

## Case Study: Selected findings from an ethnographic study of “party rape” at one institution

Armstrong, E.A., Hamilton, L., Sweeney, B. (2006). *Sexual Assault on Campus: A Multilevel, Integrative Approach to Party Rape. Social Problems*. 53(4): 483-499.

### Study Description

- Definition of “party rape”: an assault of an intoxicated woman at an on- or off-campus party (focused on male perpetrators as most common scenario)
- Study setting: One all-female floor in a residence hall identified as a “party dorm”
  - Place to live to participate in the party scene on campus (but most partying occurs elsewhere)
- Primarily 1<sup>st</sup> year women
- On the campus, the fraternity/sorority system is the most visible social scene
  - 1/4 students belong to F/S
  - 1/3 of 1<sup>st</sup> year students live in “party dorms”
- Methods: observation, interviews, surveys of residents; group interviews with other students; key informant interviews, classroom interaction & survey

**Primary conclusion:** ...sexual assault is a predictable outcome of a synergistic intersection of both gendered and seemingly gender neutral processes operating at **individual/peer culture**, **organizational/institutional**, and **interactional** levels.

*The authors note “...it is not only fraternity parties that are dangerous; men can control party resources and work together to constrain women’s behavior while partying in bars and at house parties. What distinguishes fraternity parties [on the campus that was studied] is that male dominance of partying there is organized, resourced, and implicitly endorsed by the university. Other party venues are also organized in ways that advantage men. (p. 492)*

### Findings

#### A. Individual selves and peer culture in the transition from high school to college

- I. *Non-Gendered characteristics motivate participation in party scene*
  - a. Widespread belief that one is “supposed” to party in college
  - b. Partying used as a way to fit into college life, be popular, have friends
- II. *Peer culture as gendered and sexualized*
  - a. Partying is the primary way to meet men; few other opportunities for casual friendly contact
  - b. Men’s attention & sexual interest at parties seen as a source of self-esteem & social status by women; dancing & kissing at parties proves men like them
  - c. Pressure to conform to physical appearance of “ideal college party girl” (thin, tan, trendy clothes, etc.); must look “hot” but not “slutty”
  - d. Women gain status from securing attention from high-status men, while men gain status from securing sex from high-status women

#### B. Organizational practices: how IHEs and subsystems structure student life through rules, distribution of resources, and procedures.

- I. *University practices as “push” factors*
  - a. Res hall: strong alcohol policy enforcement
  - b. Res hall: lack of appealing public space for socializing
  - c. Lack of ways for party floor residents who want to opt out of the party scene to get connected with one another and establish alternative social worlds
  - d. Alternatives to the party scene: most early in the evening; those during party hours deemed “uncool”

## II. Intensifying peer dynamics

- a. Certain residence halls have a concentration of affluent, party-oriented students interested in fraternity/sorority life (1<sup>st</sup> students request to live there)

## III: Student/male control of fraternity parties

- a. Fraternity houses:
  - Lax alcohol enforcement, privately owned, chapters answer largely to inter/nationals and IFC
- b. Fraternities control all aspects of their parties
  - Themes often require scant/sexy clothing, women in subordinate roles
  - Transportation: men pick women up from res hall; rides home uncertain
  - Admission: members police door, allow women but turn away unaffiliated men
  - Alcohol: men control quality & quantity of alcohol; lure women to private spaces for more/better alcohol
- c. Constraining factor: orgs with reputation of sexual disrespect stop attracting many women

## C. Interactional factors: “the production of fun and sexual assault in interaction”

- a. “Social script” for a good party participation (non-gendered):
  - Predictable sequence of activities (pregame, go, flirt, home, tell stories, etc.)
  - A “fun partier” is upbeat, sociable, & drinking
  - Partiers expected to like and trust party-mates; inappropriate to make a scene
  - Alcohol is part of the script, helps transition from everyday life to euphoria
- b. Gendered expectations of partying
  - Women expected to wear revealing outfits
  - Women take “guest” role: cede control of turf, transportation, liquor
  - Women expected to be “nice,” deferential, gracious, grateful for hospitality
- c. Gendered roles in sexual interactions; “heterosexual script”
  - Men expected to pursue sex
    - Beliefs and expectations normalize coercive behaviors, e.g., Men are “naturally” sexually aggressive
  - Women as sexual gatekeeper: relieves men from responsibility of getting consent; contributes to view that if sex occurred, she must have allowed it
- d. (Some) men are willing to exploit women’s vulnerability
  - Attend parties looking for casual sex
  - Use a range of coercive strategies, often not forceful
  - Feed women alcohol to party, but also because it lowers inhibitions
  - Constrain women’s movements, e.g. blocking doors, controlling transportation

## C. Student responses and the resiliency of the party scene

- a. The women valued fraternity parties: allows them meet new people, have fun, feel belonging
- b. Thus: resisted criticizing the party scene or the men’s behavior despite knowing women who were assaulted
- c. Instead, blamed victims: Bad experiences attributed to women’s “mistakes”