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## **Risky Recruitment: How Rape Myth Acceptance Among Potential New Sorority Members Is Related to Their Self-Efficacy to Prevent Sexual Assault and Perceptions of University Sexual Assault Reporting**

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**RISKY RECRUITMENT: HOW RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE AMONG POTENTIAL  
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SEXUAL ASSAULT REPORTING**

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BAILEY THOMPSON, PH.D., STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY**

*This study examined how rape myth acceptance among potential new sorority members is related to their self-efficacy to prevent sexual assault and perceptions of how their university would handle a sexual assault report. Results indicate that the more these women reported acceptance with common rape myths, the less efficacious they felt to prevent sexual assault and the less likely they were to believe the university would handle a sexual assault report adequately. Universities must therefore consider how to dispel dangerous rape myths among this unique population to ensure sorority women feel comfortable intervening in and reporting sexual assault incidents.*

The prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses is a major concern for colleges and universities. One salient point of conversation among university officials is how the fraternity/sorority community may play a role in sexual assault victimization on college campuses. Much of the research on this issue, however, has largely focused on fraternity men and their likelihood to commit sexual assault perpetration (e.g., Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Foubert, 2000; Foubert, Brosi, & Bannon, 2011), often neglecting examinations of sorority women. Women in sororities may be at higher risk of sexual assault victimization than non-sorority women (Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999; Minow & Einolf, 2009; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Weschler, 2004).

Sexual assault victimization is more likely to occur among college students in their first year of study compared to subsequent years, especially for college women. One study, for example, which surveyed a demographically-representative sample of undergraduate women in state universities in the United States, found that sexual assault victimization for all college women decreased over the course of their tenure at the university (Humphrey & White, 2000). Another study with two classes

of university women found the same results, indicating that female college women in their first year are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault victimization and possibly even more so if they are interested in joining a sorority (Krebs, Lindquist, Berzofsky, Shook-Sa, & Peterson, 2016; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003).

The types of resources made available to these young women as they transition into college life may play a major role in their ability to succeed in college. According to Schlossberg's transition theory, the perceived availability of social support (i.e., from peer networks, communities, family, etc.) is one of the key factors in how adults handle and manage life transitions such as entering college (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). Incoming college women should thus feel as though their college or university will play an adequate role in providing them with the support they need, such as when experiencing and/or reporting a sexual assault incident.

The vast majority of sexual assaults that occur on college campuses, however, are not reported to the university or other authorities, though the majority do disclose to a roommate, friend, or family member (Krebs et al., 2016). The most common reasons for not reporting are that the

victim did not think the incident was serious enough to report or they did not want any action taken. Other concerns include that students felt that they would be treated poorly by authorities or that no action would be taken (Krebs et al., 2016). These findings are also supported by the Association of American Universities' (AAU) "Campus Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct" (Cantor et al., 2015). The majority of sexual assault victims who reported to officials, however, believed that they were helpful, especially if they reported to a university official (Krebs et al., 2016).

These findings suggest that college students who experience a sexual assault are more likely to turn to peers for support than university officials, but peers may not be equipped to provide the type of support a victim needs, and, in some cases, could further victimize the victim if supporters subscribe to dangerous rape myths that imply the victim was at fault. Rape myths are misconceptions about rape and sexual assault, often unnecessarily placing blame on the victim and strongly related to sexual aggression against women and related hostile sexist attitudes (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). College students interested in joining a sorority or fraternity are more likely to report higher rape myth acceptance than other college students (Kalof, 1993; McMahan, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this paper was to examine how rape myth acceptance of potential new sorority members may be related to their self-efficacy to prevent sexual assault and perceptions of how their university would handle a sexual assault report.

## Literature Review

### *Why Sorority Women Are at Higher Risk for Sexual Assault Victimization*

Several studies have found that sorority women are nearly four times as likely to experience sexual assault victimization than non-sorority women (e.g., Minow & Einolf, 2009; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Some research suggests this

may be due to the close relationships between sorority women and fraternity men, such that fraternity men have a greater likelihood of committing sexual assault than non-fraternity men (e.g., Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991; Minow & Einolf, 2009). These sorority women may then also be less likely to report sexual assault if the perpetrator is a fraternity member, due to the strength of the bonds between fraternity men and sorority women. Reporting against a fraternity man could result in backlash from their sorority sisters within their own chapter and other members of the fraternity/sorority community, threatening the victim's established peer networks, who are also likely perceived as major sources of support.

Sorority women may also be more at risk for sexual assault than non-members due to the nature of their social activities as a member of the fraternity/sorority community. Minow and Einolf (2009) found that alcohol consumption and attendance at fraternity/sorority events where alcohol was served was positively correlated with sorority women's sexual victimization. Social events with other members of the fraternity/sorority community is a large part of the fraternity/sorority experience; thus, while attending these events is often not mandatory, they are strongly encouraged. Copenhaver and Grauerholz (1991) found that women who were most active in sorority functions were more likely than less active members to experience sexual assault during fraternity functions and/or by fraternity members. Sorority women are therefore uniquely situated in a space where the fraternity/sorority community can play a major supporting role in their initial college development and transition into college.

### *The Importance of Examining Rape Myth Acceptance among Potential New Sorority Members to Prevent Sexual Assault*

Rape myths are misconceptions about how sexual assault occurs and who is to blame (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999), such as

agreement with statements like “when girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble” and “rape happens when a guy’s sex drive goes out of control” (McMahon & Farmer, 2011, p. 77). For the purpose of this study, the term *rape* is assumed under the umbrella of *sexual assault*. Sexual assault is defined here as any nonconsensual sexual contact, including sexual penetration and touching. Rates of sexual assault vary across studies, but the recent AAU Climate Survey (Cantor et al., 2015) found that 11.7% of all students across 27 universities and nearly a fifth (16.9%) of undergraduate women in their first year experienced sexual assault.

Acceptance of rape myths are strongly related to hostile sexist attitudes (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and less of a willingness to intervene in potential sexual assault situations (i.e., bystander attitudes) (McMahon, 2010). Bystander intervention education efforts at colleges and universities often attempt to train students on how to recognize a potential assault and how to intervene, as well as increase an individual’s efficacy to intervene. A meta-analysis showed moderate effects of bystander education on both bystander efficacy and intentions to help others at risk, while smaller but significant effects of bystander education were observed for self-

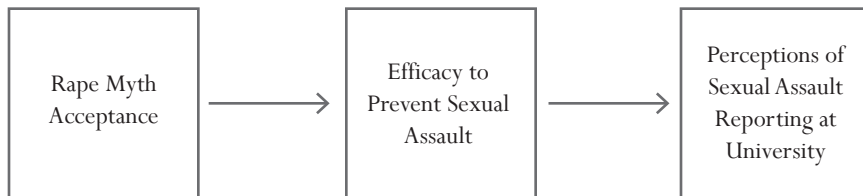
reported bystander helping behaviors, lower rape proclivity (but not penetration), and rape myth supportive attitudes (Katz & Moore, 2013).

Acceptance of rape myths that assume nonverbal cues as consent may also indicate a lack of knowledge and self-efficacy to obtain verbal consent in sexual interactions, such as rape myths that indicate that women who do not physically fight back or do not verbally say no cannot claim rape (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne et al., 1999). Sexual consent education programs on college campuses have shown some promise in improving the self-efficacy of students to verbally communicate consent and prevent future sexual assault (Ortiz, Shafer, & Murphy, 2015).

The following hypothesis was thus proposed to examine how rape myth acceptance is related to potential new sorority members’ self-efficacy to prevent sexual assault and perceptions of how their university would handle sexual assault reporting. See Figure 1 for the proposed model.

H1. The more accepting participants are of rape myths, (a) the less efficacious they will feel about their own ability to prevent sexual assault, and (b) thus the less likely they are to believe that the university would adequately handle a sexual assault report.

**Figure 1**  
*Proposed model*



**Methods**

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants included 802 female undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 20 ( $M = 18.23, SD = .49$ ) who were interested in joining a social sorority at a large,

public southwestern university before the beginning of the respective fall semester term. The vast majority of participants identified their race/ethnicity as White/Caucasian (89.5%), though 5.3% of this group also identified with another racial or ethnic group (primarily Hispanic/Latina, 4.0%). An additional 8.2%

identified exclusively as Hispanic/Latina. The remaining participants identified exclusively as Asian/Pacific Islander (1.7%) or Black/African American (0.5%).

All the women were required to attend one of four information sessions about the recruitment process before they were eligible to become a potential new member. As the women arrived, before each information session began, they were asked to voluntarily complete the study's short paper-and-pencil questionnaire. If they agreed, they were then provided with a writing utensil, an information sheet about the purpose the study, and the survey questionnaire. Privacy of responses were ensured by asking participants to sit apart from one another while completing the questionnaire, and then when finished, they were asked to fold their questionnaires so that their answers could not be visible to others and drop the completed questionnaire into the open slot of a large collection box. Participation took approximately 5–10 minutes. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

### Measures

The questionnaire included measures of rape myth acceptance, beliefs in their abilities to handle related sexual assault, and perceptions about how the university would handle sexual assault reports.

*Rape myth acceptance* was measured using 15 items from the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne et al., 1999). Participants were asked to rate each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items included rape myth statements about female victim blaming (e.g., "If a girl acts 'slutty' (such as wearing 'slutty' clothing), eventually she is going to get into trouble" and "If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand); men's inability to control themselves (e.g., "Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they

get too sexually carried away" and "It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing"); and false reporting (e.g., "Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys" and "A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it." All 15 items loaded reliably ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and were summed and averaged together ( $M = 2.00, SD = .59$ ).

*Self-efficacy about preventing sexual assault* was measured with four items that addressed the participants' sense of efficacy to prevent sexual assault by understanding what is sexual consent and being able to intervene on a potential sexual assault. They were asked on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to indicate their agreement with the following four statements: "I believe I can make a difference in preventing sexual violence at [university]," "I feel confident I could step in and help if I thought I saw signs of a sexual assault," "I have a really good understanding of what officially counts as consent to have sex," and "I feel comfortable asking someone for their verbal consent before having sex." All four items loaded reliably ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and were summed and averaged together ( $M = 4.26, SD = .66$ ).

*Sexual assault reporting perceptions* were measured with three items to assess how the participants expected the university would handle a sexual assault report. They were asked on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to indicate their agreement with three items that were listed after the following prompt: "If a student reported a sexual assault at [university], I believe it would be..." The three items included "...taken seriously," "...handled compassionately," "...and kept as private and confidential as possible." All three items loaded reliably ( $\alpha = .79$ ) and were averaged together ( $M = 4.67, SD = .54$ ).

### Results

A simple mediation model analysis was

conducted, using Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS SPSS macro, to test the paths between rape myth acceptance (X) and sexual assault reporting perceptions (Y) with efficacy to prevent sexual assault as the mediator. The analysis thus tested whether a significant relationship existed between potential new sorority members’ rape myth acceptance and negative perceptions of the university’s sexual assault reporting and whether their perceived self-efficacy to prevent sexual assault played a significant intervening role between this relationship.

H1a proposed that the more participants are accepting of rape myths, the less efficacious they will feel about preventing sexual assault. The relationship between these variables was significant in the predicted direction ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $t = -3.81$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.2254, -.0720]). H1a was supported.

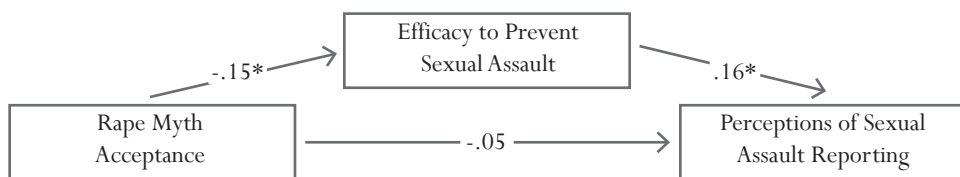
H1b proposed that the more participants are accepting of rape myths (X), the less likely they will feel that the university will handle a sexual assault report adequately (Y) when they are also more likely to feel less efficacious about

preventing sexual assault. The direct effect of X on Y was not significant ( $\beta = -.05$ ,  $t = -1.59$ ,  $p = .11$ , 95% CI [-.1132, .0117]), but the indirect effect of X on Y through the mediator of efficacy to prevent sexual assault was significant ( $\beta = -.02$ , 95% CI [-.0417, -.0094]), such that the relationship between rape myth acceptance and perceptions of sexual assault reporting was significantly mediated by the participants’ belief in their ability to prevent sexual assault. H1b was thus supported. See Figure 2 for each of the paths of the model and their corresponding coefficients.

These results indicate that the more accepting potential new sorority members are of rape myths, the less likely they are to feel efficacious in preventing sexual assault, and in turn, the more negative they feel about how the university would handle a sexual assault report. Rape myth acceptance and self-efficacy to prevent sexual assault were thus together indicators of how a potential new sorority member felt about the university’s ability to handle a sexual assault report.

**Figure 2**

*A simple mediation model with efficacy to prevent sexual assault as a mediator between the relationship of rape myth acceptance and perceptions of how the university would handle sexual assault reporting, \*  $p < .001$ .*



**Discussion**

Although most potential new sorority members did not report high rape myth acceptance and low self-efficacy to prevent sexual assault, the significant relationship between these variables and with perceptions of the university’s sexual assault reporting revealed some points of concern. Potential new sorority members who were more accepting of rape

myths and felt less efficacious about preventing sexual assault were also more likely to believe that the university would not handle a sexual assault report adequately. These relationships should be concerning to college administrators, fraternity/sorority advisors, and other interested parties, because those potential new members who reported higher rape myth acceptance may also be more susceptible to sexual assault victimization while enrolled at the university

(Minow & Einolf, 2009; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). In addition, if an assault were to happen to these women or their peers, they may be less likely to report their assault or step in to prevent the assault from occurring.

As proposed by Schlossberg's transition theory, for these young women to successfully transition into the college environment, strong and adequate social support is necessary (Anderson et al., 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). If colleges and universities want to foster efficacy to prevent sexual assault among potential new sorority members and improve their perceptions of the university's sexual assault reporting system, they must work at dispelling acceptance of dangerous rape myths among these young women's key support groups, namely the fraternity/sorority community. University administration and staff cannot be the sole voice of these educational efforts, as we know many young college women will turn first to their peers for support before turning to university officials.

Fraternity men can play a key part in these efforts, as sorority women's close organizational relationship to fraternity men, who often hold higher rape myth acceptance than non-fraternity college men and women (Foubert, 2000), is one way in which sorority women may be more vulnerable than other college women to sexual victimization. Sorority women sometimes also report higher rape myth acceptance than non-sorority women (Brosi, Foubert, Bannon, & Yandell, 2011; Kalof, 1993), which may be due to the close relationship between fraternity men and sorority women, such that these women may mimic the beliefs of close fraternity men as a way to strengthen the bond between their groups. The fraternity/sorority community, as a whole, may foster a unique atmosphere for the perpetuation of rape myths on campus.

As these women begin to navigate the social structures and peer networks that college offers, they may be less willing to intervene or challenge stereotypes held within their newly-formed peer

groups, especially when they are attempting to become a member of the community. During sorority recruitment, these women may also find themselves in situations where sexual assault is more likely to occur, such as fraternity parties, which are often known for having open and easy access to drugs and alcohol (Ham & Hope, 2003; Mallett, 2013). Being part of these events and attempting to join the chapter of their choice may thus hinder their willingness to clearly communicate resistance to sexual assault or step in if they witness others engaging in potential sexual assault. Universities must work at identifying ways in which potential new and current members will feel most comfortable reporting incidents of sexual assault without fear of retaliation from their chapter or the fraternity/sorority community at large.

The relationship between rape myth acceptance and self-efficacy for preventing sexual assault may also exist because some participants are not able to recognize what constitutes sexual assault or rape. Traditionally, there is little discussion of sexual consent in U.S. high schools (Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, & Boonstra, 2016), and therefore, these young women may have never received formal education about sexual assault before college enrollment and sorority recruitment. The recruitment process can serve as an opportune time to engage potential new members of fraternities and sororities in discussions of what sexual assault looks like and how related sexist attitudes can play a role in sexual assault.

Universities are thus advised to tailor sexual assault prevention efforts to sorority women and fraternity men by taking into account the contextual complexities of fraternity/sorority membership and the role rape myth acceptance may play in the activities of their community. These efforts should address the importance of these close peer networks and work to educate sorority women and fraternity men on how to identify, prevent, and report sexual assault by incorporating peer-to-peer educational efforts

that address the unique needs of their community. Older fraternity/sorority members may be able to educate incoming new members on sexual assault issues and positively impact their safety during their most vulnerable time in college.

As potential new sorority members are most likely new to the university, they may not yet understand the policies and procedures associated with reporting sexual assault. They may also have yet to develop confidence or trust in their university, or organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). If they do not feel a strong connection to their university and hold unhealthy rape myth attitudes, they may be less likely to feel the university has the ability to handle tough, personal, and private situations like sexual assault (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). The school pride that often develops between student and university takes time, and potential new sorority members may build a connection with the fraternity/sorority community first as the recruitment process may occur before classes even begin. It is then important that universities start early, during orientation and sorority recruitment, to begin facilitating this connection between themselves and students, but the entire fraternity/sorority community must also be on board and feel as though their unique needs and concerns are considered in all educational efforts.

Future research is necessary to determine whether the significant relationships found in this study also exist among potential new and current sorority members at other universities and among samples with greater racial and ethnic diversity, as the current sample was limited to one recruitment class, and most participants identified as White. Also, all data was collected using a cross-sectional survey questionnaire and therefore causality could not be assessed between the variables of interest. Additional research should also be conducted to determine ways in which universities can best partner with the fraternity/sorority community to incorporate their unique needs in any educational efforts

to dispel dangerous rape myths and improve efficacy to prevent sexual assault.



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## Ortiz and Thompson: Risky Recruitment: How Rape Myth Acceptance Among Potential New S

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