

# **A Longitudinal Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Sexual Assault Education Program**

Breitenbecher, K. H. & Scarce M.  
(1999). *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14( 5), 459- 477.

A Review of the Literature  
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## **Background Information**

- Only a few studies evaluating the effect of sexual assault education programs have been published to date.
- Those studies that have been published measured changes in knowledge, behavioral intention, judgements of responsibility, and rape- supportive attitudes as well as overall satisfaction with the education program.
- Follow- up periods for these studies ranged from 2 weeks to 3 months.
- While these studies have shown success in generating positive change in rape- supportive attitudes and behaviors they have been criticized.
- The two main criticisms center around the time frame for the evaluation and the choice of outcome variables selected to assess change.
  - . Two weeks to 3 months is not enough to assess whether any long term change has occurred.
  - . There is an implicit but untested assumption that changing knowledge and rape- supportive attitudes will lead to a decrease in the incidence of rape.
  
- Before this study only 2 investigations had evaluated how effective educational programs were in reducing the incidence of sexual assault (*1. Hanson & Gidycz 1993, 2. Breitenbecher & Gidycz 1998*).
- The results of these studies were mixed.:
  - The first study was effective at reducing the incidence of sexual assault for women with no prior history of sexual victimization but did not reduce the incidence of sexual assault for women with prior sexual assault histories.
  - The second study was modified specifically to address the problem in the first study. This time the results indicated that the educational program did not reduce the incidence of sexual victimization for either group.
  
- The authors concluded that it is difficult to know what works and what doesn't because:
  - The existing research on the effectiveness of sexual assault education programs does not give us a clear idea of what works and what doesn't.
  - The relationship between history of sexual victimization and program effectiveness is not well understood.
  - Most people who design and implement rape education programs on college campuses either do not evaluate their programs, or they do not publish the results of those evaluations.

-The current study attempts to add to existing knowledge in the field of rape education programs by:

-Examining the effectiveness of a university education program designed by specialists in rape education.

-Using a 7 month follow- up period to assess program effectiveness (which is longer than any study has reported to date).

-Focusing on the incidence of sexual assault as an outcome variable.

## **Method**

-275 college women agreed to participate in the study at the beginning of the school year.

-The women were randomly assigned to either:

-The treatment group/ education program (T) or

-The control group/ no program (C).

-Of the 275 women participating in the initial phase of the study 224 returned for the 7 month follow up.

-Demographic information was collected and the women's history of sexual victimization and level of knowledge

about sexual assault were assessed prior to the start of the sexual assault education program.

-The education program was conducted in groups of 30, had a lecture/ group discussion format, and consisted of

information on:

-The prevalence of sexual assault among college populations.

-The existence of rape myths and sex role practices that promote a rape supportive environment.

-The definition of rape as an act of violence & power, as humiliating & degrading, and as a community issue affecting all men and women.

-It was expected that increasing knowledge about these issues would lead to reduced risk for sexual victimization.

## **Results**

-The program was effective in increasing the treatment group's knowledge about sexual assault at the 7- month follow- up period.

-But the program was not effective in reducing the treatment group's risk of experiencing sexual assault during the 7- month follow- up period regardless of prior victimization status.

-Regardless of T or C group status women with histories of sexual victimization were more than twice as likely to be assaulted during the follow- up period (this is consistent with research on the relationship between past victimization and risk for future victimization).

## **Considerations**

-It is possible that the sample (224) was not large enough to detect differences in findings related to sexual assault history.

-It is possible that the length of the program (1 hour) was not enough to change women's risk related behaviors or responses to unwanted sexual advances.

### **More Considerations**

-It is also possible that the issues addressed by the program (information on prevalence, rape myths and sex role stereotypes) are not directly related to a women's risk of being sexually assaulted

-Although it is important to look at long term outcomes it is possible that there would have been a difference in rape incidence had the follow- up period been shorter (a possible solution would be to do multiple assessments at different time periods □ c 2 weeks □ c 3 months... 6 months... a year).

### **A Final Consideration**

-Although the goal of this rape education program was to empower women in order to reduce their risk of being assaulted it is possible that there is only so much that a potential victim can do to protect themselves. Programs that focus on potential perpetrators may ultimately prove more effective in reducing the incidence of sexual assault.

### **Future Directions**

-It is important to:

-Increase knowledge about how prior victimization leads to increased risk for future victimization.

-Increase the number of evaluations that look at incidence as an outcome variable.

-Encourage rape education organizations to evaluate their programs and report on the results.

### **References:**

-Hanson, K. A., & Gidycz, C. A.. (1993). An evaluation of a sexual assault prevention program. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 61 , 1046- 1052.

-Breitenbecher, K. H., & Gidycz (1998). An empirical evaluation of a program designed to reduce the risk of multiple sexual victimization. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* , 13, 471- 487.