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To cite this article: Julia Metz , Kristen Myers & Patricia Wallace (2021) 'Rape is a man's issue:' gender and power in the era of affirmative sexual consent, Journal of Gender Studies, 30:1, 52-65, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2020.1834367](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1834367)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1834367>



Published online: 12 Nov 2020.



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# 'Rape is a man's issue:' gender and power in the era of affirmative sexual consent

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## ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement has shined light on sexual harassment and assault, creating new avenues for survivors to seek justice, outside of the justice system. People (mostly men) accused of sexual assault or harassment are publicly 'outed', and the consequences have been serious for many. #MeToo stresses that 'rape is a man's issue', arguing that men can end rape by educating themselves about gendered power, changing their behaviour, and holding other men accountable. In this contentious context, affirmative consent policies are taking root in US universities. In this paper, we ask, How does gender frame the negotiation of consent? We analyse data from our interview project on sexual consent (N = 45) to explore gendered power dynamics in subjects' reported negotiations of sexual consent. We find that participants' understandings of consent reinforced – rather than destabilized – hegemonic systems of power. Even when acting in ways that seemed consistent with feminist conceptualizations of bodily autonomy and affirmative consent, men in this study did so to protect their own interests. Affirmative consent was mediated through gender frames that stressed men's sexual entitlement. We conclude that sexual assault intervention strategies need to be reworked to address systemic, cultural, and individual-level issues.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 January 2020  
Accepted 4 October 2020

## KEYWORDS

Sexual assault; Rape;  
Masculinities; Affirmative  
consent; Gender frames

## Introduction

The #MeToo movement, started by sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke in 2006, has shined new light on sexual harassment and sexual assault, calling the public's attention to high-profile men who have allegedly committed sexual assault and/or harassment. The movement stresses that 'rape is a man's issue'. The argument is this: Because men are (usually) the ones committing sexual assault, they should be held responsible for ending rape by educating themselves about gendered power, changing their behaviour, and holding other men accountable ([metoomvmt.org](http://metoomvmt.org)). An important and contentious aspect of the #MeToo movement is that it circumvents the justice system, which has historically protected sexual aggressors (Lonsway & Archambault, 2012). Instead, #MeToo makes accusations public, encouraging public and private sectors to mete out other forms of justice, such as being publicly shamed or 'cancelled', removed from public office, and/or fired from paid employment. Survivors have newfound avenues for telling their stories, and they are being heard. As Gilmore (2019) explains in her description of Bret Kavanaugh's hearings for the US Supreme Court, '#MeToo testimony broke through mechanisms of silencing that operate as structure and stricture (620)'. *The Chicago Tribune* created an online timeline of the #MeToo movement (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htmlstory.html>). The list of accused

offenders includes familiar figures: Justice Kavanaugh, US Vice President Joe Biden, Dr. Larry Nassar, television host Matt Lauer, movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, actor Bill Cosby, and musician R Kelly, among others. As the list continues to grow, concerns about a lack of due process for the accused have made many uncomfortable, including US President Donald Trump, who said, 'It is a very scary time for young men in America, where you can be guilty of something you may not be guilty of' (Diamond, 2018). People are engaging in important conversations about what constitutes consent, whose experiences are credible and legitimate, and who is most vulnerable.

Although #MeToo has paved new avenues for survivors to *respond* to sexual assault, feminist activists have been working for decades to *prevent* sexual assault from occurring in the first place. Focusing on the importance of consent, many have sought to change culture and practices. As a result of these efforts, there have been modifications to sexual assault training on US college campuses (Dyhouse, 2013). Grounded in sex-positivity, new policies often require affirmative, sober, and enthusiastic consent from all involved parties before and during sexual intimacy.

Within this larger context, we ask, How are university students navigating new affirmative consent policies? How does gender frame the negotiation of consent (Ridgeway, 2011)? As Pascoe and Hollander (2016) argue, all sexual assault intervention strategies are hindered by the larger gendered order in which many men still have power over women and other men. Is affirmative consent a panacea for gendered power in sexual intimacy? In a qualitative interview project (N = 45), we explored these research questions at one university that recently adopted an affirmative consent policy. In this particular paper, we focus primarily on the ways that subjects' conceptualizations of manhood shaped negotiations of sexual consent. Here, we present findings on gendered power dynamics that appeared to impact both men's and women's understandings of and responses to affirmative consent practices and sexual assault.

Through our systematic analysis of data, we found that participants' understandings of consent reinforced – rather than destabilized – hegemonic gendered systems of power. We conclude that affirmative consent policies alone are not capable of dismantling the systems of power that facilitate sexual violence and men's dominance. To prevent future sexual assault, we must go beyond trainings that focus on bodily autonomy and affirmative consent to incorporate lessons about gender and power.

## Affirmative consent

Although it has only recently gained traction, the concept of affirmative consent is not new. In the 1990s, a group of women at Antioch College in Ohio were dismayed to learn about the prevalence of and weak response to sexual assault on their campus. Because consent was defined as 'no means no', sexual assaults were going unpunished even in cases when a clear 'no' was established. Students fought to change the way that sexual consent was defined at Antioch College. Through their activism, they developed the concept of affirmative consent and successfully lobbied to make it an official college policy, adopted in 1991. Since then, Antioch College has expanded its sex-positive consent policy and practices, and the concept has gained popularity across the US. California became the first state to enact an affirmative consent law in 2014, defined thusly:

Affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. It is the responsibility of each person involved in the sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the affirmative consent of the other or others to engage in the sexual activity. Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent. Affirmative consent must be ongoing throughout a sexual activity and can be revoked at any time. The existence of a dating relationship between the persons involved, or the fact of past sexual relations between them, should never by itself be assumed to be an indicator of consent.

Affirmative consent has been made into law in three more states: New York, Connecticut, and Illinois. Affirmative consent policies aim to prevent sexual assault from happening by improving communication and respect for bodily autonomy and personal boundaries. Rather than relying on outdated

oppressor/victim frameworks, affirmative consent arguments focus on sexual empowerment and women's 'bad ass-ness' grounded in 'girl power' (Dyhouse, 2013). Instead of shaming women or creating the illusion that women are not actively engaged in sex, affirmative consent intentionally emphasizes all participants' enthusiasm for and active role in sexual encounters, no matter their gender. Affirmative consent necessitates that women also have an active and eager role in their own sexual experiences.

The wisdom of shifting from 'no means no' to affirmative consent continues to be debated for its legal (Soave, 2019), political (Saul & Taylor, 2017), and practical (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Halley, 2015) implications. US Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has pushed back, seizing upon false narratives claiming that women misuse affirmative consent policies and falsely accuse men of sexual assault if the sex was regrettable or unpleasurable (Fischel, 2019). To prevent men from being victimized by lying women – an anti-feminist concern that has no basis in evidence (Belknap, 2010; Lisak, Gardinier, Nicksa, & Cote, 2010) – DeVos developed several proposals that require 'clear and convincing evidence' that the accused has committed sexual assault, weaken the power that universities have to address off-campus assault, and provide a new, stricter definition of sexual harassment (Rhodes, 2019). These rollbacks may make it even more difficult for survivors of sexual assault to get justice (Meckler, 2019). Although the overhaul of these policies is being done in the name of due process, the deeper message seems to be: men need to be protected.

### Rape as a man's problem

In efforts to prevent sexual violence, institutions including universities and the military have focused on training men not to sexually assault women. They have employed three main approaches: 1) addressing men as potential perpetrators; 2) explaining that men can also be victims of sexual assault; and 3) carrying out bystander awareness trainings (Scheel, Johnson, Schneider, & Smith, 2001, p. 258). Although these initiatives seem to embody feminist goals – ending the sexual assault of women – they can quickly become problematic. While they focus on men's role in sexual assault prevention, these programmes have not typically done anything to interrupt men's sexual dominance over women. Instead, they reinforce it through emphasizing a) men's need to protect women by asking for consent (because it is assumed that men are the initiators of sex), and b) men's responsibility in monitoring other men. This dynamic is most clear in bystander awareness programs that are geared towards men and reinforce men's role as protectors of women. Women, conversely, are cast as passive objects for men to save. Saving women confers the status of a 'good' man (Weitz, 2015).

In her study of sexual violence prevention within the military, Weitz (2015) revealed gendered messages and strategies inherent in the U.S. military's training. For example, trainings argued that men should protect their women comrades because 'male comrades ... embodied a superior type of hyper-masculinity that could be harnessed for good' (175). Trainings idealized qualities associated with hegemonic masculinity (beliefs of ownership over women, aggression, and physical power) including the requirement of protecting women. This ideal masked an underlying chronic problem of sexual assault within the military: 'Good men' were raping their colleagues with impunity while the military focused on protecting women from a foreign enemy. Weitz said, 'Ironically, reinforcing the ubiquity of male predators, combined with reinforcing women's vulnerability, can reinforce (other) men's role as protector' (172).

Ridgeway (2011) argues that 'gender frames' are important because they organize social relations and inform social and personal identities across gender, race, class, and sociopolitical lines. They persist over time despite social movements and larger structural shifts. Predominant gender frames in US society, such as the belief that men should protect and economically provide for women and children (Demantas & Myers 2015), stress men's dominance. Through everyday 'manhood acts' (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009), gender frames that benefit men over women are reinforced and reproduced. Importantly for this paper, systems of gendered power, heteronormativity, and patriarchy frame the ways in which we understand and practice sexual intimacy – and ultimately – consent (Connell, 1987; Hlavka, 2014; Moore & Reynolds, 2004; Risman, 2018). Ironically, when doing

masculinity 'correctly' is tied to enacting dominance (Connell, 1987; Pascoe 2012), even men with good intentions commit sexual assault (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

Weitz (2015) explored the link between protection and hegemonic masculinity, or the ultimate, most dominant form of masculinity in society at any given time (Connell, 1987). Weitz explains that, historically, masculinity in the US has been shaped through expectations of men defending the nation and serving as guardians over women. By enacting the role of protector, men access a higher level of status within society. Protectors are given permission to assert dominance over women and other men through physical violence and the close monitoring of others (Weitz, 2015).

The gender frame of men as protectors has currency because women are assumed to be in constant danger (Weitz, 2015). But, where does this danger come from? Ironically, it comes from men. Sexual coercion of women by men has been normalized in the US. This is especially clear on college campuses in the 'Greek' or fraternity scene. Hattery and Smith (2019) explore this phenomenon within fraternities in which beliefs about consent are frequently manipulated and distorted. Hattery and Smith explain that there are multiple methods in which men use coercion while claiming that the sexual experience is consensual because they eventually get a 'yes'. These methods include 'riffing, working a "yes" out, and rape baiting' (27–28). The riffing strategy refers to a technique in which men talk their way into a situation where they will be able to have sex with a woman. Working a 'yes' out refers to ways that men try to 'seduce' women after they refuse to have sex with them the first time, such as by giving them something else to drink (27). Finally, men use rape baiting – or strategies to increase their probability of having sex – to identify women with whom they can easily talk into having sex, such as specifically targeting naïve first-year students. In their interviews, men argued that working out a yes was not sexual assault as long as women finally 'gave in' (28). Men in their study constructed their own definition of consent to ensure their sexual gratification, and they used coercion through their role as the initiator of sex to make this happen.

Pascoe and Hollander (2016) work is particularly useful in teasing out these complexities. They argue that rape is normalized in society through a process that they call 'mobilizing rape'. They conceptualize sexual assault as more than individual-level incidents between perpetrators and their victims. Instead, sexual assault is only possible due to the array of cultural values and behaviours that underpin sexual violence, such as gender inequality and dominance. Importantly, multiple masculinities – not just hegemonic masculinity – are grounded in dominance. Men may participate in and benefit from traditional systems of gendered power and sexual dominance, even while subscribing to feminist ideals.

In this paper, we explore the ways that manhood framed subjects' navigation of affirmative consent in their intimate encounters, affecting both women and men. Many of the men in our study espoused pro-feminist rhetoric about women's empowerment. They took seriously the message that rape is a man's problem. However, most interpreted that message differently than it was intended by feminists in the #MeToo movement. Rather than taking responsibility for and rejecting nonconsensual sexual practices, they pivoted, finding a way to look like good guys while maintaining their gendered power in sexual situations. They redefined affirmative consent to suit their own purposes. Ultimately, they protected themselves and other men, contributing to rather than interrupting the mobilization of rape (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

## Research methods

This project is part of a larger study designed to understand college students' knowledge of changing definitions of consent, use of consent practices, and experiences with consensual and nonconsensual sex, including hook ups. To date, we have completed 45 face-to-face semi-structured interviews and eight focus group interviews with 23 subjects, and we received responses from 14 survey participants. The data for this paper come from the face-to-face interviews only. The sample size was larger than required for code saturation in qualitative analysis (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017), but we wanted to recruit as diverse a sample as possible. Semi-structured interviews enabled

participants to answer questions openly while also giving interviewers the ability to direct the flow of conversation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2012, p. 474). This method was particularly useful in this project for the following reasons: First, face-to-face interviews allowed for students to give in-depth, highly detailed descriptions of their sexual encounters and their understandings of consent. Second, we were better able to understand the processes through which students developed their understanding of consent over time. Third, these in-depth interviews revealed experiences with non-consensual sex and sexual violence that students possibly had not self-identified as such outside of the interview context.

The interview guide was five pages long, and questions focused on the following: participants' experiences with casual hook-ups (Allison & Risman, 2014; Bogle, 2008) [e.g., Can you tell me what hooking up is to you? Let's focus on your most recent hook-up; can you describe the atmosphere? Was alcohol involved?]; understandings of consent [e.g., How would you define consent? What do you typically do to show that you are consenting to sexual activity? Have you ever had a sexual encounter where you or the other person did not give verbal consent?]; and understandings of and experiences with sexual assault [e.g., Since being in college, have you helped others who were dealing with their own experiences with sexual assault? Did the person consider reporting the incident to university authorities? How have you changed your daily routine after hearing about the event?]. The interview guide included numerous probes to encourage subjects to share details. Interviews were conducted from April 2018 to October 2018. Each lasted about an hour. Participants were offered 10 USD for their participation in the study. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The average transcription was 12 pages long, single spaced, and about 10,000 words each.

### *Sample and research context*

Data were collected at a midsized (about 17,000 students) public university in the Midwest. College campuses are a particularly important location to explore issues of consent. Despite having to complete trainings that focus on sexual assault prevention and Title IX policies, campuses continue to be sites in which students are constantly surrounded by messages that condone or ignore sexual violence (Hattery & Smith, 2019). This combination creates conflicting messages about consent and sexual assault. Furthermore, studies find that at least one in five bachelor's degree-seeking women will experience sexual assault before graduating from a four-year university (Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017). Although men are also sexually assaulted, the incidence is less frequent, and regardless of whom is targeted, men are usually the perpetrators (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). Many campaigns that are focused on sexual assault awareness and prevention (e.g., the No More Campaign and It's On Us Campaign) have specifically targeted universities as sites for focusing their efforts. The university where we collected data for this current study requires all students to complete a Title IX training course at the beginning of the fall semester. These trainings cover the university's new affirmative definition of consent, the definition of sexual assault, bystander awareness, safety practices, and resources on campus. The university also posts messages about Title IX and consent on flyers around campus. This site was selected because participants had been exposed to (at least one) unifying message(s) about consent and affirmative consent policies.

Subjects were recruited in various ways. Professors from Sociology, Psychology, and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments advertised the study with their students in classes. We posted advertisements on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. We gave out flyers and small recruitment cards announcing the study and the contact email address for anyone interested in participating. After students emailed the researchers expressing interest in participating in the study, we sent them a follow-up email explaining that the interview would discuss consensual and nonconsensual sexual experiences. Potential participants were informed that we would also ask them about experiences with assault. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability. Interviews took place in private offices or meeting rooms on campus. At the start of the interview, participants were given a consent form that reiterated the research purpose and included crisis

hotlines for those who felt any distress after completing the interview. We assured participants that interviews would be confidential. Each subject created their own pseudonym.

All researchers conducted interviews over the course of the study, but no one interviewed a subject with whom she had a personal or professional relationship. For the larger study, we interviewed a diverse group of students: 27 identified as women (one a trans woman) and 18 identified as men. They had different majors and academic backgrounds. Most participants ( $N = 39$ ) were undergraduate students. Three were graduate students, and three had recently graduated. The overall sample was diverse along several other dimensions, as well. The average age of participants was 23.8, ranging from 18 to 47 years old. Racially, 22 subjects identified as white, 9 were Latinx/Hispanic, 7 were Black, four identified as bi-racial, and three participants were Asian-American. Rather than asking participants to categorize their sexuality, which may be fluid, we collected data on the reported gender of their sexual partners (Manning, Longmore, Copp, & Giordano, 2014). Three women discussed having sex with both men and women, 22 women reported having sex with only men, and one woman reported only having sex with women. Among the men, 14 reported having sex with only women, three reported having sex with only men, and two participants only used gender-neutral pronouns to describe their partners.

### **Analysis**

For the larger study, we used a grounded theory method of analysis (Charmaz, 1996; Corbin & Strauss, 1990), creating 'analytic codes and categories developed from data, not from preconceived hypothesis' (Charmaz, 1996, p. 28). We began by identifying a list of broad but relevant codes/themes from within the interview guide, and transcriptions were coded using NVivo software. Several important codes emerged in this open coding phase: coercion, reason for use of consent, misconceptions about consent/sexual assault, feelings of safety. Next, we began axial coding, in which 'categories are related to their subcategories, and the relationships tested against data' (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 13). The use of axial coding was particularly helpful for establishing relationships and patterns within each of the codes and allowed for deeper investigation of the conditions in which the patterns arose. In this stage of the research, several patterns emerged. For this paper, we focus on only one major pattern: participants' perceptions about consent were mediated by beliefs about gender. Here, we explore the ways in which men's negotiations of consent and discourse around sexual violence were mediated through gender frames about men as protectors. Although the data presented here focus primarily on the men's interviews, a small group of women expressed views similar to the men's. Those data are included here as well. It is important to note that findings from qualitative data analyses, although empirically grounded, are not generalizable. Nonetheless, findings can be used to help us derive deeper understanding of social processes related to gender and power in different contexts.

### **Ethical considerations**

Although many students reported that the interview helped them gain insight into their own beliefs about consent, others compared the interview to talk to a therapist. During the interviews themselves, we noticed a pattern of misinformation about sexual assault among students. Many reported events that involved sexual assault without recognizing that what they described was assault until they discussed it in the interview context. When this occurred, we deviated from the interview schedule to say things like, 'We need to talk about that some more.' We took time after the interview to review the university's definitions and policies on consent and sexual assault with the participants, and occasionally we referred subjects to counselling. As feminist interviewers (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2012:), we believe that this step was crucial in practising ethical research. Misinformation about sexual assault and confusion about resources on campus could potentially lead to further violence

against students or prevent them from accessing resources that may be crucial for dealing with sexual violence. As such, our debriefing process involved an educational component.

## Findings

Based on our systematic analysis of data, we found that men in this study had learned the lessons of affirmative consent training. Receiving the message that ‘rape is a man’s problem’, men reported changing their approaches to sexual encounters. Some men understood that men can stop rape by not raping women. However, many more conceptualized rape as a man’s problem through a hegemonic-gendered frame. These men operationalized rape as a man’s problem in three ways: 1) men need to protect women; 2) men need to avoid being accused of rape; 3) men need to protect each other from being accused of rape. We found that participants’ understandings of consent reinforced – rather than destabilized – hegemonic systems of power within sex. Men used their understandings of affirmative consent to display their dominance over women and other men, while also appearing to maintain seemingly progressive, liberal, and even feminist values.

### Protecting women

In the current study, the ideal of men as protectors was expressed in a variety of ways. Some participants discussed how fraternities and masculine institutions have addressed sexual violence in their experiences. For example, Rick (age 24, Latino) stated:

One of [my fraternity’s] national events is “Rape is a Man’s Issue” ... We’ve been hosting it for the last three to four years. And it’s shed light on, you know, consent ... So, what we do is we tailor it to the guys, you know, we invite the girls too, but in a way so the guys can understand ... And it gets really intense because a lot of times, the guys that will be in there, they feel like it’s just another one of those ... trainings. But you know, what’s crazy is the girls that come – like we had one girl, a couple of girls actually – just break down and start crying because it’s such a heavy topic. And I think- not that it’s a good thing you know? They shouldn’t be crying. But I think that it really does do a good job of showing the guys like, “Damn. This is for real ...” And we tell them too: everybody has a mother, everybody has a sister, everybody has a cousin. You know, something like this can happen to anybody who you know.

Rick’s fraternity focused on men being the agents of change for sexual assault prevention and encouraged men to ensure they were getting consent from their partners before having sex. They appealed to men’s pathos in order to get men to take the issue seriously. By emphasizing the vulnerability of women with whom men might have close relationships, Rick believed that men were made more aware of sexual assault, and thus, better equipped to protect women. Rick elaborated later in the interview, when he discussed his experiences coaching a powder puff football team, or football team for women. Rick recalled:

During Homecoming and stuff, with those girls, we’re on a Group Me [a social media communication platform]. And then right before Homecoming ... I was like, “Look guys, be careful this weekend, you know, a lot of things can happen. Don’t go anywhere alone.” And they really appreciated that because I looked at them all like my little sisters. I was like you know, “just be safe.”

Once again, Rick drew on the vulnerability of women. Despite all the women on the powder puff team being college-aged adults, he infantilized them by implying that it was his job as an older brother figure to warn them about the possibility of assault. By warning women about the threat of sexual assault and by framing sexual assault as a ‘man’s issue’, Rick applied ostensibly feminist tactics to maintain his image as a ‘good’ man (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Rick thought that the women appreciated his protective stance and used their approval as evidence of its value.

Other participants discussed strategies they used in their own sexual experiences to help protect women. Jason (age 24, Bi-racial), for example, described a routine he used to hook up with women. He said he would initiate the consent process by texting women before they came over and straightforwardly asking them, ‘Do you want to hook up?’ He said:

If they say, “yeah,” and they show up to my house, then I take that in the context of consent. But, at any point in time- that’s why the hang out period is so important too. At any point in time you can like – I wish people would understand that they have the right and ability and all that stuff to say, “Nope this is not for me, I’m fucking leaving.”

Jason asked for consent via text before meeting up with his hook-ups, but he never verbally confirmed consent in person. He wanted to have sex, and he did not want to jeopardize that outcome by opening the topic for discussion. Instead, he built a waiting period into his routine to allow women to feel more comfortable. During this time, they watched TV, occasionally had a drink, and talked. He asserted that this waiting period showed respect for women’s right to bodily autonomy and their own right and responsibility to say no if they changed their minds. Jason described himself as an active agent who protected women by giving them the time to say no before they begin to have sex. At the same time, his sexual partners were construed as passive participants: If they stayed, then they necessarily consented to having sex. To Jason, affirmative consent was measured by staying rather than leaving. The sentiment of a woman’s passivity being a sign of consent was affirmed throughout his interview, for example, as he discussed negotiating consent and pleasure during sexual encounters:

I mean aside from like, hit this way or hit that way, like that’s about the most micro that I

would understand. If she’s like, [in terms of]communication – like, if she’s giving me the eye thing, that means nothing to me. Like, I frankly don’t care [laughter]. “If you can’t verbalize it to me that I’m doing something wrong, or like you want me to do something else? Then it’s just not important enough to you,” is what I kind of take from that. Because I know what I like, and I tell them what I like. So, they would do that I suppose. And I would hope they would do the same.

Jason felt as though he created a safe space in which his partner could and should verbalize her desires (as he would do). He openly discounted non-verbal cues. While seeing himself as an active agent in promoting his partner’s and his own pleasure, he continued to interpret non-verbal communication as a passive action that he could choose to ignore. Jason was able to simultaneously engage in progressive, feminist conversations about consent that made him a ‘good’ man (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016), while prioritizing his own pleasure during sexual encounters.

Prevention strategies that rely on men serving as bystanders (situations in which men monitor other men’s suspicious behaviours) also emphasize men’s protector status. As Weitz (2015) argued in her research on sexual violence prevention work within the military, stressing the need for men to protect women from other men reinforces the dominance of men, in general. Men often monitor the actions of other men who they deem as less safe than they and their friends are. For example, men in this study discussed their experiences with bystander awareness and about how they have protected women from other men. Recalling an experience at a local bar, Charlie (age 22, Latinx) described how he and his friend, Billy (a man), saved their friend, Jenny (a woman), from a man who seemed to be bothering her. He explained that whenever he goes out and sees Jenny, he ‘always [tries to] be mindful of her because she ... does drink whenever she goes out.’ That night, Charlie noticed Jenny was drunk and ‘storming off’ from a man who seemed to insist that she follow him. He explained:

So I literally just turned to the guy and I made it seem like I was in his way. Like “ohh” (shifting his body to right side). “Ope” (shifting his body to the left side). “Oh, ohh” (shifting body to right side again). Like “oh, excuse me.” “Oh Sorry!” But I was doing it on purpose. I just I didn’t want him to follow her. And it was cool because ... one of my other homies [Billy] came next to me. And then he looked at the guy, and he’s like, “No, just turn around.” And the guy turned around. And then I looked at my boy and I gave him a big hug ‘cause like man, like that was love! I knew he had my back and he understood. He understood intersectionalities that were happening within that situation and it felt good to know that I wasn’t the only one, who you know, that was mindful of that.

While Charlie physically prevented the stranger from following Jenny, Billy noticed and came to help. The experience ended with a celebratory hug between the two men. Charlie beamed with a sense of

pride he felt, bonding with one man to protect a woman from another man. In each of these examples, men expressed concern for women being sexually assaulted in seemingly progressive ways: making anti-sexual violence work a 'men's issue', expressing value for bodily autonomy, and being good bystanders. It should be noted, though, that they concomitantly emphasize embodying masculine skills, such as assertiveness and leadership.

Some women in our study held similar beliefs about men's role in protecting women from other men. Erica (age 23, Asian) recalled her most recent hook-up, after which she felt her partner deliberately got her drunk in order to sway her into having sex. Erica explained:

He knew I was interested in someone else and ... I felt like he got me drunk maybe on purpose or something ... I actually had invited the guy I was more interested in over that night to like hang out with all of us together. He couldn't make it and I remember kind of saying how I was hoping he was there to make sure something else like that didn't happen.

Erica went on to describe feeling taken advantage of after this encounter and described her participation as, 'I pretty much just laid there, let him have his way'. Although she did not identify this experience as sexual assault, Erica believed the situation could have been prevented if the other, more desirable man had come. Erica's story reflects how messages about masculinities and men's ability to protect women from other, less desirable men are also subscribed to by women.

In recounting these experiences, the participants relied on old tropes about men's status as being 'protectors of women' and framed women as passive actors within these situations (Weitz, 2015). Participants' discussions focused on the importance of men establishing dominance over women and other men whom they believe are strange or dangerous, unlike them, all under a veneer of feminist ideals.

### *Protecting Themselves*

Although participants discussed men protecting women from sexual assault, they also expressed the need to protect men from being falsely accused of perpetrating assault. Thus, men simultaneously needed to protect women and to be protected *from* women. Underlying beliefs about false accusations of sexual assault complicated participants' discussions around sexual violence. Men and women in our study overwhelmingly expressed the importance of believing survivors who come forward, but often qualifying these statements with comments about false accusations. Alexis (bi-racial, 22) explained that thanks to the #MeToo movement: 'Everyone's coming out more. And it's like, oh, I'm going to believe you. Why am I not going to believe you? But also, some people are just lying to get money'. Julia (white, 24) had similar views about the effects of the #MeToo movement, explaining:

I think more people speak up if it happens to them from the movement. But then I feel like it could also cause some more problems that might- you know, if it actually didn't happen and someone wants to get somebody in trouble for whatever reason, I feel like it could lead to kind of problems like that. But more obviously, more often [sexual assault] happens than not. But I just think with all like the people coming out about it now, I feel it'll led to a lot more cases of it.

Both women reported feeling that the #MeToo movement would help cultivate a culture in which survivors could more easily be believed, while concurrently highlighting that the movement may result in false accusations against men.

Men expressed these beliefs too. One participant, Ryan (age 21, White), talked about the effects of the #MeToo movement and recent pushes towards affirmative consent, saying:

A lot of guys are actually worried they will be accused of rape one day. Like, that they'll misinterpret a type of social cue. Or the social cues will be there, but a woman will say "Oh I changed my mind mid-way through" and [the man] wouldn't have known. I don't know how legitimate of a worry this is, but the worry is still there. I feel like there are different types of populations that are interpreting it in different ways and one population could be hurt or worried by this.

Ryan was not sure his worry was 'legitimate,' but he thought men's decisions were affected, nonetheless.

The need to protect potential victims of false accusations was reiterated in many ways throughout the study. For example, Ghost (age 36, White) explained that while he was in the US Navy, he and his colleagues attended intense training courses on affirmative consent and sexual violence protection, so that when they had opportunities to hook up with women while bar-hopping, service members would be sure to get affirmative consent. Ghost also said:

There was a lot of times when there was a possibility of taking someone home from the bar but, to me, there were very little coherences in our conversations. So, to me ... it sounds bad [chuckles] but it was more of a cover-my-own-ass situation, right? If I'm not going to get a clear and concise "okay" with this, [then I'm not going to do it]. There were a lot of people who would say, "Oh I didn't have fun last night, so now I'm going to say I didn't want that." It happened a lot to guys on the base. So it was a very big cue that you better know what you're doing ... So it was a lot more scary.

Ghost would not go home with intoxicated women from the bar out of fear that they would 'consent' initially, but then disavow consent if the sex was not pleasurable. Ghost highlighted that this, indeed, was a 'scary' time for men in the Navy. He related his motivation for getting clear, un-intoxicated consent, not out of the belief that it was a healthy part of sexual communication, but rather to ensure he was 'covering his own ass'. Ghost ensured his own safety and well-being by attaining affirmative consent.

Similarly, Paul (age 28, Asian) shared his fears that someone might accuse him of sexual assault based on things he did in the past. Paul recounted being at a party in his early 20s during which a woman led him into a room where people were already having sex. Paul said,

I don't think there was ever consent there ... yeah. It wasn't like "Hey, let's do this." It was like, take your hand and walk you into this room, sit you down, and just start blowing you, while other people were already fucking.

Paul did not seem worried that *he* had not verbally consented to having oral sex performed on him. He was worrying that the woman who performed the sex might later argue that *she* had not consented, making him responsible for sexual assault. Paul went on to explain how training in 'the business world' changed his perspective on consent. He stated,

[After working in the business world] I learned how to manage down and up. I just started managing everyone that I came in contact with after that ... "this has to be done by the book." I didn't worry about that before. I mean ... what if, what if that group of people [at that party] called the cops on the group of guys that were part of that. Would they call that rape? Because no one really talked about consent [then], and because I worked for a corporation, I reflected on that ... It scares me.

In hindsight, despite his description of these women actively initiating sexual acts, Paul did not conceptualize initiation as affirmative consent. He was scared that he could be punished retroactively. His new training and responsibility taught him to start using affirmative consent because if he did not do things 'by the book', there could be serious consequences for him.

While sexual violence intervention tactics at universities are created to protect those most likely to be victimized by sexual violence – typically women (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006; Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2018) – in these situations, men incorporated their newfound understanding of these strategies into behaviours that they believed would protect themselves from being falsely accused of sexually assaulting women. Strategies that were originally intended to hold perpetrators accountable for a crime morphed into tools used to underscore women's untrustworthiness and men's vulnerability.

### **Protecting other men**

Some men in our study used sexual violence prevention techniques to protect other men – not from being sexually assaulted, but from accidentally committing sexual assault. For example, Charlie (age

22) described parties at which he observed his friends talking to women who seemed too drunk to consent to hooking up. He explained:

Like if ... one of my boys is dancing with some girl who was getting heavily intoxicated then we're going to let him know, like "yo, bro chill ... relax, she's drinking. Her friends are over there. Just watch out," you know' ... And usually after that, he just calms down. ... Like, it doesn't get weird, like my friend isn't rubbing up on a girl. And it's not looking chaotic, in a sense that they're ... making a scene. Does that make sense? In terms of getting people to look at them, and then grabbing other people's attention.

Here, like before, Charlie acted as a bystander and expressed pride that he was 'protecting women' who might be too drunk to consent to intimate contact; however, there is a distinct difference in his descriptions of these two situations. In the first situation, Charlie focused on his and Billy's ability to force a strange man to turn around and leave the woman alone. In this second situation, Charlie expressed concern for protecting his friend. He warned his friend that he needed to 'watch out' because the girl's friends were nearby, and he should not 'make a scene'. Charlie's worry was *not* that the woman could not consent because she was intoxicated. He was worried that his friend was in jeopardy. Charlie described his role as a bystander in two somewhat incompatible ways: he protected women from men he did not trust, and he protected men he *did* trust from women.

Equipped with seemingly progressive, feminist initiatives of sexual assault prevention, men in this study affirmed themselves as 'good' and safe men, while using sexual assault prevention strategies to protect themselves, their friends, and the institutions where they belonged from false accusations of assault. This strategy impressed some women and made them feel safer. Maddie (age 18, White) talked about a fraternity house that she visited often, saying that they call themselves a gentlemen's fraternity. She explained that they used many strategies to prevent non-consensual experiences. For instance:

The fraternity that [my friends and I] always go to, they always provide rides for us to go back and forth from Greek Row. So that's always nice. They always have one designated driver who drives everyone home. They always have that one guy who's like, "Okay, you're taking all these people home at the same time." But they never let the guy be alone with one girl, or like the guy be alone with two girls ... So they'll never allow the driver to take advantage, I guess. Even though he wouldn't ... Like if he were to do that, he would get kicked out of the fraternity 'cause that's how they do it at their fraternity. But other fraternities, I bet they don't even care.

Maddie ranked this fraternity over others because its members tried to prevent unwanted, non-consensual experiences by having a designated driver, ensuring women had safe rides home, and preventing men from being alone with one or two women. She claimed that these practices made women safer; however, these practices are consistent with fraternities' routine rituals of hypermasculinity. For example, being the designated driver is the job of pledges who are still trying to prove themselves to earn their place in the fraternity. Furthermore, as Hattery and Smith (2019) explain, having one pledge who is in charge of picking up and dropping off women at the end of the night actually helps create an environment in which sexual assault is easier to facilitate because women are completely reliant on the pledge to help them get home. Women in these scenarios often end up stuck at the fraternity house with no idea when they will be picked up or where the pledge is. Rape is mobilized through a gentlemanly guise.

Bystander strategies can be used by men who want to appear to be protecting women from sexual assault, while ultimately protecting other men from accusations of sexual assault. For example, Eric (age 21, White) talked about his fraternity having a policy in which women were not allowed to be left alone with one man. Eric said:

[My fraternity] had the system of cues that you would basically be able to give to your brother's that like, if they're doing something that you think is going in a bad direction. Like if they look like they're hitting on a girl that's super uncomfortable, you can give a cue, "Hey, slow down, take a step back." And stuff like that. ... There was a conversation about how, if we were to ever walk somebody home, we would have to have a buddy in addition to whoever we were walking home. Especially if that person was like a drunk woman, we had to have that buddy. I'm pretty sure that was mostly for legal reasons. Like you need somebody to corroborate that nothing happened.

Maddie thought fraternity men cared about protecting women who attend their parties. Eric, a fraternity member himself, surmised that men sought to protect themselves for 'legal reasons'. Fraternities' strategies facilitated sex with women while protecting the credibility of the institution and its members. As stated by another participant, MJ (age 28, White), 'No one wants to be seen as the rape house'. Bystander strategies allowed fraternity members to appear chivalrous by protecting women from sexual assault while actually protecting themselves from being *accused* of sexual assault.

## Discussion

At the surface level, it seems that men in this study took seriously the charge that rape is a man's issue and that men can and must end sexual assault by not raping people (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Ideally, this would involve a society in which women are viewed as equal, autonomous agents in sexual interactions, and to some extent, this was realized: our data showed that the men understood their role as 'potential perpetrators' and their ability to be allies – or bystanders – for women (Scheel et al., 2001). Upon deeper analysis, however, we discovered that participants had employed affirmative consent behaviours in two ways that undermine their potential for eradicating sexual assault in the future. First, they upheld and asserted men's dominance over women and other men in the name of 'protecting women'. Second, they emphasized myths about false accusations and men's perceived vulnerability within the issue of sexual assault. Using seemingly progressive language and strategies surrounding sexual violence prevention that have grown out of the #MeToo movement, men in our study reframed gendered meanings in ways that ultimately benefitted themselves, reaffirming traditional manhood and masculine institutions.

In their critique of the ways that rape is normalized in society, Pascoe and Hollander (2016) said, 'At first glance this may seem like a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation, where men reinforce gender inequality both by engaging in sexual assault and by not engaging in those same behaviours' (76). We were left with a similar question: Does it matter that men are reproducing masculine privileges if their protective actions actually reduce the incidence of sexual assault in the end? Men who intervene with aggressive men may prevent the victimization of women. Men who personally opt-out of drunk sex in a self-motivated 'cover your ass' situation do prevent sexual assault. So why do we care about their motivations? We care because these actions are episodic rather than systemic. They do not interrogate or undo the underlying power imbalance. Ultimately, sexual assault persists despite progressive policies and practices because of stable gendered hierarchies and gender frames in society. Although affirmative consent conversations prevent some sexual assaults, sexual assault will not be eradicated without a more serious, culturally engrained shift in gendered meanings, structures, and practices. As Pascoe and Hollander wrote:

When we attend to the way in which we provide avenues to oppose rape, we must combat normative masculinity as a mode of domination, rather than relying on tactics that render opposing gendered sexual violence part of that very system of domination (76).

Thus, we *must* care about these underlying issues.

## Conclusion

Is rape a man's issue? As long as men continue to search for ways to maintain their gendered power in sexual intimacy, then yes it is. Can men work to stop sexual assault? Yes they can. We are currently in a time in which gendered power dynamics surrounding sexual intimacy are rapidly changing. Perhaps because of the mainstreaming of the feminist and #MeToo movements, many young women in the US express their own sexuality more freely and discourage men from blatantly engaging in sexually violent behaviours – or at least force them to find covert ways of engaging in it (Dyhouse, 2013; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Problems related to nonconsensual sexual intimacy and sexual coercion are at the forefront of political, social, and personal discussions. More men are

embracing gender equity in their personal lives (author; Risman, 2018). The time seems ripe to make real systemic change.

Instituting new policies is an important part of this change, but it does not go far enough. Culture and individuals' practices must change as well. Affirmative consent grew out of a feminist goal to reduce the incidence of sexual violence. Affirmative consent policies are indeed useful in that they promote verbal consent, enthusiasm, and the freedom to say 'no'. Based on this study, however, we are sceptical that relying on affirmative consent policies will prevent sexual violence. Affirmative consent policies alone do not interrupt persistent gender frames that help mobilize rape. This failure to dismantle the systems of power that facilitate sexual violence and reinforce men's dominance makes affirmative consent policies and practices only somewhat effective. Because negotiations of affirmative consent are mediated through gender frames that stress men's sexual entitlement, we must continue to work to disrupt those frames, while also finding new ways to educate men so that consensual sexual intimacy can become normative for all.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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