

Sexual assault and campus culture

A response to Graham Towl's article

Professor Graham Towl rightly highlights the issue of sexual violence at universities, and the need to create a culture that openly recognises this issue; and in doing so empowers victims to report the crime ('Tackling sexual violence at universities', January 2018).

As is noted, increasing rates of reporting may challenge the normative expectation amongst the offenders that they will not be prosecuted for acts of sexual violence. To build upon this, we would argue that efforts also need to be made to change normative (mis)perceptions on campuses around what is and what is not acceptable, particularly amongst male students. Students may easily be able to provide a description of a sexual assault that involves acts of violence, but they may be less able to describe what a non-violent sexual assault consists of – if indeed they would even recognise these situations as sexual assault at all. An example of this would be where someone who is intoxicated is not able to give consent to a sexual encounter. Research from the American college system has demonstrated that male students typically underestimate how disapproving other male students are of non-consensual sex (Gidycz et al., 2011). Research has also found that correcting these misperceptions results in behaviour change, with the most effective campaigns being those that are driven by the target population themselves (McAlaney et al., 2011). As Gidycz et al. comment, sexual assaults on campuses are committed by a small minority of male students.

To bring about culture change it is important to engage student populations and to better understand attitudes around sexual violence and consent. In doing so, we can identify and make use of the positive attitudes held by the majority of students, both male and female. Furthermore, it is important to accurately measure the effectiveness of any campaign that is run: while many campaigns are based on noble goals, if these do not sufficiently alter attitudes and behaviour, or worse have the opposite effect to that intended, then the issue may be perpetuated. Many campaigns have only been assessed for whether people are aware of the campaign rather than for any effect they may have had. This oversight should be addressed in future work in this field.

Dr John McAlaney, Dr Peter Hills, Dr Terri Cole, Rachel Skinner and Samuel Thomson

Bournemouth University

References

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McAlaney, J., Bewick, B. & Hughes, C. (2011). The international development of the 'Social Norms' approach to drug education and prevention. *Drugs: Education, Prevention, and Policy*, 18(2), 81–89.