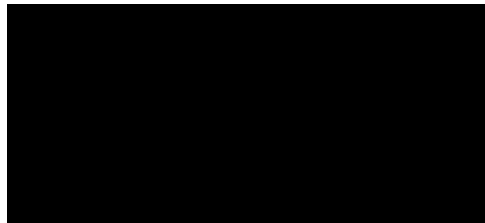


Effects of Gendered Language on Rape Myth Acceptance and Judgements of Responsibility in

Simulations of Sexual Assault



Georgia Highlands College

Abstract

This study was designed to collect data on the perceptions of consent and judgements of blame people have toward non-normative language in sexual assault scenarios. Participants were 190, randomly selected college students with various demographics, who read scenarios depicting characters across four conditions of intoxication, and three conditions of gender variance. Participants answered question about the context of the scenarios and their perceptions of the characters. The results collected showed a variance in opinions participants had toward characters in scenarios that should elicit similar perceptions. The intoxication condition and gender condition were manipulated at random to depict both normal and abnormal scenarios. Our results unveiled language schemas that produced inconsistent perceptions respondents had toward sexual assault.

Keywords: gender schema, sexual assault, language schema, intoxication, Rape Myth Acceptance.

Effects of Gendered Language on Rape Myth Acceptance and Judgements of Responsibility in
Simulations of Sexual Assault

Sexual assault has been defined by the United States Department of Justice as: “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient” (United States Department of Justice, 2017, “Sexual Assault,” para. 2). Additionally, the USDJ defines consent writing, “if a person is mentally or physically incapacitated or impaired’ ... ‘there is no consent. This includes impairment or incapacitation due to alcohol or drug consumption...’ ‘or being asleep or unconscious” (United States Department of Justice, 2014, “Sample Language and Definitions of Prohibited Conduct for a School’s Sexual Misconduct Policy” p. 4). This updated definition has refashioned the parameters of what is categorized as sexual misconduct (Gruber, 2016). However, the new definition has also revealed differences in the commonly held beliefs about consent itself (Dennis, Jozkowski, Peterson, Reece, & Sanders, 2014). Studies have shown that intoxication conditions in scenarios blur the lines of assumed responsibility of sexual assault (Qi, Starfelt, & white, 2016) and that normative scenarios with female victims and male perpetrators receive more sympathy, while scenarios depicting non-normative gender roles are subject to victim blame (Archer, Davies, & Pollard, 2006). The language that we use to describe events also influences our perception of responsibility (Danet, 1980) and it is the relationship between our familiarity with this language in sexual assault, and our perception of consent in non-normative scenarios, that we address in this study.

Gender in sexual assault

Women’s rights have been the primary focus of research on consent and sexual assault for several decades (Stemple, & Meyer 2014) and although female victims comprise much of the cases seen annually, men too are often the victims of sexual assault (Lowe & Rogers, 2017).

However, present research shows people generally assume men are undeserving of the title ‘victim’ because of two commonly held misconceptions. First, that consent is more easily given by men, therefore people distrust claims of men being raped. Second, that men are more capable of fighting off assault, meaning their experience of sexual misconduct is a non-verbal form of consent (Anderson & Quinn, 2008). Gender roles also influence Rape Myth Acceptance in individuals, with male victims receiving little sympathy when assaulted by other males and even less when the assailant is female (Smith, Pine, and Hawley, 1987). A study conducted by Stephen Cook and Charlene Muehlenhard showed that men engage in unwanted sexual encounters as often as women do because of peer and social pressures (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988). Many studies have shown that people generally view victims of sexual assault negatively, but men are viewed more negatively, regardless of sexual orientation, than women are (Anderson, 2004; Davies & McCartney, 2003).

Language

Language has a significant effect in shaping our thoughts and is in part responsible for determining our judgements about information. The words we choose to use construct the layout of our mental imagery. Similarly, the words we hear others use affect this imagery, thus influencing our opinion of information (Lucy, 1997). A study by Henley, Miller, and Beazley (1995) revealed evidence of this when they tested participants’ reactions after reading fictitious news reports written in what they called a ‘passive versus active voice’. Their results found that participants judged the assailant less severely when the story was written in passive language, and viewed the reported crime as more tolerable (Henley, Miller, & Beasley, 1995). This is one of the major concerns that psychologists and feminists have toward gender inequalities, because our language makes it difficult to separate an individual from a stereotype (Foley, 2011).

Consent.

Consent to sexual intercourse has been a topic of much debate, with the first feminists fighting for years to expand the legal protection of this one word. The definition has been reformed and as a result, so have our attitudes about sexual intercourse (Decker & Baroni, 2011). Consent is difficult to define, but is important in avoiding rape and determining the scope of sexual misconduct. Consent can be expressed verbally or non-verbally, but must be mutually understood by both parties (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). If consent cannot be obtained that is not indicative of agreement to sex. Sexual partners must both express mutual and coherent agreement to intercourse, including accordance to the extent of involvement and activities intended (Beres, Herold, & Maitland, 2004).

Intoxication.

Intoxication (through alcohol and other substances, legal and illegal) can blur the lines of consent by adding variables of cognitive imparities. Victims in these scenarios are unable to give consent due to impaired cognition (Fuqua & Loiselle, 2007). Research has consistently shown that there exists a positive correlation between alcohol and non-consensual sex (Ward, Matthews, Weiner, Hogan, & Popson, 2012). The climate surrounding intoxication has been studied often, with consistent results showing blame being attributed to an intoxicated female victim and a degree of exemption in responsibility to an intoxicated male perpetrator (Qi, Starfelt, & white, 2016). However, issues regarding perception of intoxication in sexual assault are not so clearly defined when typical gender roles are switched, furnishing very little data on the topic.

Finally, Responsibility.

Consent is a two-way street. It could rightly be assumed that a male under the influence of a cognitively hindering substance in sexual intercourse is equally unable to give consent as a

woman in the same condition (Schatzel-Murphy, Harris, Knight, & Milburn, 2009). The issues with this assumption are ingrained in our perceptions of gender roles and societal norms (Smith, Pine, & Hawley, 1988). Intoxication does not exempt perpetrators from responsibility, but what is defined as a ‘perpetrator’ in some scenarios could be conceptualized by the language that we have come to be familiarized with as ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ (Felson, 2002). In this study, we observe current perceptions about sexual misconduct, and the correlation between cognitive schemas about gender, intoxication, and language.

For our hypothesis, we predicted that participants would categorize females as ‘victims’ and males as ‘perpetrators’ because of perceptual bias toward gender roles. The assumption was, despite the portrayal of sex roles, or undefined sex of persons involved, people would identify women as ‘victims’ and men as ‘perpetrators’ by using a gender schema. We expected that males would be perceived as needing less consent than females, who would be perceived as needing more consent. We predicted that our language, which involves gender distinction, has effected these cognitive biases by developing inequalities in our judgements about responsibility in sexual assault. Finally, we expected that varying conditions of intoxication would reveal opinions about consent for different genders, and perceptions about responsibility as the result of our language schema.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 190 students who were randomly selected from a small southeastern college. The sample included 46 first year students, 91 second year students, 33 third year students, 7 fourth year students, and 9 other students. Respondents genders were calculated as

128 females, 55 males, and 4, who identified as gender queer or gender nonconforming. Their sexual orientation was predominantly heterosexual, with 88.7 percent of the sample, while 11.3 percent identified themselves as another sexual orientation. The racial demographic of the sample was mostly white with 69.6 percent, followed by African American with 21.6 percent, and Asian with 3.9 percent. 5 percent of respondents identified themselves as another race. 7.6 percent of the total sample were ethnically Hispanic, and 92.4 percent were not Hispanic.

Participants were not compensated for their contribution to the research.

Materials.

The data was collected through two methods, first via an online server, using survey monkey software. Second, the survey was administered in person and randomly assigned to participants. The survey consisted of a 4 (between) X 3 (within) mixed methods factorial design. Participants received an informed consent followed by the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA, Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; McMahon & Farmer, 2011) and three hypothetical scenarios. participants were randomly assigned to one of four intoxication conditions, and randomly assigned within subjects to a counter balanced sex condition to prevent order effects.

Example scenario:

Ambiguous Sex of Perpetrator and Victim

After a recent breakup, a local college student called Alex decided to go to a party with a good friend. Alex didn't know anyone there other than the guy who invited them to his apartment, but they had a good time anyway, drinking a few beers and hanging out by the pool at the apartment complex. Close to midnight, Alex's friend noticed another person – Jordan – paying close attention to Alex. Figuring the breakup had set Alex back in the dating game, the friend decided to help Alex along by slipping a little Vicodin in both Alex and Jordan's drinks. No one needed to get roofied, but Alex's friend wanted to take the edge off a bit, loosen them both up. A little while later, Alex headed inside to a bedroom with Jordan. The next morning, Alex woke up with Jordan, a person Alex had never met, and Jordan woke up with an equally strange Alex. Neither of them could remember having drunk enough to make such a careless error. Neither of them remembered the Vicodin. Alex's friend later high-fived Alex and, with a knowing wink, asked if the party had been good.

Each scenario preceded a series of dependent measures about the context of a hypothetical scenario that participants would rate from 1-5. 1 being strongly agree, and 5 being strongly disagree. The final data collected from participants were standard demographic information. The survey concluded with a debriefing about the study.

Procedure.

Participants would receive one of four possible intoxication conditions in their survey. The online version of the experiment apportioned participants to an intoxication condition by the birth month chosen at the beginning of the study. In person conditions were randomly assigned. In both forms administered, intoxication conditions ranged from actor 1/intoxicated x actor 2/intoxicated, actor 1/sober x actor 2/sober, actor 1/sober x actor 2/intoxicated, actor 1/intoxicated x actor 2/sober. Within the intoxication condition, surveys were again randomly assigned to a counter balanced sex condition. These described the sex of the actors in the scenario, in diversified order of male/female, female/male, and ambiguously sexed. The actors were given gender neutral names ('Alex' and 'Jordan') to dissuade gender distinction outside of visceral perception by the participants. Sex conditions were batch randomized into eighteen possible orders (AMF, AFM, FAM, FMA, MAF, MFA).

Table 1.

	Both actors intoxicated	Neither actors intoxicated	Actor 1 intoxicated Actor 2 sober	Actor 2 intoxicated Actor 1 sober
<i>Ambiguous sex</i>	N	N	N	N
<i>Male</i>	N	N	N	N
<i>Female</i>	N	N	N	N

Participants would read the scenarios, each with a different sex condition and answer questions about the actors in the scenarios. The questionnaires were similarly constructed, however, the questionnaire following the ambiguously sexed scenario asked that respondents report the gender they assumed the actors to be. Additionally, participants would answer how likely they would be to take certain actions, in the event of witnessing the scenario themselves. They would answer these after each sex condition and rate likelihood from 1 to 5, one, being 'not at all likely' and 5, being 'highly likely'. Examples of questions asked: 'ask Alex if they are okay,' 'do nothing,' 'interfere in a non-confrontational way'. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; McMahon & Farmer, 2011) was also administered to provide additional data about respondents' views of sexual assault.

Results

Participants of the online study were assigned a survey based on their birth month. Coincidentally, our experiment concluded with a disproportionate number of participants in one intoxication condition, with 33.7 percent of the surveys. Differences in the remaining conditions were insignificant. Data was collected through repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA).

To test our hypothesis, the first independent variable, the intoxication conditions, were separated into respective groups. These were: both actors intoxicated, neither actor intoxicated, Alex (actor 1) intoxicated, and Jordan (actor 2) intoxicated. Additionally, the second independent variable, the sex conditions, were analyzed within their intoxication condition grouping. Dependent measures within the conditions were contrasted to provide information about participant perceptions. We tested judgements about actors' ability to give consent, when affected by the independent variables of intoxication and gender. Results showed the actor Alex was seen as having significant variance in their ability to give consent across conditions (F

(11,298) = 4.09, $p < .0001$). In the scenario where both actors were intoxicated and Alex was female, Alex was seen as being less able to give consent ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.37$) which showed a significant difference when compared with every other manipulation of the independent variables (except the ambiguously sexed version of the same scenario). The mean score for the scenario where Alex was sober and female ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.37$) showed perceptions of greatest ability to consent, only slightly less than that of the ambiguously sexed version of the same scenario ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.35$).

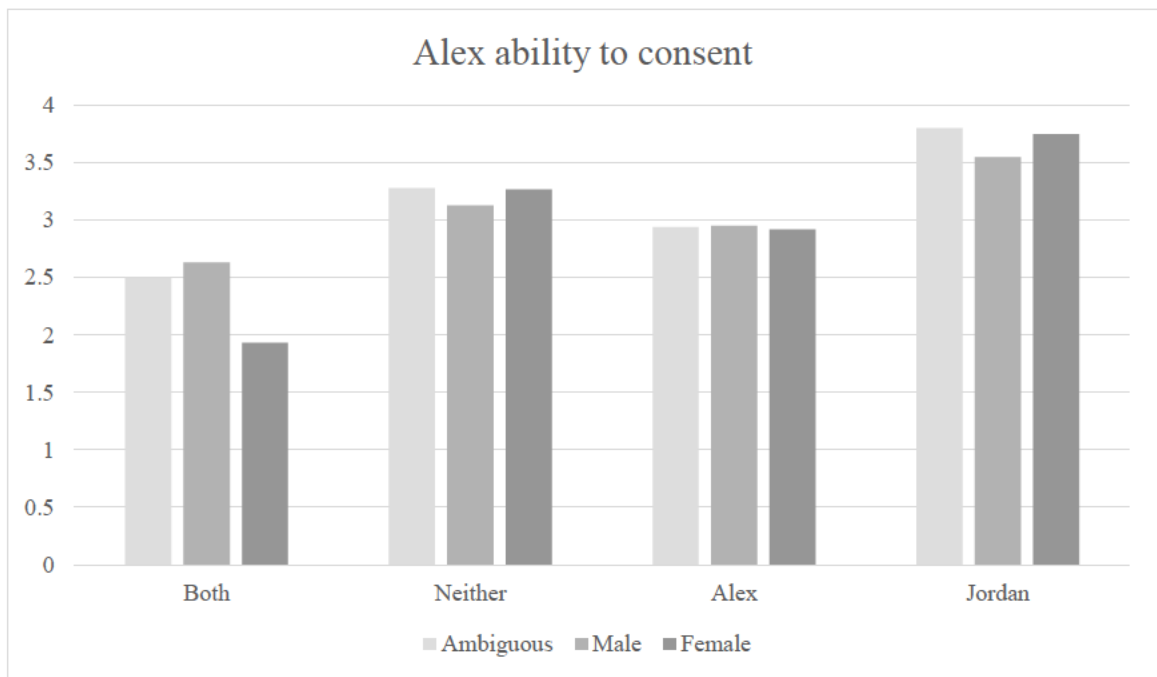


Figure 1.

Jordan's ability to consent also showed significant variance in results ($F(11,297) = 4.27$, $p < .0001$). Similarly, to the results for Alex, Jordan was seen as having little ability to consent when both actors were depicted as intoxicated and Jordan was female ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.33$). Jordan was perceived as having the greatest ability to consent when Jordan was sober, Alex was intoxicated; and Jordan was female ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.33$).

As expected, when we measured the responsibility attributed to Alex across the manipulations ($F(11,297) = 4.89, p < .0001$), most of the blame was attributed to Alex in scenarios where the language is abnormal. Alex was said to be sober, Jordan was intoxicated; and Alex was female ($M = 3.58, SD = 1.27$). This result in stark contrast to more normative scenarios such as; neither actor intoxicated, Alex is female ($M = 2.05, SD = 1.27$), and both actors intoxicated, Alex is male ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.2$). Responsibility was also measured for Jordan ($F(11,296) = 2.88, p, < .0013$), results showed that participants found Jordan the most to blame when Jordan was sober, Alex was intoxicated, and Jordan was ambiguously sexed ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.13$), followed by Jordan sober, Alex intoxicated, and Jordan female ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.17$). The manipulation that produced the least blame toward Jordan was the condition where both actors were intoxicated and Jordan was ambiguously sexed ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.12$). Closely followed by the same condition where Jordan is depicted as female ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.17$).

Participants also reported significant variance when responding to questions about their likelihood of action if they were to witness a similar scene. The most notable actions, in their variance, were ‘note the details’ and ‘point out the details to a friend’. The ‘note the details’ action ($F(11,299) = 2.88, p, < .0013$) recorded the greatest likelihood when responding to the scenario where neither actor is intoxicated and Alex is male ($M = 3.55, SD = 1.25$). However, the manipulation with the lowest likelihood recorded was the same scenario, but Alex is ambiguously gendered ($M = 2, SD = 1.17$), closely followed by the female gendered version of the scenario ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.23$). Another significant finding for this action was the second most likely manipulation, where Alex is depicted as sober, Jordan is intoxicated and Alex is female ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.23$). This result is indeed noteworthy, when compared to the same

scenario where Alex is male ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.25$), which was also one of the lowest actions reported.

The next dependent measure that showed an interesting variance was the ‘point out the details to a friend’ action ($F(11,300) = 2.65$, $p < .0030$). The highest likelihood of action was reported in the scenario where Alex is intoxicated, Jordan is sober, and Alex is male ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.20$). The lowest likelihood recorded was in response to the scenario where neither actor is intoxicated and Alex is ambiguously sexed ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.16$), followed by the same scenario where Alex is female ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.22$).

Respondents identifying the sex of actors in the ambiguously gendered scenario showed very little bias toward a gender configuration, and were equally likely to report both genders for both actors. Most surprisingly, the male x male gender option was a popular choice by participants, receiving 28.2 percent of the total surveys answered.

Discussion

Our research unveiled cognitive biases about sexual assault. The results show an intriguing dichotomy between normative language and perceptions of responsibility, that were neither logical nor appropriate for the scenarios given. In a purely rational sense, the actors in the scenarios should not have been judged with as much variance as was recorded. We suspected this variance, because previous research had recorded biases about gender and intoxication. Although, these prior studies’ focus was in comparing conditions within their own likeness; female versus male, intoxicated versus sober. We however, were interested in similarities rather than contrasts, and if those similarities, upon closer inspection, might hold a difference in opinion. In our study, a difference in blame was recorded when actors were placed in a situation where conditions should be insignificant. In the scenario where Jordan was depicted as

intoxicated and female, she was perceived as being more at fault than in the scenario where she and Alex are both intoxicated, as well as the scenario where Jordan is again the only one intoxicated, but this time depicted as male. A similar variance was also recorded for the Alex character in the like scenario. Both characters were viewed with more blame in a particular scenario, than in another where conditions should resonate similar perceptions. Another paradox our experiment unveiled was the climate surrounding opinions of consent. Again, showing an irrational divergence, especially when the actors are both intoxicated, compared to when the actors are observed under the same condition separately. Thus, conveying evidence toward language as an instigator. Other interesting findings were the differences that respondents reported when assessing the likelihood of action. The undeniable difference recorded when just the sex condition was altered, leads us to assume a correlation between normative language scenarios and perception. These perceptions are most likely the result of many psychological factors such as, the just-world hypothesis, cognitive dissonance, and gender schemas. Judgements about gender roles were examined in this study, as were perceptions about intoxication and its effects on Rape Myth Acceptance and consent. However, contrary to previous works, we found language use in the depiction of sexual assault seems to be a considerable adversary when calculating judgements. Respondents appeared to have less consistency in their views when assessing scenarios with atypical portrayals, providing more extreme responses in these versus the more normative portrayals.

Our sample was limited to college students in one small portion of the country. As is common knowledge, college students tend to be more socially tolerant and sexually expressive. Future research should assess the cultural effect of language portrayal in sexual assault scenarios with samples that contribute more diverse demographic backgrounds than we could provide.

Another commentary for researchers is the need for further clarification as to why we find such biases in non-normative language portrayals, and the effect this has on our handlings of consent in actual accounts of sexual assault.

References

- Anderson, I. (2004). Explaining negative rape victim perception: Homophobia and the male rape victim. *Current Research in Social Psychology, 10*, 43-57.
- Anderson, I., & Quinn, A. (2009). Gender differences in medical students' attitudes towards male and female rape victims. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 14*, 105-110.
- Beres, M. A., Herold, E., & Maitland, S. B. (2004). Sexual consent behaviors in same-sex relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 33*, 475-486.
- Danet, B. (1980). LANGUAGE IN THE LEGAL PROCESS. *Law & Society Review, 14*, 445.
- Davies, M., & McCartney, S. (2003). Effects of gender and sexuality on judgements of victim blame and rape myth acceptance in a depicted male rape. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 13*, 391-398.
- Davies, M., Pollard, P., & Archer, J. (2006). Effects of Perpetrator Gender and Victim Sexuality on Blame Toward Male Victims of Sexual Assault. *Journal Of Social Psychology, 14*, 275-291.
- Decker, J. F., & Baroni, P. G. (2011). "NO" STILL MEANS "YES" THE FAILURE OF THE "NON-CONSENT" REFORM MOVEMENT IN AMERICAN RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT LAW. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology, 101*, 1081-1169.
- Felson, R. B. (2002). *Violence and Gender Reexamined*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Foley, W. A. (2011). Gender and Language in Ethnographic and Evolutionary Perspectives. *Reviews in Anthropology, 40*, 82-106.
- Gruber, A. (2016). Anti-rape Culture. *Kansas Law Review, 64*, 1027-1053.
- Henley, N. M., Miller, M., Beasley, J. A., (1995). Syntax, semantics, and sexual violence: Agency and the passive voice. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 14*, 60-84.
- Hickman, S. E., & Muehlenhard, C. L. (1999). "By the semi-mystical appearance of a condom": How young women and men communicate sexual consent in heterosexual situations. *Journal Of Sex Research, 36*, 258-272.

- Jozkowski, K. N., Peterson, Z. D., Sanders, S. A., Dennis, B., & Reece, M. (2014). Gender Differences in Heterosexual College Students' Conceptualizations and Indicators of Sexual Consent: Implications for Contemporary Sexual Assault Prevention Education. *Journal Of Sex Research, 51*, 904-916.
- Loiselle, M., & Fuqua, W. R. (2007). Alcohol's effects on women's risk detection in a date-rape vignette. *Journal of American College Help, 55*, 261-266.
- Lowe, M., & Rogers, P. (2017). The Scope of Male Rape: A selective review of research, policy and practice. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 35*, 38-43.
- Lucy, J. A. (1997). Linguistic Relativity. *Annual review of anthropology, 26*, 291-312.
- Muehlenhard, C. L., & Cook, S. W. (1988). Men's self-reports of unwanted sexual activity. *Journal Of Sex Research, 24*, 58-72.
- Payne, D. L., Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1999). Rape Myth Acceptance: Exploration of Its Structure and Its Measurement Using the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. *Journal of Research in Personality, 33*, 27-68.
- Qi, S. J., & White, K. M. (2016). Attributions of responsibility, blame and justifiability to a perpetrator and victim in an acquaintance rape scenario: The influence of Marijuana intoxication. *Journal Of Sexual Aggression, 22*, 20-35.
- Schatzel-Murphy, E. A., Harris, D. A., Knight, R. A., & Milburn, M. A. (2009). Sexual coercion in men and women: Similar behaviors, different predictors. *Archives of sexual behavior, 38*, 974-986.
- Smith, R. E., Pine, C. J., & Hawley, M. E. (1988). Social cognitions about adult male victims of sexual assault. *The Journal of Sex Research, 24*, 101-112.
- Stemple, L., & Meyer, I. H. (2014). The Sexual Victimization of Men in America: New Data Challenge Old Assumptions. *American Journal of Public Health, 104*, 19-26.
- United States Department of Justice. (2017). *Sexual Assault*. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/sexual-assault>
- Ward, R. M., Matthews, M. R., Weiner, J., Hogan, K. M., & Popson, H. C. (2012). Alcohol and sexual consent scale: Development and validation. *American Journal of Health Behavior, 36*, 746-756.

White House Task Force. (2014). *Sample Language and Definitions of Prohibited Conduct for a School's Sexual Misconduct Policy*. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/page/file/910276/download>

