responsibility of these decisions is a serious one and not to be done flippantly or without discernment. Only with the confidence of knowledge on your topic and an understanding of what the core of your research is about can one make these choices appropriately.

Going through these decisions and these processes leads me to examine how I view research differently moving forward in my career as a professional and academic. The most obvious takeaway is just how much research and arduous work is needed to get to the starting line. Only by going through all the data and giving it an honest examination can one develop a wisdom and insight needed. Not that I ever doubted the individuals who publish in peer-reviewed journals were intelligent, but after going through it myself and understanding the sacrifices and commitment necessary, I have a different understanding and appreciation for research. I have a newfound respect for research and will look to use it more in my professional life.

Interestingly, after having made this achievement, I also no longer must be awed by it. By carrying out the same, I can now lend a true critical eye in reviewing research. This is an invaluable and necessary tool for any scholar; to be able to constructively examine research with the ability to rate the work based on its merits. Arrogance does not limit itself to any field, and to have the confidence and knowledge to appropriately challenge outcomes, findings, and methods is a beneficial tool.

The last perspective I have in reviewing research differently revolves around ethics and integrity. As properly vetted and structured as my research was, there were countless times when I could have altered research subject's answers, fabricated/falsified data, and/or manipulated findings. While always believing research needed to be done honestly, the opportunities to be less than honest are countless. Until I went through and experienced this process for myself, I did not truly understand the essential need of honesty, authenticity, and veracity in research. While these are important values in every field, when presenting a new truth, they cannot be stressed enough.

In reflecting how I will use research moving forward in my professional career, I see several opportunities. Primarily, as a leader of a large department, I am responsible for the forward progress of my department. This means producing new initiatives and programs to stay current and market ready. Being able to support my ideas with research, whether mine or another scholar's, will be a valuable tool, and one I would not have been quite as comfortable using previously.

On a broader level, with great thanks to the program at NIU, I will be able to engage research more effectively in discussions and initiatives about social justice. Knowledge is a great equalizer, and to be able to engage on an intellectual level, rather than the white noise of political rhetoric, will help in setting up a more level playing field for all. My appreciation and understanding of original research will help me as a professional level better serve marginalized populations.

Finally, and most notably, I can see the research process and my publishable article as a beginning and not an end. While the culmination of three years of effort rightly feels like a

moment to pause, I know moving forward the point and value of original research. I can engage it in ways I was never able to before, along with the hope and determination of doing more.

### Final Thoughts

I have learned knowledge is true confidence. The lesson to me with my pursuit of a doctoral degree is to be careful and cautious about what you know and do not know. I had made assumptions about higher education and what a doctoral program and the resulting research could teach me, and I was humbled when those assumptions were corrected. The realization that knowledge is confidence was satisfying, and I now understand what it takes to have deep and empirical understanding about subjects and the positive benefits resulting from it and the process.



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**APPENDIX**

**INTERVIEW AND JOURNAL QUESTIONS**

### **First Interview - Topic areas and representative questions**

Topic area - Introduction to the participant, background information on the participant (why they chose the school, their academics, general experience on campus so far), and brief framework of the study.

- How are you today? What led you to want to participate in this study?
- Please tell me a little about yourself, and what led to you choosing this school for your education.
- What has been your experience here as a student so far?
- Do you have a pseudonym you would like to use?

Topic area - Discussion about personal safety on campus, including messages received, concerns they have, advice they would pass on, what they wish they knew before coming.

- What are some messages you received about personal safety? Where and/or from whom do you recall receiving those messages?
- What is the best advice you have received about keeping safe on campus? Why is that the best advice?
- If you were to speak to a girl in high school who wanted to come to this campus, what advice would you give them about their safety? Why that advice?
- Are there ways you feel oppressed as a woman on campus? How do you experience that?

Topic areas - More focused dialogue regarding campus sexual assault, including prevention measures, their level of fear, how this fear influences their choices, and when they do or do not feel they have power.



- Think about things - social, work, academic activities - you do every day. What role does fear of sexual assault play in them? How does it feel?
- When you think about power on campus, which students have it?
- How has your life changed regarding fear of sexual assault since you become a student here?
- Regarding sexual assault on campus, what situations or contexts are you most afraid of? How does that feel?

### **Second Interview questions/themes**

Topic area - re-connecting with the participant, asking them how the experience of the journal prompts went, if they had any new thoughts.

- How was the journal experience for you? Was it easier or harder than answering interview questions? Why?
- How did the interview questions and journal prompts affect you? Did it cause you to think of anything differently? Did you?

Topic area - discussion about any new cognitions of being a woman on campus, how they evaluate their fear being a woman college student.

- How often are you aware of being a woman on campus? What are those contexts? Freedom vs. Safety?
- In those contexts, does fear and/or power play a role? How does that make you feel?

Topic area - Open dialogue about their feelings, revelations, and thoughts about campus sexual assault and anything else on their minds.

- In thinking about rape culture and campus sexual assault, how do you feel? What are situations when this is more in the front of your mind?
- Have you thought of any behaviors you modify due to fear? What are they? How do you experience that? Are there some things you cannot forget? What would you recommend as far as changes? What would be the top three?

### **Journal Prompts**

- 1) Week 1 - How was your week? In what contexts do you fear sexual assault? What are they? How does that feel?
- 2) Week 2 - How did your week go? Are there occasions when you trade freedom for safety – make decisions on where to go, what to do, or whom to be with based on whether it was safe? How did that feel? Did you experience any fear with that awareness, and, if so, how?
- 3) Week 3 – How are you feeling this week? What is NIU's role in preventing sexual assault? Social, academic, and/or work settings... How do you feel about that?