Commentary

Athletic Participation, Fraternity Membership, and Date Rape

The Question Remains—Self-Selection or Different Causal Processes?

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This commentary discusses the papers in a special issue that addresses the contribution of athletic participation and fraternity membership to the prediction of date rape on campus. The commentary focuses on issues that make it difficult to weigh the available evidence, including methodological and conceptual problems, and concludes that the field is currently unable to answer definitively whether athletes and fraternity members, compared to other men, are more sexually aggressive in general, at some locations but not others, or are similar in overall rates of sexual aggression but favor different forms of coercive sexuality. It is suggested that future research address the relative contribution of individual determinants, self-selection into social groups, and features of the environment and culture created by and reciprocally influencing athletes and fraternity members. Such studies are a high priority because of the important practical significance of their findings on shaping prevention programs for date rape on campus.

The articles in this special issue extend scholarship on a continuing issue confronting researchers who seek to understand rape on campus: the importance of fraternity and athletic participation. The empirical data and theoretical arguments they present focus on the prevalent belief that campus elites, such as fraternity members and intercollegiate athletes, are more likely to hold what are considered sexual assault supportive beliefs and to participate in

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sexually assaultive behaviors. These articles not only add to the empirical basis of our understanding, but, more important, delve into the primary issues that confront contemporary research in this area.

The manuscripts demonstrate a shared perspective that acquaintance rape on college campuses is not limited to fraternity members and athletic participants. In an article that examines the association of both these identifications with sexual aggression, and related behaviors and beliefs, Boeringer (this issue) reviews the research of Sanday (1990) and Martin and Hummer (1989), whose qualitative studies have set the stage for the wave of research of which these articles are part. By highlighting this earlier qualitative work, Boeringer places the current research in context. As he makes clear, research on this subject has profitted from rich qualitative data and perspective. However, up to this point, qualitative richness has not been matched by quantitative rigor. Addressing this challenge is the major hurdle confronting date rape scholarship.

Boeringer examines a sample of 477 male undergraduates from a large southeastern university. He found that neither fraternity membership nor intercollegiate athletic participation was associated with higher levels of physically coercive sexual behaviors compared to nonaffiliated students. However, compared to other men, fraternity members did report higher levels of verbal coercion and use of alcohol to ply females for sex, and athletes reported higher levels of likelihood of using force coercively. Boeringer concludes that these findings support the idea that fraternity members, while not reporting disproportionately higher physically forced sexual aggression, make greater use of alternative forms of sexual aggression. This finding is consistent with the qualitative reports of both Sanday (1990) and Martin and Hummer (1989), and extends earlier work by Boeringer and associates (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991).

Assuming that the higher use by fraternity members of alcohol and social coercion to gain sexual access is a robust finding (or can be replicated more widely), it suggests that the type of risks represented by them may be different, although their overall level of sexual assault may be no higher than that presented by other male groups or by individual males. Combined with the prior qualitative work, this finding suggests that fraternity members

may adopt a favoritism toward certain strategies over others. By using alcohol as a weapon more so than other groups of males, they seem to be higher in behaviors that could be classified as "party" assault (Ward, Chapman, Cohn, White & Williams, 1991). It may be that fraternity members choose this behavior because of the access to the social and physical facilities afforded by the fraternal system/institution. This hypothesis also could explain why fraternity membership fails to account for significant variance in multivariate analyses of sexual aggression that control for alcohol use (Koss & Gaines, 1993). If the fraternity men who are sexually aggressive are taking advantage of the institutional structure available to them, by pursuing a strategy of "working a yes out" of their targets with alcohol, the variance accounted for by fraternity membership on sexual aggression would be largely mediated by their alcohol use behaviors.

Other men seemingly rely on different strategies to obtain similar ends. But if the ends are similar, as Schwartz and Nogrady (this issue) point out, it is difficult to conclude that fraternity men are more sexually aggressive than nonfraternity men. Instead, Schwartz and Nogrady argue that many male peer support groups may function to similarly support date rape attitudes and behaviors (DeKeseredy, 1990; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1993), regardless of formal institutional structure. For example, Schwartz and Nogrady find that fraternity membership alone does not discriminate victimizers and nonvictimizers. Similarly, they also find that athletic participation does not discriminate between these groups. They conclude that campus groups other than fraternities (and implicitly athletic teams) are similarly capable of providing the peer support, objectification of women, and access to alcohol, that encourages the sexual victimization of women. Taken together the findings of Boeringer, and Schwartz and Nogrady make a strong case that sexual victimization is not a phenomenon limited to certain groups on campus.

If so, then what if anything is important, or even interesting, about fraternity members and sports participants that they deserve so much attention? The answer to this question lies in an issue previously articulated by Ward et al. (1991). They identified four different types of college rape: stranger rape, party rape, acquaintance rape, and date rape. They suggested that each type of rape has "its own set of characteristics and precipitating fac-

tors" (Ward et al., 1991, p. 65-71). Empirical data are needed to demonstrate that college students engage in each of these types of rape, and to describe the cognitions of the perpetrator and the situations conducive to each type. Different processes or dynamics could be involved in the various guises of rape. For example, in the context of a relationship, the participants would be acting according to expectations that are in part dyad-specific. Whereas, in the party rape situation, where the victim and victimizer do not know each other, but belong to the same social network, the expectations are likely to be guided more by general beliefs about that social situation, and less by victim or dyad-specific attributes.

The empirical evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, suggests fraternity members make frequent use of the party method as a sexual access strategy. One of the apparent advantages of this strategy is that it seems to be associated with very low reporting rates. Low reporting is likely to be especially true when the victim is a member of a sorority (Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991). To the extent that fraternities control physical space in which they can conduct activities with very little direct supervision, a structure is created that not only provides the physical facilities for rape and lends legitimacy to the actions of members, but it also encourages drinking by potential victims and thereby suppresses the likelihood of reporting as well as perceived culpability and credibility of any women who do report.

Other male groups may rely more heavily on alternative coercive strategies. This is not to suggest that other male groups on campus do not partake in "fraternity-like" behaviors, but that without the same institutional structure and the advantages it provides, they are more likely to adopt alternative strategies. Because these alternative strategies make use of different mechanisms and situational contexts, they may well differ in their degree of success and risk of reporting. It is in the context of these differential outcomes of alternative strategies that the Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald, and Benedict (this issue) manuscript should be viewed.

Crosset and colleagues focus on the reporting of violence against women at Division I institutions, and find that athletes are disproportionately reported to judicial affairs offices for sexual assault. When these findings are considered together with those of Boeringer and Schwartz and Nogrady (this issue), the possibil-

ity of differential reporting is raised. Differential reporting would be expected, regardless of the similarity of incidence, if the dynamics and contexts that surrounded the assaults varied across groups. The work of Crosset and colleagues reinforces the need to learn whether these campus groups and the environments that they construct are qualitatively and quantitatively different from each other. Do athletes really rape more, or is there something about them or their sexual access strategies that are more likely to trigger reporting to college authorities by the women they have sex with? Or are athletes and fraternity members simply a segment of the larger rape-supportive male culture?

This question could be addressed by examining the constellation of relationships, as represented by the covariance structures, between the beliefs of individual members of these groups and their behaviors and outcomes. This determination could clarify whether athletes and members of fraternities are more at-risk for rape beliefs and behaviors because of different causal processes that are at work within these groups, or whether they are part of a general population that is masculine-oriented and date-rape supportive.

If fraternity members and athletes hold similar beliefs to the general male student body, they create and are influenced by essentially the same processes as other male groups, although they may select themselves into these discrete social entities. The practical implication of this scenario is that the types of interventions aimed at these groups should not differ from those aimed at other groups of campus men. If on the other hand, these groups differ from the general male population in the cognitions and behaviors that support sexual aggression, then interventions aimed at them need to be specifically tailored to these differences. The articles appearing here come down on different sides of the issue. For example, Boeringer finds that fraternity members score higher on different rape supportive behaviors than nonmembers. On the other hand, Schwartz and Nogrady conclude that fraternity men do not differ in, among other findings, their peer support for getting women drunk. Unfortunately, due to differences in the selection of the samples, it cannot be determined which position has the greatest empirical support.

Sampling problems are not uncommon in the social sciences in general and in research on sexual assault in particular. Partially,

these problems are attributable to difficulty obtaining institutional agreement to participate in the research, due to the perceived sensitive nature of the topic, and to lack of resources for carrying out the studies. Nonetheless, progress must be made in the sampling area. Although the authors of these manuscripts admit the convenience nature of their samples, neither article fully owns up to the shortcomings of the samples or the limitations these shortcomings visit upon the conclusions.

An examination of the sample used by Schwartz and Nogrady (this issue) illustrates some of the sampling decisions that may influence the findings obtained. This article focuses on an "older" student population consisting mainly of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, whereas the sample used by Koss and Gaines (1993) consisted largely of freshmen. The importance of attempts to sample this older population cannot be over- emphasized, as it is possible that men who have risen in the hierarchies of the respective male peer groups (such as sports teams and fraternities) have the most influence on the context created by their peer groups and are also best able to exploit them. Alternatively, it is possible that younger students hold the most polarized rape supportive beliefs, which gradually moderate in time or through maturation and education. This is an empirical question that could be addressed by cross-sectional data that includes students at all levels or by prospective studies across the college years.

A related, although not as obvious, issue is the sampling procedure itself. Schwartz and Nogrady (this issue) collected their sample from three classes, and nearly all the data used in their analyses were from men attending a class in "social problems" and one in "sports." As pointed out by Boeringer (this issue) in a very well-taken comment, classroom sampling is not, in itself, a problem if the selection of classes represents the institutional offerings. However, it seems possible, if not likely, that the individuals found in the sports class held higher masculine beliefs than the average college male. This is to say that the researchers likely over-sampled from the population of hypermasculine males. Among this sample were 22 fraternity members who subsequently were determined not to differ from the other students in this sample, but these students may not have been typical of their campus in their rape supportive beliefs and personality characteristics. Although adding data from an important group of

students, the Schwartz and Nogrady sample is limited by small sample size, particularly for the fraternity men themselves (n = 22). This small cell size does not offer sufficient power for strong inference, let alone inference that takes advantage of various multivariate procedures. In all fairness, however, small sample size is a common problem encountered by researchers in this area. The ambiguities introduced by convenience samples are greater when the intention of the research is to examine both fraternity members and sports participants as alleged high-risk individuals. As later analyses make clear, the Schwartz and Nogrady sample included a good portion of intercollegiate sports participants. The results might have been stronger had they separately compared each of the two groups of interest, fraternity members and sports participants, to the independent students. Boeringer confronts similar analytical problems.

To overcome these analytical constraints, larger and more representative samples are needed. More representative data sets will make generalization to the student body of a single school, and to the population of similar types of institutions, more comfortable. Larger samples would allow for more fine-grained analysis of the correlates of sexual assaultive behaviors and associated beliefs. Addressing confounds like men who are both athletes and fraternity members would also help. Some of these limitations could be partially overcome by combining several of the existing data sets. Data set merging would work uncommonly well, as many of them use the same scales.

Although the collection of larger and more representative samples is an important step, it is only a preliminary one. Even if future, more generalizable analyses of retrospective data support the hypothesis that individuals belonging to fraternities and sports teams, compared with unaffiliated men, have higher levels of sexually assaultive beliefs and behaviors, the findings would not explain where these beliefs and behaviors came from. Although fraternities may appear to be great places for rape-supportive environments to prosper, there is nothing in the literature that rules out the possibility that it is the individuals within these social groups who, regardless of their peer network or surroundings, would be prone to sexually assaultive behaviors. Moreover, there is no clear distinction between individual and environment be-

cause it is individuals who help to construct the rape-encouraging environment, and in turn have their behavior validated by that environment.

To begin with, these individuals self-select into the pool of candidates "rushing" fraternities. Second, a fraternity must choose them, and they do so according to criteria that focus around competition, superiority, and dominance (Martin & Hummer, 1989). Similarly, the population of male student athletes is created under selection pressure that shapes the constituency of its membership. In both cases, the selection pressure is more likely to result in a membership that subscribes to more masculine and traditional beliefs. Boeringer (this issue) hints at this complexity when he interprets his findings as suggesting that "there is some selective mechanism in which males with greater propensity toward sexual force are more likely to move into varsity sports, or that there is something about the social situation of athletic participation that enhances sexually aggressive beliefs."(p. 142). Thus the processes of interest are feedback loops, not simple linear relationships. The relative contribution of social selection to the behaviors and beliefs found in select campus groups should be studied.

Because the data sets underlying the articles in this issue are the products of passive correlational studies, they can only speak to the state of affairs at a given moment in time. There is no way to discern what the course of events or processes were that led up to the levels observed. For example, upon finding that men living in coed settings reported higher mean levels of likelihood of rape than males living in all-male situations, Boeringer (this issue) concludes that this finding contradicts the hypothesis that living in all-male environments tends to increase rape-supportive attitudes and behaviors. This explanation for the findings can be hypothesized, but could not be confirmed without data from a quasi-experimental design that made use of comparison groups and longitudinal methods. The observed levels could also be explained by the hypothesis that sexual assault-inclined college freshman males may decide to live in coed dorms, because this increases their total hours of contact with females, especially freshman females, who are probably the best targets for the sexually aggressive/assaultive male. Unfortunately, the passive-correlational approach can support a variety of hypotheses with-

out offering any hint as to which one is more likely than the others to be correct.

Different designs might disentangle confounded issues coupled with larger samples and more complex statistical approaches. Clearly the strongest method for improving the internal validity of studies in this field is the use of longitudinally collected data. In particular, it would be helpful to measure the rape-supportive beliefs of incoming freshman males, then measure the beliefs of these same males as they progress through their college years. These types of data exist and are approaching publication and may go a long way in resolving some of the unanswered questions (e.g., Jacqueline White and John Humphrey's work at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1992). Admittedly, the application of longitudinal designs is time- and resource-consuming. There are other directions to take. These include the theoretically driven statistical control of beliefs that likely predate the selection into fraternities or sports teams to determine the additional effect of specific peer group involvement on date rape or other assaultive behaviors.

Beyond the method of sampling and the size of the data sets needed for increased internal validity and statistical power, the field needs to begin to use richer measurement of the sexual assault-related phenomena we are concerned with. In particular, instruments need to be more specifically focused on the task of disentangling the causal mechanisms and underlying environments that encourage these occurrences. One area where measurement precision would pay off immediately is in attempts to quantify the dimensions of sport and fraternity and sport subcultures that support rape (Boeringer, this issue). Measuring the different dimensions of sport subcultures, for example, will allow the examination of whether aspects of sports, such as contact versus noncontact, revenue producing or not, team performance, coaching staff attitudes, and shared housing and off-field facilities make individual contributions to the variance of sexual assaultive behaviors. Up to this point, most analyses have quantitatively treated all members of intercollegiate sports the same.

Similarly, there may be a great deal of variance in fraternity environments across types of institutions, and across individual fraternities within schools. Therefore, dimensions of this environ-

ment should be measured. These fraternity-house-level variables might include the degree of secrecy within the house, the overall strength of traditional gender role perspectives, rape supportive ideas, the GPA, the weekly rate of alcohol consumption, the number of judicial infractions in recent years, the number and type of parties held on house grounds, campus and community involvement, intramural sports participation and success, sexually abusive or harassing house practices, and overall traditionality of the fraternity among others. These variables, along with the corresponding individual level variables, should be entered into predictive models to determine the additive variance accounted for by the environmental dimensions.

Some researchers have started to make considerable progress in this area. For example, in measuring sexual victimization among sorority women, Copenhaver and Grauerholz (1991) paid special attention to where the sexual assault took place and the level of Greek-life involvement of the individual sorority members. By measuring the level of involvement in Greek life, these researchers measured, to some degree, the elevated risk that might accrue to sorority women, in contrast to unaffiliated women, due to increased contact with fraternity members who are allegedly high-risk for sexual violence, and also due to higher identification with Greek values and norms. Similar approaches to aspects of fraternity life would be very beneficial.

In conclusion, these articles demonstrate that the issue they address is provocative and complex. The data suggest that the field is currently unable to answer definitively whether athletes and fraternity members are typically more sexually aggressive, whether some groups in some locations are, or whether these men may differ from others in the forms of sexual aggression they favor. Nor are the relative contributions of individual determinants that may be concentrated among a group through self-selection of like individuals, and influences from environmental and cultural differences that may characterize these groups, well-described. This commentary has suggested some directions for future research that might illuminate an issue with enormous practical significance for college campuses, and could result in information that directly informs our approach to rape education and prevention.

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