Communicating/Muting Date Rape: A Co-Cultural Theoretical Analysis of Communication Factors Related to Rape Culture on a College Campus

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Previous studies suggest that college campuses foster a rape culture in which date rape (most commonly, rape of women) is an accepted part of campus activity (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Sanday, 2007). In focus groups at a Midwestern university, researchers asked students about rape as they experienced it or knew about it on campus. The study revealed attitudes and perspectives about rape communicated from cultural, social, and individual levels. Co-researchers’ comments indicated such attitudes exist in relation to and are expressed through behaviors preceding potential incidences of rape, during rape itself, and in response after rape occurs. Throughout this process, college students, especially females, were muted, potentially contributing to the creation and perpetuation of a campus rape culture.

Keywords: Date Rape; Co-cultural Theory; Muted Group Theory

Every two minutes in the United States, someone is raped, and the chances of being that victim are four times greater for a college female student than for any other age group (“Statistics,” 2009). Whereas national crime statistics indicate that incidences of violent rape are decreasing, rape continues to be underreported (“Statistics”). Over one-half of the rapes that occur each year are not reported (“Reporting Rates,” 2009). The purpose of this study is to understand rape on college campuses by viewing it as a communication phenomenon, in which communication about sex and rape, the
possibility of rape, the negotiation of consent, the rape itself, the aftermath of rape, and the reaction to date rape, are central to defining a rape culture on campus. Using a co-cultural theoretical paradigm that relies heavily on muted group theory, we aim to provide insight into how a rape culture on college campuses is created and perpetuated.

Rape Culture and Its Influence on Sexual Violence on College Campuses

Rape Culture

Despite an abundance of prevention efforts on college campuses, multiple studies demonstrate the continuous prevalence of rape, especially acquaintance rape (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Boswell & Spade, 1996). One explanation is that college campuses foster date rape cultures, which are environments that support beliefs conducive to rape and increase risk factors related to sexual violence (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Sanday, 2007). Despite attempts to dismantle rape culture on college campuses, for the most part, such cultures remain intact for a variety of reasons (Sanday, 2007).

First, myths contribute to rape culture in that attitudes about rape help explain how people behave toward its victims and perpetrators (Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004). Rape myths “deny or minimize victim injury or blame the victims for their own victimization” (Carmody & Washington, 2001, p. 424). Some examples of rape myths include notions such as the idea that “no” really means “yes;” that women can resist rape if they wish; that in most cases the victim is promiscuous; and that women falsely report rape to protect their reputations or because they are angry at someone (Burt, 1980; Carmody & Washington). Ingroup social norms tend to make rape myths seem like normal belief patterns, further engraining the myths. Although rape myths are a social and cultural phenomenon that exists beyond the college campus, research suggests that athletics and fraternal organizations, replete on college campuses, are related to stronger rape-supportive attitudes, based on such myths (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Sanday, 2007).

Second, men’s athletics can foster a rape culture because they are sex-segregated, the nature of sport is to be dominant, and students involved in a college sport, particularly men, gain prestige from being physically dominating (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995). College men who play aggressive sports in high school are more likely to accept rape myths, are more accepting of violence, and engage in more sexual coercion toward dating partners compared to other college men (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, & White, 2006). In NCAA Division I schools, such as the university in this study, more male athletes are reported to student judicial boards for sexual assault than any other students (Crosset et al., 1995).

Likewise, the fraternity culture fosters discussion and beliefs about women and sexuality that are different from those outside the fraternity (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005). Fraternity membership creates a double standard wherein men who have sex are “studs,” and women who have sex are “sluts” (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). This double standard is perpetuated by some fraternities more than others; Boswell
and Spade (1996) found that college women were able to identify differences between high and low risk fraternities on their campus.

Next, fraternity men and sorority women are more likely than independent men and women to use alcohol before having sex (Lanza-Kaduce, Capece, & Alden, 2006), which may contribute further to the perpetuation of rape culture on college campuses. Previous research has found a correlation between alcohol consumption, sexual violence, and rape culture. Alcohol abuse on college campuses runs rampant (National Center, 2007). When studying unwanted sexual experiences on college campuses, including date rape, Banyard et al. (2005) reported that almost half of unwanted sexual experiences involved alcohol use. Benson, Gohm, and Gross (2007) found that 78.7% of study participants reported alcohol use at the time of the assault. Even small amounts of alcohol affect college women’s judgment of date rape risk (Loiselle & Fuqua, 2007).

Lastly, the presence of rape culture influences not only the risk factors related to sexual violence, it influences post-rape behaviors, so as to conceal and perpetuate rape and the culture of rape. Importantly, rape culture appears to foster silencing. A national survey of college women found that fewer than 5% of sexual offenses are reported to law enforcement (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). The presence of alcohol makes victims less likely to report an assault because of fear that others will perceive the rape was their fault (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003). Low rates of reporting may mark existing rape culture and perpetuate it, since not reporting protects the perpetrators and creates a sense of tolerance toward rape. Overall, women in a rape culture may be unlikely to label their unwanted sexual experiences as rape because of social acceptance of rape myths (victim blaming), the presence of fraternal organizations, alcohol or drug use, or through silencing or diminishing the importance of their experiences (Harned, 2005).

The absence of rape reporting on college campuses occurs partly because normal sexual negotiations have not occurred within interpersonal interactions that result in date rape (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). Thus, after the rape, perhaps due to the ambiguity about what might constitute rape, consent, and responsibility, survivors may question their pre-rape communication and be uncertain of whether their experience was rape or not. Adams-Curtis and Forbes (2004) argue the progression from sexual negotiation to coercion is commonplace in the college setting. To better understand this progression of events, we now turn our attention to an examination of the role of communication in date rape situations.

**Model of Date Rape Factors**

According to Weitz (2002b), “The crux of the social problem of date rape is rooted in the sex offenders’ personality and socialization” (n.p.). Therefore, Weitz argues that we need to better understand the male sexual perpetrator so that we can design strategies to stop future offenses. Weitz proposes a preventative strategy. He offers a nested model of date rape factors situated within four contextual levels in order to explain and illustrate the overlapping influences that affect and often cause a date rape: the culture at large (the most general level), the perpetrator’s individual frame
of reference (psychological and sociological), the immediate interpersonal context (the situation), and the date rape “event” itself (the most specific context). In short, Weitz argues that factors from all four levels overlap to produce or impact a sequential context of date rape (the immediate “event”). In some instances, a victim's miscommunication and, vastly more often, the perpetrator's misperception lead to sexual assault. Therefore, he suggests direct and explicit verbal communication training (e.g., “Stop. I do not want to have sex with you.”) may be the appropriate strategy for date rape prevention.

Weitz (2002a) recognizes that the psychological/sociological, the situational, and the sequential contexts are nested within the “culture at large.” He argues that psychological factors such as self-centered personalities and aversions to personal relationships, coupled with sociological factors of masculinity and control contribute to the proclivity to rape. Further, situational factors such as alcohol consumption and going back to the perpetrator’s apartment, though not pivotal, may affect the rape context. The psychological, sociological and situational factors all contribute to the sequential context that leads to rape.

Whereas Weitz (2002a, 2002b) seeks to understand the factors that allow the “event” of date rape to occur, we utilize his model in understanding the factors that foster rape culture on college campuses. We believe that if campus rape culture exists, it is the product of social processes encompassing more than just perpetrators and victims. Therefore, we sought the perspective of college students, both male and female, without attempting to categorize this perspective as a (potential) perpetrator's or (potential) survivor's point of view. Guided by Weitz's finding that miscommunication and/or misperception often immediately precede individual date rape cases, we considered how and if students talk about sex and rape, how they negotiate consent, and how they communicatively react to cases of date. As both college students and women (who, statistically, are more often rape victims than men) constitute co-cultures in more than one way, and this study is concerned with the link between rape culture and communication, co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1996, 1998b, 2004) guided the present investigation.

**Theorizing from a Co-cultural Perspective**

Co-cultural theory develops from and extends standpoint (Hartsock, 1983) and muted group (Kramarae, 1981) theories. Broadly, the co-cultural paradigm posits that, in contexts where their experiences are marginalized, co-cultures participate in and negotiate their status within the dominant discourse by using particular communicative strategies (Orbe, 1996, 1998b, 2004, 2005). Co-cultures can be defined as pariah in respect to dominant social groups (Orbe, 1998b). In patriarchal societies, women traditionally constitute a co-culture.

As one avenue to examine how co-cultures function, standpoint theories are concerned with recognizing the plurality of human experiences and truths (Hawkesworth, 2006), while recognizing that knowledge and perception are structured by power relations (O’Brien Hallstein, 1999). In this social location,
dominant groups have “partial and perverse” (Hartsock, 1983, p. 285) views of reality, because to them the reality of marginalized groups is invisible. Conversely, co-cultures have the privilege of a more complete social knowledge and experience, which grounds the need for research to specifically explore co-cultural experiences that are traditionally excluded from dominant scholarly discourse.

According to anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener, language does not serve all groups equally, since group members do not have an equal share in formulating language. In positing muted group theory, they argue that dominant groups solely determine the appropriate communicative systems. In effect, subordinate groups become inarticulate because they are forced to use the language of the dominant groups (E. W. Ardener, 1978; S. Ardener, 1975) and, as Kramarae (1981) explains, “experiences peculiar to the subordinate group have not yet been encoded in a language” (p. 7). Kramarae (2005) emphasizes the need to focus on language as being central to muted groups, particularly women, as generally words are no longer created or contested to a great extent. Men and women experience the world differently, and in patriarchal societies, the male view is dominant and the female view is subordinate (Kramarae, 1981). Thus, if they want to participate in discourse, women must adopt the male communicative system (Henley & Kramarae, 1994; Kramarae, 1981; Orbe, 1998b, 2005). Some scholars have found no differences in general language use patterns between men and women (e.g., Canary & Dindia, 1998; Weatherall, 1996), or argue that men do not intend to dominate language (e.g., Tannen, 1984). However, Orbe suggests nondominant groups are not only aware of the muting potential of dominant groups, they also actively use communication strategies to attempt to participate in dominant society (e.g., Orbe, 1996, 1998b, 2004, 2005).

Women have been muted in a multitude of ways, including the methods in which women tell stories, through male-controlled media, in ways women’s bodies are portrayed and analyzed, and through censorship of women’s voices (Houston & Kramarae, 1991). Men, on the other hand, not only feel more comfortable and confident in using the dominant communicative system, they also trust institutions more than women do, since institutions are created and named by men. To resist this process, muted group theory has been used as a feminist activism tool to encourage women to create meaning through their own language while acknowledging that they must do so because they are muted.

This naming, as a communication act, grounds co-cultural theorizing (Orbe, 1996, 1998b, 2005), so that muted groups can find language strategies to overcome their mutedness (Orbe, 1996) and, thus, “reinforce, manage, alter, and overcome a societal position that renders them outside the centers of power” (Orbe, 2005, p. 65). These strategies are guided by three major communication orientations, as defined by the desired outcome in relation to the dominant group: assimilation, accommodation, or separation (Orbe, 1998b). Assimilation aims at eliminating perceptions of cultural differences. Accommodation expects dominant structures to change to encompass the life experiences of each co-cultural group (Orbe, 1996). Separation opposes
forming a bond with the dominant culture or with other co-cultures, so as to maintain a unique group identity.

Understanding the factors that influence co-cultures’ use of certain communication strategies can foster dialogue between dominant and nondominant groups as the primary practical application of the theory (Orbe, 2004). Co-cultural research has suggested that knowledge and understanding of co-cultural practices will be of most benefit to dominant groups because co-cultural communication strategies ultimately give voice to what might be traditionally “muted” in dominant discourse. The purpose of this study is to examine rape culture on a Midwestern college campus as it exists in and is formulated by student communication about sex and rape. Following and exploring in more depth the muted group vein of co-cultural theory, it is possible that, as a co-culture, female college students are muted with respect to date rape, but they may try to combat this (successfully or not) by using co-cultural communication strategies. Based on co-cultural theory’s practical application (e.g., Orbe, 2004) and Weitz’s (2002a, 2002b) model of date rape factors, understanding the co-cultural strategies that female college students employ when communicating about date rape may be a first step toward preventing the formation and continuation of a campus rape culture. Toward this end, this study sets out to explore how date rape is communicated about and described on a college campus.

Methodology

This study is phenomenological in nature. Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is a human science that explores the lived experiences of people who have participated in a particular phenomenon (Lanigan, 1979; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 1990). Researchers look for the essence or central underlying themes related to the experience and derive general or universal meanings (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological research approach involves three steps:

1. Gathering descriptions of lived experiences.
2. Reviewing capta to reveal essential themes; and

The process is not exact, and interpretations of the same materials could vary (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In addition, de Laurentis (1984) cautions that the phenomenon being examined is not fixed; the construction of memories and experiences may change. According to Orbe (1998a), “Because phenomenological researchers are consciously engaged in their own lifeworld, interpretations change the instant that they view the finished product and begin to reflect on it” (p. 237). This fluidity of interpretation, however, is not necessarily a limitation, as it contextualizes interpretations, making them implicitly reflective of one’s own positionality in
relation to dominant discourse. Thus, the phenomenological approach has proven to be an effective research tool when working with co-cultural groups (Orbe, 1996).

Capta Gathering

Capta were collected through nine focus groups conducted at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The university’s student population is approximately 12,000; there are 15 national fraternities and sororities on campus, and the athletics program is Division 1. The 2007 “Personal Safety and Security on the Campus” brochure listed four sexual assaults reported that year; the brochure lists ways to protect oneself from attack, but does not discuss date rape. The student affairs division at this campus engages in comprehensive alcohol and drug awareness training.

Using Orbe’s (1998a) terminology, we considered our participants as co-researchers, as they were the experts informing us about their culture. The co-researchers were recruited from communication classes including the introductory class, which is required for students of all majors. Of the nine focus groups, five were comprised of only females, two consisted of only men, and two were comprised of males and females. Some of the recruitment was purposeful in nature in order to ensure specific groups were included. Two groups consisted of fraternity members and one was comprised of sorority members. One of the mixed groups and one all-female group were made up of student athletes. The remaining focus groups were volunteers who did not fit in any of the above categories.

The recruitment process did not specify that students must be rape victims to participate, although one co-researcher voluntarily disclosed that she had been raped. Members of the research team moderated the focus groups. Care was taken that female and male groups were moderated by persons of the same sex in order to increase comfort levels and increase participation in discussions. Mixed-sex groups were moderated by female interviewees who were trained to adapt to the context. All of the sessions were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

The research team developed a topical protocol (interview guide) to guide the focus group moderators and to ensure that all relevant topics were covered. Moderators used an open-ended conversational approach to encourage participation (Nelson, 1989). Topics discussed included definitions of rape, reasons for rape, the role of alcohol in rape, options after rape occurs, reasons rape is not reported, avoiding potential rape situations, and the prevalence of rape on that university’s campus.

Reduction of Capta

The second step in the research process consisted of the reduction of capta. During this phase, researchers examined the transcripts independently and then collectively to identify emerging central themes. Using a process called imaginative free variation (Lanigan, 1988; Nelson, 1989), researchers reflected on the co-researchers’ experiences, systematically identifying the elements that were essential to the experience and eliminating those that were not. In the final phase of the phenomenological research
process, the researchers attached meaning to the information attained in the reduction process.

**Model Development**

The meaning of the information emerged through comparing and contrasting different co-researchers’ experiences and discussing how the identified themes contributed to the experience. During this discussion, it became clear to the researchers that ambiguities in meaning were attached to date rape and not stranger rape, and that only date rape was relevant to this study. After re-reading the transcripts, the research team met for several one-hour sessions to discuss the main theme that emerged and develop a model that reflected the findings. We created a model, guided by Weitz (2002a, 2002b), and based on our co-researchers’ experiences because, as Nelson (1989) suggests, when examining phenomenon essentially focused on women, the phenomenon must guide the methods and procedure from that particular experience under investigation. Creswell (2007) concurs, suggesting that explaining qualitative approaches separately is a heuristic device, not meant to constrain the researcher; in this case, our phenomenological investigation led to the creation of a model instead of mere description. The model was limited to factors the researchers agreed were vital to the co-researchers’ lived experiences in relation to date rape.

**Results**

Our primary interest is in how date rape is communicated about and described on a college campus. The results demonstrate the ambiguity surrounding date rape mutes not only actual and potential date rape victims, but potentially marginalizes meaningful discourse on the topic and further entrenches rape culture on campus.

When talking about date rape, students had difficulty defining it, feeling that situational factors may affect interpretation of the event. Although declaration of consent to have sex was suggested as a decisive factor, co-researchers questioned exactly what verbal and nonverbal behaviors constituted consent. Their comments about events and contexts prior to the potential occurrence of rape suggest communication focuses on individual responsibility for one’s safety. Co-researchers talked about the importance of being careful in potential date rape situations, the danger of mixing alcohol and drugs with social gatherings, and how difficult it is to label an act “date rape.” When talking about the immediate context of date rape, co-researchers reported it is important to consider how and whether the victim communicated consent during the rape. Finally, co-researchers’ comments indicated that, in their understanding, after a rape has occurred (post-rape context), there is little communication either interpersonally or publicly about the rape. Female students especially reported feeling muted.

Considering comments by the co-researchers, we propose a circular model illustrating the perpetuation of a rape culture and the process of how date rape is communicated on college campuses (see Figure 1), demonstrating that within college
rape culture, rape victims are muted before date rape occurs, during a situation in which rape is possible, and following an actual experience of rape. Within this time continuum, the perpetuation of mutedness regarding the college rape culture exists on four levels: the cultural context, the individual context, the situational/
interpersonal context, and the immediate context where date rape occurs, following Weitz’s model (2002a, 2002b). Therefore, not only female rape victims are muted, so is the college administration and other students. Before- and after-rape experiences at each of these levels compound themselves to ultimately lead to more ambiguity and mutedness. We next detail the answers to our research question in our discussion of the emergent model.

Pre-Date Rape (Awareness)

The cultural context. The first and broadest factor that plays a role in college students’, particularly female victims, mutedness about rape, is the culture of which they are a part. This culture includes the college campus, surrounding community, and society at large. At this level, ambiguity exists about what constitutes date rape. The campus culture does not provide students with an exact definition of date rape. For example, when asked about the definition of date rape, one female student responded, “How and when you say ‘no’ matters,” whereas another felt, “Consent does not have to be verbalized.”

Although consent seemed to be essential in co-researchers’ definitions of rape, neither male nor female students could clearly pinpoint what consent meant in regard to date rape. They were unsure how to handle situations leading to sexual intercourse and did not know how to interpret consent. Additional students confirmed the ambiguity of rape by saying, “Rape is hard to define” and often adding the disclaimer, “It depends.” Thus, at the cultural level, female students must attempt to rationalize and explain their perceptions of what constitutes rape, since it is not given to them by their culture. As the dominant cultural discourse, the “it depends” mentality opens the door for uncertainty that supports an inability to articulate a definition of rape.

The individual context. In addition to the cultural level, one’s individual thoughts and experiences play a role in the ambiguity of rape and women’s mutedness regarding it. The individual frame of reference consists of two contexts: a psychological context and a sociological context (Weitz, 2002a). The psychological context is based on personality, intent, and mentality. The sociological context includes social gender norms, control, social exchange, and peer group pressure.

On the psychological level, the dominant discourse often casts alleged rape victims, especially females, as “sluts” who were “looking for it.” It was not uncommon for male and even female co-researchers to use this dominant language. One woman stated, “Behaviors and a woman’s dress can suggest consent.” Another commented, “Men having multiple sex partners are heroes, but women doing the same are sluts.” “There is a ‘they get around’ attitude regarding women,” and “Women with multiple partners are known for being dirty,” reported another female student, reflecting some of the rape myths prevalent in our society (Burt, 1980; Carmody & Washington, 2001). These comments indicate that men’s dominant place in society has allowed them privileges to create and control the language and belief system regarding date
rape. Accepting this language indicates the acceptance of a subjugated position, muting the unique, personal interpretation of a date rape situation.

On the sociological level, women feel male college students expect sex in return for paying for dates or bringing drinks, similar to the social exchange mentality in Weitz's model (2002a). One comment from a female student was supported by the whole focus group of other females: “My experience is, ‘Well, I got you a drink’ . . . ‘Now what are you going to do?’ . . . If they’re not a friend, it’s like they expect something in return.” Another woman indicated that, “Guys expect to party at college, and they expect to score.” Such statements demonstrate women's understanding of a dominant discourse of which they do not necessarily approve. However, other comments from female co-researchers, such as, “Sex is common on the first date,” support a notion that women transform their individual beliefs to fit the dominant discourse about sex and relationships. Thus, they follow dominant expectations, uncertain whether or not their unwanted sexual experience constitutes rape.

Female respondents also indicated that peer pressure may contribute to the creation of a rape culture. One remarked, “There is pressure because everybody else is doing it. You have sex to fit in.” Another added, “Sometimes you don’t say no because you don’t want to look stupid.” Male co-researchers’ comments supported that peer pressure to have sex is part of the dominant discourse. One co-researcher remembered, “When I was 15–16 . . . all the guys were like . . . ‘You’re still a virgin?’ That was the peer pressure I got.” Expectations such as these, for both men and women to have sex, may perpetuate the rape culture among college students.

The situational/interpersonal context. The ambiguity of rape and corresponding mutedness of female college students from the first two categories—culture at large and individual frame of reference—affect thoughts and behaviors in situations where the possibility of date rape is heightened, such as college parties. Many female students commented on the danger of such an environment with regard to the possibility of date rape occurring. Although college women realize the danger of this type of environment, they still participate in it, feeling or hoping that they can prepare for the situation. As date rape has no clear definition and is, thus, the invisible enemy, we describe efforts to minimize the possibility of it happening as “shadowboxing” date rape, similar to the way in which boxers train against an imaginary partner. Although co-researchers were not asked how they protect themselves from date rape, they talked about it nonetheless in each focus group.

The most common shadowboxing strategy for women was going to parties with trusted friends. One woman described her protection system as “a group of friends you trust and [who] look out for one another.” Another female co-researcher remarked, “I feel more comfortable when I go to a party at a friend’s house than at a fraternity party, but my friends are always there . . . we always look for one another if there would be . . . a bad situation.” Co-researchers also indicated friends were there to keep each other from drinking too much at parties.

Both men and women cited being under the influence as the most common gray area with respect to date rape. One co-researcher indicated, “Alcohol impairs
judgment and provides for situations that might lead to rape.” Alcohol perpetuates the ambiguity of date rape, as consenting under the influence might not be an entirely conscious decision. Again, women take on the language of male perpetrators, saying, “The guy might not pick up on the signals” or “Guys get that way [drunk], and having sex makes them heroes.” Most commonly, female co-researchers indicated they shadowbox the danger of alcohol-impaired rape by making their own drinks and not taking drinks from strangers.

However successful such shadowboxing strategies as preparation against date rape, they may further mute actual and potential date rape victims by highlighting an individual responsibility for self-protection. Taking the precautions to prevent date rape means the individual will also need to take on the responsibility if something were to happen. In other words, if an individual takes responsibility for the preparation to avoid date rape, then, by default, that individual must take the blame if rape occurs. This individualistic mentality affects behaviors in and interpretations of contexts where the possibility of date rape is immediate.

**Immediate Context/Possibility of Date Rape**

The culture at large, the individual frame of reference, and beliefs about the interpersonal/situational context culminate in determining how one behaves in the face of an immediate date rape situation and/or evaluates other’s behavior in such a situation. Since the concept of “consent,” regardless of interpretations, is the central element in defining rape, the communication of consent is the focus of the immediate context. Thus, an occurrence of date rape indicates a breakdown in the communication of consent based upon ambiguity and mutedness constructed through experiences in each of the previous contexts.

During a sexually violent act, women find it difficult to assert their lack of consent, as they feel they have already failed to do so, to diffuse the possible rape before it happens. One co-researcher shared her friend’s explanation of giving up the fight of consent, “He was already doing it, so I just lay there.” Another female student remarked, “guys might think it’s unfair to stop in the middle.” Others talked about the peer pressure to have sex or the need to “prove to a male that you like him.” This conformity reflects the dominant view on consensual sex, as articulated by some male co-researchers, assuming consenting is a one-time act rather than a process allowing for a change of mind.

Because the immediate pre-rape context is charged with communicative expectations and attempts to diffuse the possible act of sexual violence, the immediate post-rape context is often filled with questioning of how rape could happen. In the direct aftermath of date rape or learning about it, female co-researchers tended to put on trial their own effective communication of consent. Female co-researchers commonly responded to learning about a date rape case by questioning one’s behavior, “Did you say it forcefully? Did you try to get off or have him get off of you?” Even though asking such questions may simply be an attempt to understand what happened, the
act of questioning casts the first stone at the victim and perpetuates rape culture by seemingly letting the perpetrator off the hook.

Post-date Rape (Awareness)

Although answering questions and reporting date rape may reduce the ambiguity surrounding a particular case, both sexes agreed reporting is stifled by another ambiguity with respect to date rape—not knowing the steps of dealing with it and not knowing what others’ reactions will be. Co-researchers expected the only certainty to be heightened attention. In the words of one female student, “It would be a big issue and everyone would talk about it and everyone would have their opinions.” Another student said, “I don’t want this remembered on a piece of paper,” and still another participant added she did not want to “stand out.” Through this expectation of an unequivocal response and a potential backlash, the post-date rape confusion carries out to the larger contexts of interpersonal relations, individual frame of reference, and the culture at large to perpetuate the cycle of keeping female victims, college students, and college administrators muted.

The interpersonal context. Building a trusted support group was essential for shadowboxing date rape in the pre-rape interpersonal context, but the post-rape interpersonal context is marked by the rapid deterioration of that trust. One female respondent, who had actually experienced and reported date rape, admitted she did not even tell her mother until quite some time after the event. She explained her secrecy: “I was so sure that she’d say, ‘Why are you even with him?’ and when I told one of my friends, he said, ‘Well, how was he in a position where he could have done that?’”

Support from other co-researchers in the dominant discourse may theoretically validate an experience; however, the unpredictability of reaction to date rape only increases confusion and ambiguity. One co-researcher only shared her story with “the people [she] most counted on being supportive,” and even then “got such completely different reactions from them and they were sort of backwards from what [she] expected.” Through this ambiguity, date rape ruptures trust not only in respect to the specific perpetrator, but also in relation to friends. This decrease in trust, coupled with the desire not to relive a physically and emotionally violent experience, leads the victim to an avoidance response on two interpersonal levels: (1) avoiding sharing the experience with friends and (2) avoiding contact with the perpetrator and his or her friends, because “The guy is going to hate you and all his friends are going to hate you and they’ll bug you about it.”

This avoidance silences both the victims and the few close friends who might know what happened. As one male co-researcher put it, if victims feel they can “only confide in two people and want them to keep it a secret . . . it leaves it at the students being tolerant with it and trying to help their friends the best they can,” with only a “select few individuals in the student body that are going to know.” As a result, mutedness is perpetuated in the post-date rape interpersonal context, also affecting one’s individual frame of reference.
The individual frame of reference. Co-researchers of both sexes hypothesized that self-concept will change post rape. As a reflection of the (pre)dominant thinking among college students, capta suggest an expectation for the victim to feel dirty and ashamed after rape, including date rape. Statements such as, “By saying you’re a rape victim that spells it out for you that you’re not a pure girl any more” were quite common among both female and male co-researchers. Remembering that the pre-rape individual psychological frame of reference casts date rape victims as “sluts,” it is no wonder date rape stains one’s self-concept, focusing on the individual characteristics and behaviors.

This change of self-concept in a negative direction couples with a perception that other people will know what happened and judge the victim. Expecting questions such as, “What were you doing? What were you wearing?”, one female co-researcher represented not reporting as self-preservation: “And if you know the people around. And if you know people who know that person. Yeah, you don’t really want to make yourself stand out.” Post-rape silence is just as much a social expectation as is pre-rape peer pressure to have sex. The fear of victim-blaming further isolates individuals who have been date raped or who know victims choosing to stay quiet.

Responding to a question about what one should do after a rape, one female co-researcher summarized the feelings of isolation and desperation: “I wouldn’t know the steps. If I were attacked, I would probably crawl up into a ball and die.” A more powerful group, school administration, also can silence individuals. Since, in comparison to students, administration is clearly the dominant group on college campuses, it has the power to validate date rape experiences by preventative education and post-rape support, but co-researchers did not feel such validation existed. Because the dominant discourse does not openly recognize the legitimacy of experiencing date rape, the individual feels a need to try to explain that experience away so as not to contradict the mainstream. These explaining-away attempts flow back into the larger cultural context, enabling the continuous ambiguity associated with date rape.

The cultural context. With respect to campus culture, perhaps the most obvious “evidence” of muted groups in relation to date rape is the lack of date rape reports. With respect to date rape in college, co-researchers of both sexes suspected, “There’s more that goes on than a lot of people know,” with many cases remaining unreported. Ultimately, the lack of reports perpetuates the ambiguity in defining and understanding the reality of date rape, creating a culture that allows for its continuous occurrence.

In the context of such culture, male respondents, as the dominant group, maintained that date rape should be reported, regardless of possible consequences. One male student asserted, “If something like that were to happen to me . . . I know I wouldn’t keep my mouth shut. And that’s what I’d like to think that everybody [would do].” More trusting in dominant structures, males also believed the experience of rape is private, and certain (dominant) channels for reporting it should be followed. One male respondent remembered someone talking about being raped in an informal situation, an experience so uncomfortable for him, he thought, “Whoaaa! You’ve got some issues if you’re going to tell me that right off the bat.”
Male students also relied on the legal system to legitimize the occurrence of date rape. Some male co-researchers asserted that when the perpetrator is found guilty, “then for a fact she was raped.” From the male perspective, speaking the dominant discourse and following the dominant structures legitimizes a rape case because if it “didn’t go to court, people would say, ‘You know it’s obviously not that big of a deal. It’s not even going to go to court, you know. Maybe she’s just trying to stir up a little bit of trouble.’”

Female co-researchers, on the other hand, were both more supportive of silence with respect to rape and more skeptical as to the just power of dominant social structures. They believed the victim “needs to feel comfortable if she wants to report it”—comfort difficult to achieve with the expectations for victim-blaming and isolation discussed earlier. Furthermore, women see reporting as pointless because men’s superior social position skews justice. One co-researcher explained not reporting an actual date rape case: “Are you going to believe us or are you going to believe him? He was really, really popular; we weren’t . . . it’s his word against ours.”

Such comments support the muted groups’ theoretical framework on two levels: First, by supporting silence, females mirror and maintain the dominant discourse; second, the expression of skepticism supports the notion that the dominant communicative system is insufficient to articulate the female experience with date rape.

Date rape ruptures the neat categorization of who does what and why in a relationship. For victims, rape is a physical violation, as well as an intrusion into one’s psychosocial life. However, even for nonvictims, the very awareness of an actual date rape case violates the “normal” picture of trust-based relationships. Thus, co-researchers made efforts to explain date rape away, perpetuating mutedness across the four levels of influence: immediate context, interpersonal context, individual frame of reference, and cultural context.

**Conclusions**

In this study, we sought to discover how college students experience and describe rape and how such communication about rape may foster a campus rape culture, using the co-cultural theory framework with focus on muted groups. In focus groups with co-researchers, we discovered that date rape survivors, who are more often female than male (“Statistics,” 2009), are muted before, during, and after the experience of date rape. Both male and female students contribute to muting women, thus perpetuating a rape culture in which rape becomes an expectation, or part of the social milieu.

Before rape occurs, students (and others) on campus say they are unclear about what rape is, particularly date rape. In fact, training and awareness about stranger rape appears to be common practice on college campuses (“Statistics,” 2009), but when discussion turns to date rape, the notion of consent is unclear. The inability to define “date rape” and “consent” mutes women victims as well as college students who might want to communicate about these issues.

Following a date rape situation, the cultural variable of ambiguity mutes women. Women are aware of the ambiguity surrounding date rape, and after experiencing a
sexual act, they do not have the knowledge to discern if they were actually raped. Rape myths, such as “women who have sex are sluts,” might make it easier to decide to keep quiet rather than come forward. Female co-researchers felt that keeping silent about rape might protect their self-image by not drawing attention to their behavior in an ambiguously violent situation; for male co-researchers, legal trials have the power to end the ambiguity around rape. In a patriarchal society, men trust the court system to confirm the reality of rape because it speaks in their dominant language (McKerrow, 1989). Alternately, women do not refer to dominant structures like the court system as an immediate response. For them, as the muted group, dominant language does not provide the best articulation of their experiences (Kramer, 1981). While the event of date rape may be real and concrete, women are muted in the inability to articulate a concrete definition of this very real experience. For male co-researchers, proof, alluding to some sort of legal standard, eliminates such difficulty, but the lack of proof only makes the case more ambiguous.

On the individual level, the ambiguity and confusion regarding possible rape created at the cultural level often lead to denial of the reality of rape (“She didn’t think anything happened”). Paradoxically, this assertion mixes with taking the blame for what happened, and for the break in communicating consent. One female co-researcher described a date rape case she knew, saying, “She knew the guy and so, she thought it was her fault for not asserting herself enough, so she didn’t even think it was rape . . . She thought it was her fault and she didn’t think anything wrong happened.”

In the aftermath of date rape or learning about it, female participants tend to put on trial their own effective communication of consent. Female co-researchers commonly responded to learning about a date rape case by questioning the victim’s behavior, “Did you say it forcefully? Did you try to get off or have him get off of you?” For women, individual experience and behavior seem to be the decisive factors in calling something “rape,” whereas male participants avoid immediate judgments and turn to the “hard” evidence legitimized by dominant structures.

In the interpersonal context, women often reflect on their expectations of what should occur in social situations where date rape is possible. They also reflect on what the male’s expectations may have been. As a result, they “shadowbox,” making mental preparations for how to protect themselves. After the rape occurs, both women and male acquaintances blame the victim for not being more “sensible.” This vicious circle mutes women by making them feel badly for not “doing enough” to protect themselves, but sadly, the ambiguity arises, what is “enough”?

Co-researchers reported female victims utilize a combination of Orbe’s (1996, 1998a) communicative practices. For example, separation strategies—in which the co-cultural group decides to remain strong, reinforce stereotypes of themselves, or perhaps even attack the dominant group—might allow the co-cultural group to be strong and establish a new culture. In this study, however, we found no such examples of separation.

Orbe’s (1998b) second main category of co-cultural responses, accommodation, occurred only in terms of intragroup networking. Female students described seeking
other friends with whom to attend parties. However, in many instances these friends reported their inability to remain together for an entire party, and were not always supportive of the victim after she was raped. Therefore, co-researchers made few attempts to accommodate, and generally, such attempts did not appear to be fruitful.

For the most part, co-researchers reported female victims and others appear to assimilate into the dominant culture (Orbe, 1998b). Orbe described nonassertive assimilation strategies such as self-censorship and averting controversy, which co-researchers all reported using. For example, victims or victims’ friends censored themselves by not admitting a rape had taken place, and, by contending rape was ambiguous, they avoided controversy. Orbe describes assertive assimilation in strategies such as overcompensation, which occurred when co-researchers put on a strong “face,” or stereotype manipulation, as even female co-researchers made negative comments about women they knew who had been raped. Co-researchers also used aggressive assimilation strategies (Orbe, 1998b) by mirroring the language of the dominant group, or by strategically distancing themselves from the person who had been raped.

In a rape culture in which date rapes are common and participants are muted by the dominant culture, and in which the process of group muting is ongoing, it is no wonder that individuals use assimilation as their main communicative response. As Figure 1 suggests, the process of muting is perpetual. The message from the dominant culture is that stranger rape is wrong, but date rape is a situation that should and can be avoided. No wonder, then, that the most comfortable way to respond is to cover up the controversy or talk about its shame. When the culture, society, and individual levels of influence perpetuate ambiguity and shame, co-cultural members have little choice but to attempt to quietly assimilate their experiences with societal expectations.

At each level of Weitz’s (2002a, 2002b) sequential contexts, muting occurs and perpetuates the silence of a date rape culture. The broad cultural message that encourages assimilation filters onto college campuses in which administrators may not have open discussions or policies about date rape, and college police may not appear concerned about date rape; societal expectations mute these college personnel. College students, as a group, then, become muted as they are not free to acknowledge or talk about the problem. In turn, they assimilate and mute each other, particularly female victims, who end up silenced.

Such assimilation, however, proves harmful. Its direct result is a rape culture that is fed and perpetuated by the victims themselves. Orbe (1998b) suggests that nonassertive assimilation may negatively affect self-concepts and reinforce the power of the dominant group. It may seem logical to demand or suggest that women begin to challenge the dominant culture by speaking out and educating others about the horrors of date rape, but that suggestion is not realistic. Further, whereas rape prevention programs on college campuses seem like a good idea, unless the co-culture stops assimilating, changing the culture will be difficult.

We believe this study provides new insight into how communication creates a dominant date rape culture on college campuses. However, there are limitations to this project. First, we studied only the culture on one campus and cannot assume
other date rape cultures appear the same. Further, we focus on heterosexual date rape, ignoring the tremendous ramifications of same-sex rape culture. In fact, with only one exception, our co-researchers only talked about cross-sex rape, which undoubtedly impacts our results, but also underscores the hegemonic heterosexuality in our society. Finally, we examine how the culture of college students, particularly females, on campus responds to date rape, but we do not examine how particular co-cultures respond. For example, Women’s Centers may help create different communication strategies; the campus under investigation does not have a Women’s Center. Other campus co-cultures, such as health and wellness groups and student organizations, also may have alternative communication strategies that were not tapped in this study. An area of additional research ought to be the impact that other co-cultures have on date rape culture.

Although this study provides some preliminary indications that co-cultures on college campuses work to perpetuate and reinforce a date rape culture, further research is required. The capta from this study suggest that male college students who are raped also might be muted, but differently from women. For example, some co-researchers said that men do not report rape because it is not the masculine thing to do. However, these capta were limited; future researchers ought to explore these differences. In addition, whereas this study offers important information about how this culture is reified, even more critical is to gain an understanding of types of communication that resist such cultures. The next scholarly step is to investigate the date rape phenomenon on a wide range of colleges and universities to ascertain the types of communication strategies on campuses that have minimal to no recognizable rape cultures, if such campuses exist. For example, why do women not use separation strategies in the face of such traumatic experiences? Are accommodation strategies ineffective in addressing date rape culture? Delving into specific co-cultural communication patterns could be useful in learning about how to teach healthier responses and break the patterns that may be inherent in date rape cultures. After attaining that knowledge, personnel on college campuses, such as the one described in this study, could implement and test the efficacy of different rape culture resistance strategies.

**Practical Applications**

Perhaps this investigation of rape culture from a co-cultural, muted group perspective will be a step toward changing the rape culture on college campuses. The knowledge that the co-culture is muted at every stage in the process, from pre-rape, through the actual occurrence, to post-rape, allows practitioners to examine how communication processes may be altered at any point. This study, then, points to some shortfalls in current acquaintance rape education. Whereas most of the current education efforts occur in the pre-rape phase (e.g., watch your drink, go to parties with friends, etc.), our model suggests that education ought to occur throughout the process. Some educators are beginning to address the actual occurrence through resistance training because, contrary to popular thought, victims are not physically harmed more if they resist (Rozee & Koss, 2001).
Further, co-cultural theory suggests that prevention efforts should combine education for both how to fight date rape if it is about to happen (from a potential survivor’s perspective), and how to properly “read” a situation from a potential perpetrator’s perspective. In fact, some suggest date rape prevention should focus on males, because it is not women who are deficient in communication, but men who do not understand women’s language (O’Bryne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006).

In particular, we recommend that organizations such as RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) begin to accept the notion that date rape is an ambiguous concept, but when someone reports it, it should be taken as seriously as stranger rape. Additionally, we support a new focus on the individual frame of reference in which both psychological and societal notions of what rape is are altered to include date rape so that a new culture that does not tolerate date rape can be created. Investigation into the practical use and workability of Weitz’s (2002a) upfront, pre-date statements ought to occur. The cultural changes at any level must be based on different communication about date rape.

Although we wish we could offer more tangible solutions to the problem, this study provides the first step toward examining the crucial role of communication in creating and perpetuating a rape culture. We hope other researchers and social marketing professionals will use this information to develop and test materials that address the miscommunications and misperceptions that occur at each level. Perhaps, if organizations began to communicate different messages about date rape so that, ultimately, college students as a whole as well as university officials were not muted in discussing the matter, we might discover (again) the real power of communication.

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Note

[1] We chose to interview female athletes as a unique group of college women who may have experienced the rape culture as victims or as perpetrators. We were not able to secure a similar group of male athletes.

References


